

I.

THE OLD WOODEN COVERED BRIDGES OF THE OCTORARO

By D. F. Magee, Esq.

When in about 1905 the engineering corps and the executive officers of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company selected the Octoraro Creek as the sole source of their supply of pure water for their engines in use on the eastern division of their main line, and the low grade road the great freight line of this Company between Harrisburg and the Philadelphia and New York terminals, they did so, as they publicly stated, because they found it to be the purest large stream of water in Pennsylvania. This is the exact fact today and will no doubt continue to be the fact for all the years to come.

It was then stated by them that from its headwaters about Christiana to its mouth at Octoraro junction where it empties into the Susquehanna river just at the head of tide water, there was no impure material of any kind from village, factory, mill or mine which entered it throughout its flow, a distance of some twenty-eight miles by air line and probably twice that distance by the true course of the winding stream.

This freedom from the usual unhealthy conditions effecting most all streams of its size greatly enhances the beauty and charm of this stream as it flows in its bed today, rippling and gleaming in the sunlight through miles of wooded hills and verdant meadows, as they alternate on its borders, to be alternately supplied with the purest of waters from springs far back in the woodland then to distribute this again in irrigating fashion to the thousand of acres of grazing lands afar down its winding valley.

The great beauty of this stream was ever a source of joy and admiration of our great founder and leader, Hon. W. U. Hensel, who never tired of viewing its beauties and depicting its charms, as he saw them and viewed them from the "Octoraro Creek Road," which runs by its banks from Christiana down; as well from many other roads that to those that know them give entrancing views of its waving fertile fields of grass and grain, pasture lands and woodlands.

Also our late prominent member, Dr. Jos. W. Huston, was exceedingly active in contributing to our annals when in his prime and wrote much of the people and business and manufacturing that a century ago flourished in the upper stretches of the valley and built many furnaces, forges, tanneries, mills etc., to be driven by its swift flowing waters. Dr. Huston was born and spent the most of his life within sight of the East branch and loved to tell the story of its romantic past. But all of these passed away several generations ago, as the building of railroads made all such industries seek ready transportation of their products to purchasers all over the country. Today even the marks of them in most instances have passed away, and only here and there can be seen a portion of a dam or a ditch nearly filled, that marks the places where the water was held in leash to be carried in head races and tail races to and away from the turning wheels of industry. Their presence like the rude walls of stone that may be found now hidden by trees and undergrowth where once the mill or the furnace stood, only intensifies and emphasises the thoroughness of the manner in which true nature has resumed her sway and covered up the scars that men had made on its fair face.

The Octoraro Creek is made up of two main branches and these are designated as the **East** and **West** branch of the Octoraro. The East branch

is the largest and longest to its junction with the West, and throughout its length from Christiana to this junction, it is the boundary line between Chester and Lancaster Counties, as the Octoraro the main creek continues to be the boundary clear to the State line where it passes into Maryland at or about the Horse Shoe below Woods Mill. It first takes the name of Octoraro as it leaves the Christiana Dam, which dam was supplied with water from Buck Run, Williams Run Run and Pine Run and another large run flows into it at Nobleville, a short distance below Christiana, known as Valley Run. Practically all these streams have their source in the North half of Sadsbury Township and arise from hundreds of spring heads on the South slope of the Gap Ridge.

The West Branch, on the contrary, has its spring heads almost exclusively in Bart Township, centreing up about the Nickel Mines in the extreme North portion of the Township, and flowing Southward away from the Gap Ridge and divided from the East branch exactly by the Township line from the Sadsbury waters. These two streams known as the Nickel Mine Run and the Meeting House Run after crossing the present State Road, the one at Green Tree and the other near Old May P. O. come together a couple miles South and assume the name of Octoraro West Branch. Under that name the West branch flows Southward on the boundary lines of Little Britain and Coleraine. They come together at the head of Old Pine Grove Forge Dam at a point known as "Point Lookout" which in an air line course is about twelve miles from the Gap Ridge foot hills where they both have their source.

After nearly a hundred years following its first settlement and the establishment of the many industries, especially the iron manufacture in its several forms, and the clearing of the forest primerval that covered this vast tract of fertile lands included in the Townships of Bart, Sadsbury, Coleraine, Little Britain in Lancaster County, and parts of the Townships of Sadsbury, Upper Oxford, Lower Oxford and West Nottingham, in Chester County, roads and many of them were needed to and from the farms and mills and centres of trade and industry that sprung up in all that section, as well as the bigger roads and highways that led away to the cities of Philadelphia, Wilmington and Christine. This Southern end of our county needed roads and the road needed bridges across the big streams for safe passage at many points as they travelled to and from their markets and points where business and pleasure alike lead them in those busy days of the making of the country. While at first fords of reasonable safety were established at many points for the roads that were needed to cross this stream, yet at times, and especially in the winter times, the best of fords are unsafe and unsatisfactory, but bridges of the size and expense required to bridge a stream of this size were rather expensive for local authorities or communities to build, and not many were attempted.

