



A Special Edition of the Old Village Newsletter

The Mitchell River Bridge – Past, Present, and Future

This issue of the Old Village Newsletter is devoted exclusively to the Mitchell River Bridge. The fall-winter newsletter will be published early in 2010.

From the Editor

This special edition of the Old Village Newsletter is devoted exclusively to the Mitchell River Bridge. Admittedly, articles on town issues, such as the perennial zoning rewrite problems, a report about the Annual Meeting/Gam Session, and a wonderful essay on the footbridge over Mill Creek by Jennifer Longworth are waiting in the wings – these will be included in a winter newsletter. But at this moment in time, when the Mass Highway Department (officially known as MassDOT) has presented detailed plans for a 2011 replacement of the bridge, we thought it was important to highlight the bridge's history, from its inception to its present day configuration, and to briefly outline the conflicting opinions about its future.

The bridge itself is not in the Old Village, but to the OVA Board of Directors, it is a part of our history, vital to members who moor boats in the Mill and Little Mill ponds, to the Pease Brothers boatbuilding business at Eliphamets Lane, and to our many Bridge Street members. We in Chatham have enjoyed the unique qualities of this simple

wooden bridge which sits by a quiet river way, surrounded by sloping land, small fishing shacks, and peaceful waters. Any changes will affect us all. The Old Village Association, along



Mitchell River Bridge 1985

with the Chatham Historical Commission and the newly formed Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge, are trying hard to preserve what is important to the site. Whether we succeed or not, perhaps this bulletin will record for history what was, what is, and what may be.

Carol Pacun

The Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge: The Last of Its Kind

The Mitchell River Drawbridge has spanned the Mitchell River, between Stage Harbor and Mill Pond, for over 150 years, and it has become one of Chatham's enduring landmarks. Although the bridge has often been repaired, reconstructed, closed and reopened, quite remarkably it has survived as the only remaining wooden drawbridge in Massachusetts. Its trunion-cable-electrical lift mechanism is also the last of its kind in the state. The only other known wooden drawbridge found in the United States is the Glimmerglass Bridge in Brielle, New Jersey.

Under the state accelerated bridge program, the bridge is now once again due to be reconstructed. Massachusetts Highway Department (now MassDOT) is responsible for this work, which will be paid for by state and federal funds. MassDOT representatives have presented various designs to the public. As in 1977, there is a disconnect between what the department sees as an appropriate concrete and steel bridge, and those who would prefer to see a wooden structure similar to the one that has been in place all these years.

Ironically, the lack of wooden drawbridges in Massachusetts may well be the overriding reason why MassDOT is so suspicious of wooden drawbridges. Without any recent examples, MassDOT claims that it has no standards to rely on, no certainty how long a modern wooden bridge would last, what it would finally cost, and no direct knowledge of the new woods and wood applications now being used for marine use. The department is relying on the AASHTO Guidelines for concrete and steel which supposedly requires a 75 year lifespan for the bridge, and on its manual (100s of pages) which outlines requirements and safety regulations for all bridges in the Commonwealth.

With A Little Help from Our Friends

The Old Village Association has been happy to help preserve the bridge. We are grateful that a small independent group, the Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge, led by Norm Pacun, was able to jump in quickly to address the issues, gather research, and find three experts to provide technical support. With Old Village Association help, the Friends were able to have these experts (one by phone) in Chatham at an October 13th meeting with MassDOT: Arnold Graton, master wooden bridgwright; James Cooper, bridge historian and president of the Historic Bridge Foundation; and David Fischetti of DCF Engineering. We thank them for their support.

The Association is also grateful to Dorr Fox, from Preservation Massachusetts, and Kitty Henderson, Executive Director of the Historic Bridge Foundation, for their advice. Likewise, Don Aikman and the Chatham Historical Commission have played a key role in identifying the historical assets involved and encouraging their preservation.

Priscilla LeClerc of the Cape Cod Commission, the staff of the National Seashore, MPO members, as well as harbormaster Stuart Smith and selectman Ron Bergstrom, have taken the time to answer questions and assist in this effort. They all have expressed the hope that a solution will be found that meets MassDOT rules and at the same time preserves the beauty and history of this much loved landmark and the surrounding site.

“It’s Just A Bridge” – Or Is It?

