

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

1823-2013

No. 6—Bridging the Gap

The retreat of the Wisconsin Glacier that covered this area 14,000 years ago revealed the mighty Susquehanna River. Native Americans used the river extensively until the Clinton-Sullivan Campaign after which European settlers began to migrate to the area. Thousands of acres of dense forests and fertile river vale were purchased by speculators and resold by land agents. Originally part of Tioga County, the Town of Union was sliced from east to west by the Susquehanna River with the land on the south designated as Town of Union South Side Susquehanna River (SSSR) on property deeds.

In the first quarter of the 19th century the land in Union where the ferry connected the north and south banks of the Susquehanna was owned in succession by Arthur Gray, Jonathon and Jacob Crane along with Gozen Winans, John Dunbar, and lastly Jacob Rounds. Crane's Ferry was located at the end of what was appropriately called Ferry Road, now Pumphouse Road. Nearby were a tavern, store and several other buildings. The ferry was the primary method of crossing the river to visit relatives or conduct business in Union. Some early residents took the ferry one last time as they traveled to their final resting place in Riverside Cemetery.

Established in 1831, the Union-Vestal Bridge Co. began planning for the first bridge, a toll bridge, to replace the ferry and physically connect Union and Vestal. It would be two decades before the bridge was constructed in 1851. Jacob Rounds had purchased the land that included the ferry in 1821. In preparation for the building of the toll bridge at the site of the former ferry, he leased 40 feet of land to the Union-Vestal Bridge Co. for the bridge approach, a toll house, and a small fenced garden "for so long as said company uses and occupies the same for the use of a bridge." The bridge was to be "20 to 25 feet wide and 700 feet long—to be built of wood with sides at least 4.5 feet high and with two tracks". Contractor John Best constructed the bridge for \$15,000. Although most histories describe this bridge as a covered bridge, we don't know whether the roof was ever added. A list of tolls set by the Union-Vestal Bridge Co. in 1863 included in part: 20 cents for a four-wheeled carriage drawn by two animals, 15 cents for every ox wagon, sled or cart drawn by two oxen, 5 cents for every mare or horse, and 3 cents for every foot passenger. Newspaper accounts tell us that an 1865 freshet carried away one span of the bridge which was repaired only to have cattle break through a span in 1867.

The March 18, 1868 issue of the Broome Republican newspaper reported that an ice flood had lifted the bridge off its piers leaving only one span standing on the Union side.

In that same year the state legislature passed a bill authorizing construction of a bridge that would be funded by bonds to be repaid by both Vestal and Union. Union wanted to divide the cost equally while Vestal wanted the share based on property values because Union's property value was twice that of Vestal's. A committee of representatives from both towns negotiated a compromise that settled on Union's portion of the initial construction cost at \$17,000 and Vestal's at \$13,000. Future repairs would be shared equally.



The Union News of June 1870 reported, "The Free Bridge, Union and Vestal Again United, Let the People Rejoice". The contract had been awarded to Messer's. Bristol and Robbins of Owego in the spring of 1869 with work commencing in early May. The following description was given: the distance between the abutments is 782 feet divided into five spans of which the three center spans were 148 feet each and the end spans 159 feet each. All spans were built independently. The roadway was 16 feet wide. Materials used in the construction were: 58 tons of wrought and 22 tons of cast iron prepared at Owego, 75,000 feet of pine, 41,000 feet of hemlock, and 75,000 feet of oak. The lumber was prepared at Hooper's Valley under the direction of Mr. J.L. Purple. The floor of the bridge was 34 feet above the low water mark and 3 feet higher than the old bridge with the top of the structure 50 feet above the water. On Saturday June 18, 1870 the bridge was opened...no more crossing tolls, this was a FREE bridge.

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By 1894 inspections showed that the bridge was unsafe. Engineers from the Erie Railroad and the D. L. & W. Railroad were asked to inspect the bridge and reported that the bridge was not worth fixing, it needed to be replaced. So in 1895 a new steel bridge was constructed between Union and Vestal at a cost of \$50,000. This is the bridge that appears in many photos and on several post cards.

