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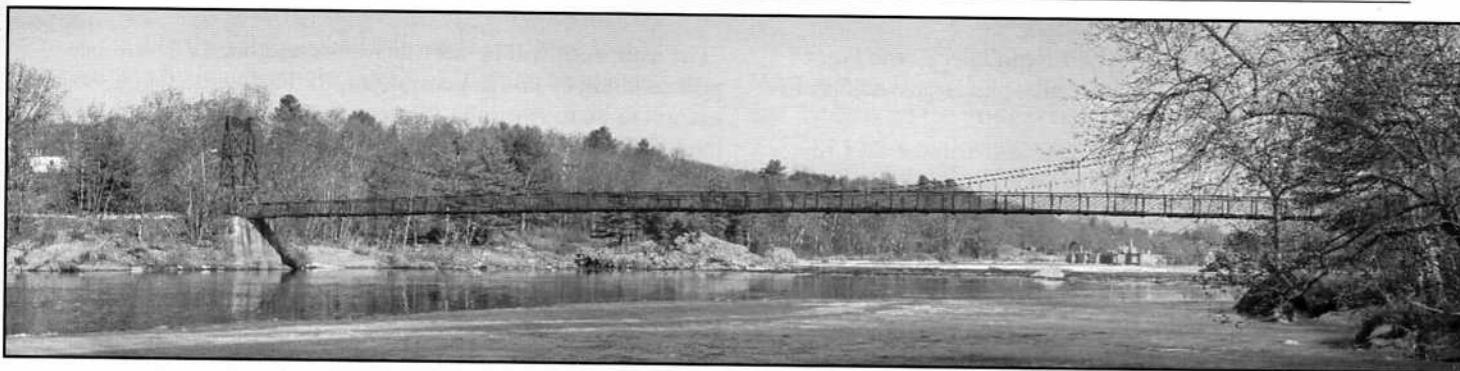
Memories of Maine

Dedicated to the History of Maine and to the People and Places that Preserve it



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The **History and Future of Brunswick's Swinging Bridge**



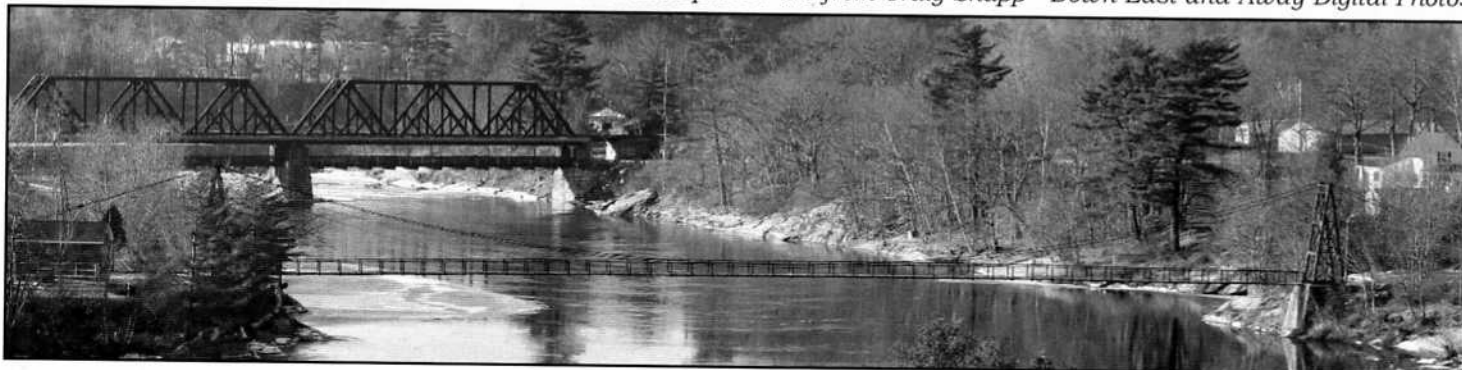
A Bridge and its History

" Un pont et sont histoire "

by Juliana L'Heureux & Candace Kanes

There's a rustic bridge stretched across the Androscoggin River in Maine between Topsham and Brunswick, known by locals, especially the old-timers, as the swinging bridge or Le Petit Pont. Also called the Walking Bridge, the structure that was built in 1892 has seen generations of school kids, baby carriages, bicycles, shoppers, runners, workers, and others crossing between Topsham and Brunswick. Rustic is a nice word for it, since it's currently closed and in disrepair. Town records call it The Androscoggin Pedestrian Bridge. It was originally used to provide access to textile and shoe mill workers who lived in Topsham but who worked on the Brunswick side of the River.