Those who cannot understand how rational people can extend this amount of effort, thought, and funding on the preservation of a small wooden bridge have, in our opinion, missed the boat. The destruction of a town’s historical assets does not happen all at once. Without vigilance, small pieces of community character disappear one at a time, sometimes over decades. A wooden bridge at the Mitchell River reminds us of our history and adds to our sense of place.

This is not, nor ever has been, a case of fighting change. Our present bridge must be reconstructed. Chatham needs the grant money: the town cannot afford the \$12,000,000 price tag. We do not hold all cards, but the effort so far has resulted in a much more sensitive design and a recognition that the aesthetics of the bridge are critical to the preservation of this historic site. All of us working on this project will continue to do our best for you to preserve what we have. We hope URS, the designer representing MassDOT, and the federal government, will continue to explore ways to build a safe, long-lasting bridge which honors our history and finds a way into our hearts.

Carol Pacun



C1900

The Mitchell River Bridge C. 1858–2009 – A Time Line

(All dates are approximate)

Pre-1858	No bridge existed over the Mitchell River at Bridge Street. Word has it that people crossed the river by boat, and that a ferry service may have been available.		government under the Cape Cod Regional Transportation Improvement Program (TIP).
		9/3/2009	URS presents design for concrete and steel bridge at a public meeting which over 60 people attend. Most express dismay at design.
c.1858	David Edwards and George Atwood build town bridge, named for William Mitchell, an early settler with land in the area. Cost: \$1300.	9/28/09	Don Aikman from the Chatham Historical Commission and Norm Pacun from the Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge attend meeting of the Municipal Planning Organization (MPO) held at the Cape Cod Commission offices advising them of the strong disapproval of local citizens of a concrete and steel bridge. MPO asks MassDOT to review matter.
1883-1903	Bridge operates, with sporadic closings for repairs.		
1903	Unnamed man is badly injured at the drawbridge. "Use at Your Own Risk" sign posted. Selectmen appointed committee to do away with the draw because of "dangerous conditions." No action taken.		
1907	Town votes \$5000 to repair bridge.	10/2009	Friends of Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge, with Old Village Association backing, hire consultants on wooden bridges and arrange meeting at the Atwood House with MassDOT and URS representatives, the Cape Cod Commission, among others, to discuss alternatives to concrete and steel. (After the meeting, officials from Mass DOT and URS visit bridge site. They don protective clothing, including hard hats. No injuries reported.)
1915-1925	Draw closed on and off for repairs. Finally, Town Meeting votes to repair wooden trestle in style of old one at a cost of \$9000.		
1926	Bridge reportedly ready to reopen.		
1941	Town votes to install an electric hoist and warning signals. Walkway on both sides of bridge added for pedestrians and fishermen.		
1959-60	Another \$3000 spent for repairs.		
1975	Bridge draw declared unsafe. Draw bolted down. Selectmen try to make closing permanent.	11/2009	URS and MassDOT present alternatives to original design, including wooden walkways, wooden clad pilings and a stone pier, at least on some designs. Most agree aesthetic improvements have been made, but the Friends and others worry about the "Disney" effect of covering up the "bones of the bridge." The Harbormaster, members of the Old Village Association, the Chatham Historical Commission, and other citizens reiterate concerns about the safety of the planned wider asphalt bridge roadway, designed for traffic going 30 mph and strong enough to support large trucks and buses. They wondered how safe the bridge would be for pedestrians and families fishing on the edges of what was referred to as a "speedway." MassDOT agrees to respond to all concerns.
1975-1980	Spaulding Dunbar, supported by Richard Hiscock and Bob Walsh from the Mill Pond Boatyard, fight closing and succeed in obtaining a ruling from the Coast Guard that the Mitchell River is a "navigable river" leading to a "safe harbor," thus requiring a permanent drawbridge. (see article page 4)		
1980-82	\$500,000-\$600,000 allocated for bridge repair. Contractor goes bankrupt and is fired by state. Further delays caused by inadequate equipment and supplies. The bridge with the draw completed in 1982.		
2000-09	As concerns about bridge safety grow, Mitchell River Bridge is added to the state list of bridges needing replacement. Harbormaster Stuart Smith continues to make needed repairs.		
2007	Selectmen rename bridge in honor of retiring selectman Douglas A. Bohman.		The next scheduled step in the process may well be the "25% design" which URS will present to the public at a later date.
2009	Smith is informed by URS Corporation representatives that they had been contracted by MassDOT to build a new bridge. Estimated cost is \$12,000,000, all of which would be paid for by the state and the federal		<i>These facts were assembled with the help of Mary Ann Gray at the Chatham Historical Society and Norm Pacun. Earlier entries are based on a 1976 Cape Cod Chronicle article by the late Eleanor Henderson (a well-known Chatham historian). Richard Hiscock and Bob Walsh also provided information.</i>