An article in the Tioga County Record of June 6, 1895 announced that the Owego Bridge Company was offering the timbers from the 1870 Union-Vestal Bridge for use in building the proposed dam across the river at Owego. It warned that unless accepted within a week, the timbers would be broken up.

By 1928 a report from the state engineers found the bridge to be in "good shape", yet they recommended a list of repairs be made to make the bridge "safe for all manner of traffic for the next 25 years". Those repairs included the replacement of all corroded steel, the rebuilding of the floor with specially treated oak planking, the addition of more girders to provide for a 10-foot spacing instead of the current 20-foot spacing, the laying of metal traffic treads on the bridge floor and the repair of all bearings and abutments. The State Department of Public Works had said they would not condemn the bridge for 10-15 years so a joint meeting of the Union and Vestal town boards reached the conclusion they had no other choice than to repair the 1895 bridge at an estimated cost of \$18,000.



Looking south; the 1936 Bridge on the left, the 1895 Bridge on the right just before demolition.

A mere seven years later a new \$250,000 steel bridge with concrete piers was under construction by the Ingraham Co. of Albany. During construction in March of 1935 the typical spring floods caused removal of the pontoons, scaffolds, and cofferdams from the north abutment until river levels dropped. The course of the southern bridge approach was laid out to tie in with the new overhead crossing over the D. L. & W. tracks, locally referred to as the viaduct or dry bridge. On the 20th of August 1935 ribbon cutting ceremonies that included Gayle Estella Jones, daughter of Supervisor Leland Jones and great-great-granddaughter of Vestal's first Supervisor Samuel Murdock officially opened "The Green Bridge".

The following month demolition of the 1895 bridge was under way. One hundred and fifty sticks of dynamite were discharged beneath the two center stone piers. As if to mock the engineer's reports of its unsafe condition, when the smoke cleared only one stone in the center pier had been loosened. It would take blow torches to sever the steel before the spans could be dropped to the river below. During a dry summer, when the river level drops, the base of the 1895 piers can be seen approximately 100 feet west of the current bridge.



Vestal's population continued to grow creating a demand for additional bridges to provide easy access to Endicott and Johnson City. Although the State began planning the Route 201 Bridge between Vestal and Johnson City as early as 1946-47 with a completion date of mid 1948, steel for the bridge didn't arrive until July 1953.

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Constructed high over a portion of the uncompleted Chenango Canal Extension, the \$3,200,000 C. Fred Johnson Memorial Bridge was dedicated on October 6, 1954 just as the new Harpur College campus in Vestal began construction.

In the fall of 1957 a bridge was planned that would connect a two mile extension of Route 26 to McKinley Avenue in Endicott. One hundred and fifty homes on both sides of the river lay in the path of the new bridge. Homes in the Vestal Gardens area, assessed at \$850,000, were scheduled to be moved or demolished in 1961. Construction of the concrete piers and road bed occurred from late 1961 through 1963 with a dedication on October 1, 1963 of the bridge that would be officially named in February 1964, the Thomas J. Watson Sr. Memorial Bridge.

New York State acquired the title to D. L. & W. Railroad land in April of 1963 at a cost of \$510,000 to build the Route 17 Southern Tier Expressway. Designing the route took two years and it was another four years before the Expressway through Vestal was opened on September 4, 1969. The Route 17/86 Expressway exits Vestal in Twin Orchards crossing the Susquehanna before entering the Town of Union as it continues on the north side of the river. When the Expressway opened, the Parkway was renamed from Route 17 to Route 434. It would be 1971 before the final 4.5 miles of the new expressway opened.

Over the years numerous smaller bridges that cross Vestal's five primary creeks have also required reconstruction after being damaged by raging waters.

Sources and additional information about all Vestal's bridges is available at the Historian's office.