Panoramic photos are from Craig Snapp - Down East and Away Digital Photos



Thousands of French-Canadians came to the Brunswick area during the height of Maine's industrial age, pre and post the American Civil War, when the Cabot Mill produced cotton textiles using the Androscoggin River's hydro energy. This bridge, Le petit pont, linked mill workers from their apartments on Topsham Island to their daily routines, going to their jobs in Brunswick, to attend Mass at St. John the Baptiste Parish on Pleasant Street and to shop on Maine Street. After the closing of the mills, the pedestrian traffic across this bridge fell dramatically, and there seemed to be no need to maintain the structure. It became a popular backdrop for photographers and a place to find a cute stray cat. Few even remember the bridge or the reason it was built in the first place.

Not just Brunswick, but the entire New England region was economically effected by the influx of French-Canadians. They helped build the amazing wealth of the mill moguls with their labor. Since Samuel de Champlain and the Huguenot entrepreneur Sieur de Mons established a failed settlement on Maine's St. Croix Island, seventeen



The photos on these pages are various shots of the swinging bridge and are courtesy of the Pejepscot Historical Society and the Swinging Bridge Committee

years before the pilgrims set foot on Plymouth soil, the French have been a contributing force in the area and Brunswick profited greatly by their presence.

1867, about midway in the timeline between the St. Croix Island settlement and today, was when the Cabot Mill began a major capital expansion to meet a growing market for cotton. To quickly meet the labor needs agents were sent to recruit workers under contract from Canada's French speaking Quebec Province. Although contracting labor was illegal the French came because they badly needed the work. A core group of French-Canadians came to Brunswick from the L'Islet region of Quebec, on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River. Many others, however, came from every corner of Quebec Province to work in the Cabot Mill.

As housing became short the Topsham Land Co. began developing the Topsham Heights area just across the Androscoggin River. The company decided a foot bridge that would help workers get to the Cabot Mill would help make their new houses more attractive, especially since it would be safer than having workers share a bridge with other traffic.

In November of 1891 the developers met with a representative of the John A. Roebling's Sons Co. to discuss the bridge. In March 1892 Topsham Land Co. - Charles E. Hacker, Amos O. Reed, George A. Stover, and Frank P. Weatherill - obtained an easement from Cabot Manufacturing to land the bridge on Mill Street in Brunswick.

Pedestrian bridges were popular in Maine. One built in Skowhegan, across the Kennebec River, collapsed in 1888. The suspension cables were not strong enough to hold the structure. That may have led the Topsham developers to seek out the Roebling's Co., which had operated a wire rope factory in New Jersey since 1849 and which had used its quality wire rope cables on the celebrated Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883.

On May 19, 1892, the Brunswick Telegraph reported that

"The iron work will be here this week and the work will be pushed along as fast as possible as Mr. Farrington [supervisor] has got to go to Australia to supervise the erection of a bridge there." Three houses were under construction in Topsham Heights.

The Brunswick-Topsham structure was completed in

September 1892, after a delay caused by a freak tornado in June, and painted the following month. The newspaper noted it "is as substantial a piece of work as one would wish to see. There is no vibration, even when a number are crossing it at the same time."

The Topsham developers did not intend to keep the bridge as a private enterprise, nor did they intend to maintain it, although they did do some maintenance. They had thought the bridge would be a profitable venture, but it was not.



In 1906 Topsham sought public highway funds to maintain the bridge, but Brunswick opposed the effort, with officials arguing they did not know anyone who needed to use the bridge and they did not want to be responsible for maintaining it. Topsham officials argued that the bridge was an asset to workers and businesses, and to the 375 Roman Catholics in Topsham.

By then, 68 Roman Catholic families lived in Topsham, and many had boarders in their households. The only Catholic Church, St. John the Baptist, was in Brunswick. A Catholic school, on Federal Street in Brunswick since 1882, moved to Oak Street in 1893, and to its present site on Pleasant Street in 1913. Students and parishioners who lived in Topsham Heights walked to and from school and church - across the new pedestrian bridge.

Topsham officials argued that the existence of the parochial school saved the town \$6,000-7,000 a year.

The commissioners of Cumberland and Sagadahoc counties approved the public expenditure. Seven years later, work began to replace the wooden suspension towers with steel towers.

Throughout its life, the bridge has been popular with pedestrians, who have used it for all sorts of purposes. An engineering firm studying the bridge in 2000 estimated that 100-300 people a day crossed the structure. Over the years, many young people have been drawn to the bridge because it sways or swings.