Spaulding Dunbar and the Rebuilding of the Mitchell River Bridge 1976–1982

by Bob Walsh

The Issues

In 1976, the town of Chatham realized that the Mitchell River Bridge needed to be replaced. The initial plan put forward by the board of selectmen (Ed Harrington, Warren Sampson and Bill Campbell) was a steel and concrete bridge with no draw span, because (a) they did not want the town to pay for the bridge and (b) they thought a steel and concrete bridge would be more modern and therefore more appealing to state officials who would fund the bridge.

The Problems

F. Spaulding Dunbar, a naval architect, yacht designer, and MIT-trained engineer, believed that a draw span was necessary not only to allow sailboats access to the boatyard he owned on Big Mill Pond but also to allow public access to the 30 plus acres of mooring space in the Big and Little Mill Ponds. He and I, (then owner of the boatyard business operating at his site) met with the selectmen and pleaded with them to keep the draw span and to build the bridge at least partly with town funds so the town could remain in control of the bridge. Ed Harrington threw up his hands and asked how he was going to get the taxpayers to foot the estimated \$250,000 cost of a bridge. Spaulding said that \$250,000 was not all that much to build a bridge that would allow the town to maintain access to and control over a navigable waterway. That was the first the board had heard the Mitchell River was in fact a federal waterway. That news led the board to decide to contact the Coast Guard and the Army Corps of Engineers to see about funding for a new bridge. The concept was still a steel and concrete bridge, but if the waterway was federally regulated, maybe the federal government would pay for the draw span. Spaulding and I left our meeting with the board somewhat heartened that the selectmen were at least not opposed to a draw span, as long as the town did not have to pay for it.

Some months passed, during which Richard Hiscock, a devotee of Chatham's waterways and an assistant harbormaster, and I ran a bumper sticker campaign and put together a petition to save the wooden bridge or to replace it with a new wooden bridge. *Editor's note: It is our understanding that Bob and Richard designed the sticker at the Squire on a napkin. See below.*

The Discussion:

Spaulding Meets the Highway Department

Spaulding then met with an engineer from the Mass. Dept. of Public Works (now Mass Highway) to discuss details of the state's plan for a new bridge. I learned of this from an outraged, sputtering diatribe launched by Spaulding against the highway department upon his return to Chatham.

First of all, he discovered that the state engineers were initially thinking of a high arched bridge that would allow power boats and perhaps small sailing craft to pass underneath. Spaulding said he told them, "My God, the approaches to such a bridge would have to be a half mile long!"

The highway engineer simply asked, "So?"

Spaulding then realized something and asked, "You haven't been to the site, have you?"

"Not yet," the man answered, puzzled. "Is that a problem?"

"Well, yes it is," Spaulding replied. "The west end of the road beyond the bridge is less than an eighth of a mile long. No room for a proper approach, not to mention no room for access ways to the businesses and homes along there. You can't build such a bridge there!"

The highway engineer paused and then displayed his total ignorance of all things marine by asking, "Why can't we just dig it out deeper under the bridge?"

Spaulding was personally offended that a so-called highway engineer did not know that the channel under the bridge could be any depth, but the ocean level would remain the same.

Finally, a Solution

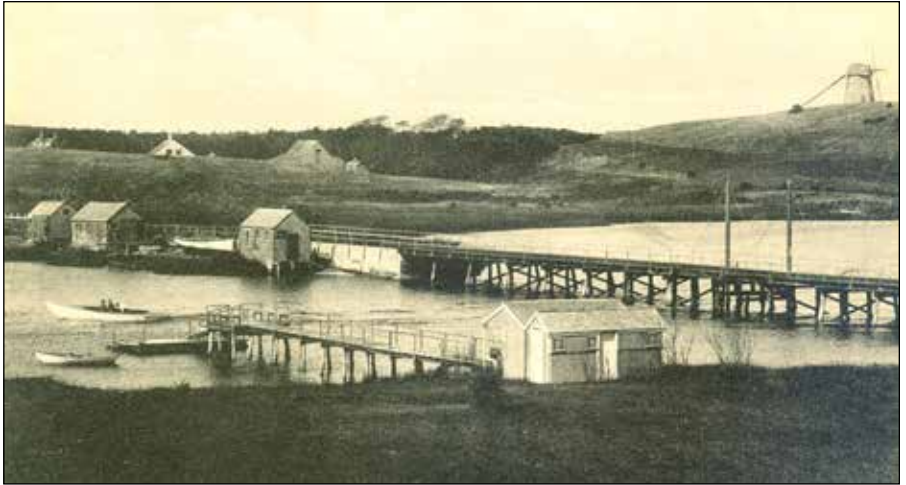
After many discussions and much public input, the selectmen finally came around to the idea that a wooden bridge offered charm and character that were far more attractive to tourists than steel and concrete. The draw span was kept, as the federal government did come through with part of the funding. Spaulding's last contribution was to ask the engineers to reverse the span, so that it opened to the west side, as the prevailing wind is from the southwest, which can push tall boats towards the east side.

After multiple delays, babbling and government stipulations, the bridge was built with an operating draw in 1982. It still looks substantially like the old "Thunder Bridge," so named because of the sound it made as cars rolled over it. I do not recall what Chatham's portion of the bill was, but it was far less than \$250.

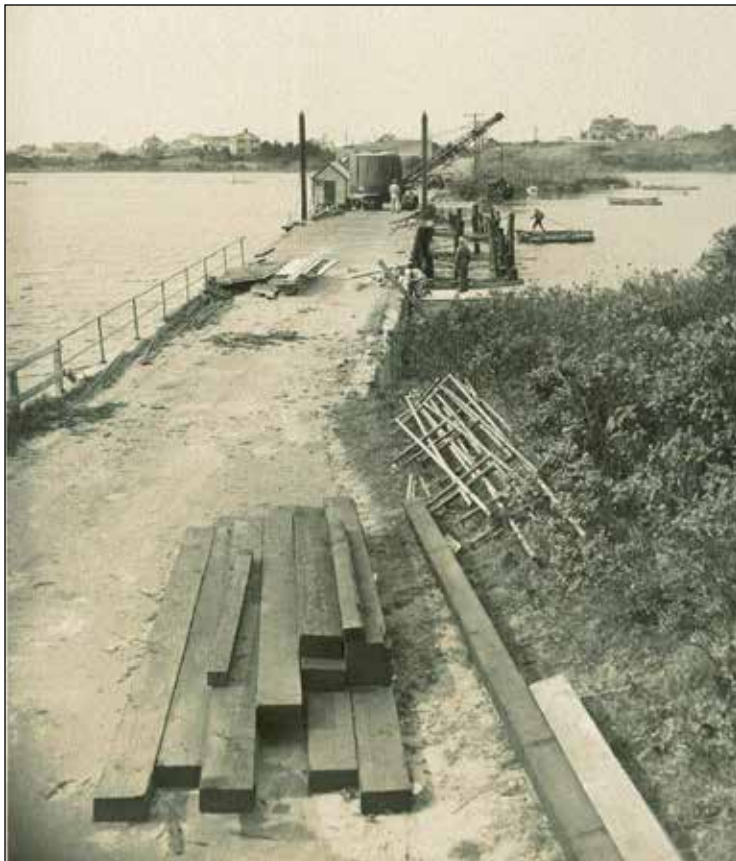


“[We hope that] the ultimate solution of our Mitchell River Bridge will be just what we, in this area, have wanted all along – namely the reconstruction of the present bridge, with an adequate draw span, rather than a new concrete monstrosity as originally proposed.”

F. Spaulding Dunbar, in a 1/11/77 letter to William J. Naulty, Chief of Bridge Section, US Coast Guard.



1900s



Mitchell River Bridge under repair 1949



Detail of the draw 2009



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Happy Holidays ~ We wish you all calm waters, sunny skies, and light winds in the New Year.