Rita Saindon, who has lived most of her life in Topsham Heights, remembers going back and forth to St. John's School. She and her friends sometimes paused on the bridge on their way home. Talking about her experiences in a 2003 interview, Saindon recalled, "We would congregate

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there in the middle, facing upstream, and if you stare at that water rushing by long enough, it feels as if you were moving on the bridge."

She and her friends often congregated in the middle of the bridge. "The bridge would sort of undulate," she said. "Especially when there were bicycles, two or three bikes coming from Brunswick and Topsham. We'd wonder if we were going to clang-bang in the middle. The bridge would sway up and down, squeaking and squealing. But we never worried about the strength of that bridge. It never occurred to us to worry. It was our friend."

Norman Marriner of Brunswick also walked to school across the bridge. But his destination was Brunswick High School on Federal Street (now Hawthorne School). Since there was no high school in Topsham, students went to school in Brunswick, many crossing the pedestrian bridge.

Marriner, who graduated from Brunswick High School in 1935, and his brother sometimes crossed the bridge back and forth three times a day - to school, home for lunch and back, then to Edwards Field on Jordan Avenue for athletic events.

They also went into Brunswick in the evening sometimes to go to the movies or for other events. Sometimes they visited Gaudreau's Restaurant, at Cushing and Mill streets in Brunswick, or the other businesses in Brunswick.

Marriner also recalls the old pulp mill on the Topsham side near the bridge. A railroad spur went to the mill. Horses and wagons also hauled pulp from the mill to the Bowdoin Mill on Main Street, where his father worked. "The pulp mill smelled something terrible," Marriner recalled.

And then there are the legends about the bridge - the woman who accidentally drove a Volkswagen "Bug" across it, the people who have ridden motorcycles or horses on it, and people who have jumped off it to swim in the fast current of the Androscoggin.

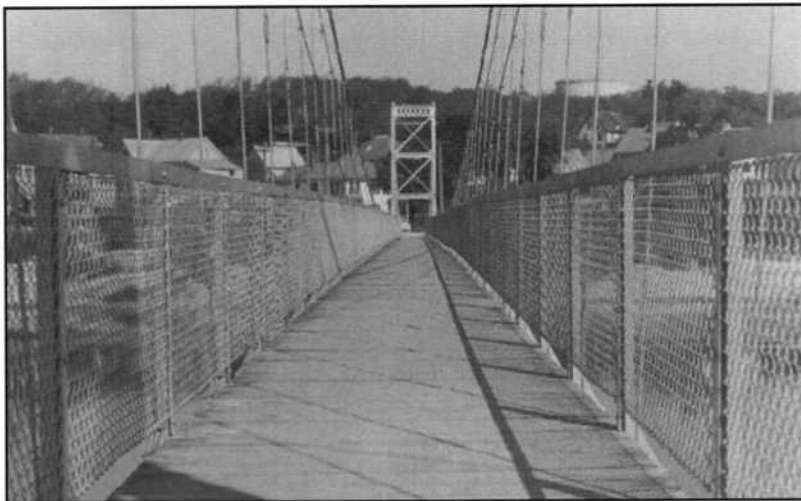
Many also remember the Flood of 1936. In March of that

year ice jams upstream combined with melting snow and rain to cause a huge flood. Ice chunks were so big, the river so high, that the deck of the bridge reportedly flipped over.

The cables and towers were unharmed, but the bridge was out of commission until the deck was replaced. Old photographs show the bridge with wood side rails. These were replaced after the flood with chain link fencing rails. The Roebling's wire rope cables have withstood the floods and other natural stresses on the bridge since 1892.

The Works Progress Administration helped to replace the span and do other bridge repairs. A plaque on the Brunswick side of the structure commemorates this work.

Brunswick and Topsham have shared the costs of maintaining the bridge. Since the flood,



other work has been done, including replacement and upgrading suspender rods in 1954, deck repairs and painting steel in 1959, replacement of side-sway cables in 1973, and steel base channels on the west tower in 1993.

Today the Brunswick Rotary Club and a large and growing group of citizens from in and around Brunswick and Topsham have teamed to save this swinging piece of Maine history. Money has been raised, the bridge has been recently closed to traffic, and restorations have begun. Your help is still needed, however to help raise the rest of the funds necessary to complete the project. If we have piqued your interest here, as I hope we have, contact the Swinging Bridge Committee at P.O. Box 481, Brunswick, Maine 04011, call (207) 729-3600 or email donate@saveourbridge.org. Visit their website at www.saveourbridge.org.

With the help of the many citizens of the area who love and remember this special place Brunswick's swinging bridge will continue to compliment this beautiful spot on the Androscoggin River. Le petit pont will continue to be a highlight of Brunswick's rich historic past, just like the people it faithfully served.



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