The main roads that centred about Lancaster gradually established pikes and the pike companies had to build their own bridges and thus the public was supplied in central parts of the county.

But this was not the case in the Southern end; there the townships did the best they could on the smaller streams but on the larger ones and especially on county line streams like the Octoraro, the County Commissioners, through action in the Courts, were finally ordered to build bridges where the burden was too heavy for a township or two townships to build and in this way the "County Bridge" became established as a settled plan for the relief of the travelling public.

Apparently the first County Bridge to be built across the Octoraro was the stone arched bridge at Andrews Bridge, which was built by order of the Court issued at the August Sessions of 1813, and the bridge built in 1814. The next one was "Pine Grove" which was on what was then a national highway for stage coaches between New York and Washington and it was built in 1816. It was, and is yet, of the old wooden arch bridge type, and it

became the type established by the County as the proper thing in County Bridges. Just about one hundred of them have been built since that, over the various streams of the County.

Most of the bridges of the wooden arched type across the Octoraro which are standing today, have been built within the past seventy-five years, and as a rule they are in fair condition yet and liable to stand for a good many years before being replaced by concrete. With this much of a preliminary of the story of the Octoraro, I will now give you in particular a short sketch of each bridge and its surroundings as full as I may in a paper of this length.

Starting at Christiana and taking the creek drive Southward by the winding stream, the first County Bridge is an iron truss bridge just below the town, close to the site of the old "Hannum Mill," but as it is an iron bridge we have nothing to do with it. Within a mile you will see a new concrete bridge spanning the stream on your left, but you do not cross this bridge, neither is it a County Bridge. At this point you begin to approach rich historic ground and are at the entrance to a three-mile drive through heavily wooded steep hills on either side, and the road is shaded and hemmed in very closely by the hills as we pass and it is sometimes called "a gap" in the hills.

A mile or so down you come to the first "wooden covered county bridge," which appears on your left but you do not cross it. It is known as "Mercers Bridge," built in 1880, its entire length is 103 feet, and it is well preserved. It is on a rather unfrequented road passing from Sadsbury Township into West Fallowfield Township, in Chester County.

You next see on your left again after passing by the modern little park called "Brookside," your second wooden bridge known as the "Steelville Bridge," close to the ancient village of Steelville, which had its days of glory a century and more ago. This was back in the days of the Revolution when the Baileys and the Steeles, of Lancaster County, made iron and run many industries at this village and along the Octoraro for some distance above it. At a later date along in the fifties Thomas Woods a strong admirable character owned the greater part of the surrounding lands and re-established some of the principal industries here. It was hereabouts that the Sprouls made their money and their fame in the iron business and owned much property.

This bridge was first built in 1847, is 84 feet in length and is on the road leading from Smyrna, in Lancaster County, to Steelville and beyond.

As we leave Steelville and take up our course on down we find the county changes and the valley broadens and wooded hills give way to open farm lands blooming in the sun light, and broad meadows green with pastures and dotted with grazing cattle. The greater part of this meadow land lies on the Lancaster County side; on the Chester County side the land rises more abruptly from the creek bank and the creek gradually trends and winds to the Southwest.

A few miles further down after a couple square turns to right we come in sight of the famous "Andrews Bridge," a striking object in the landscape. It is a stone arch bridge of four arches and is altogether four hundred and fifty feet in length. It was built one hundred and ten years ago and looks as if it was good for several hundred more years of wear. A few hundred yards below the hotel is the birth place of ex-Governor Sproul, and within a few miles of this point as a centre have been the homes of a number of families that have given strong men to the service of their country; but it is not my province here to name them, so will hurry on.

But a mile or so below we find Newcomers Bridge, a wooden arch, built in 1888, ninety-eight feet in length. It is on an unfrequented road which leads over into Chester County towards Homeville.

Bellbank is next on the list some two miles down by the Lancaster County side. This is one hundred and thirty-one feet in length and was

built in 1861, but this bridge was built to replace a prior one, which was burned down in that year, the first having been built in 1850.

There are a number of very fine large farms within sight of this bridge and from them have gone forth some notable men and women too.

If you would see this beautiful valley to the best advantage go cross the bridge into Chester County and drive up the hill just beyond the fine home place of James T. Bernard and look over into Lancaster County, Northward. Mr. Bernard is still living at the age of 78, and he can tell the story of the homes and the peoples of this section for a period of three score years and more.

The next bridge to cross the creek is "Holmes" but it was an iron bridge now replaced by a reinforced concrete, the road over it goes directly to Oxford, Chester County, some three miles away.

From the Holmes farm by a winding road we come to "Worths Bridge" a mile or so further down, an old landmark. It is on what is called the back road to Oxford from Coleraine. The bridge is only sixty feet in length of the arch type as all others, built in 1857.

Crossing here into Chester County side and passing through the big Ross farm as we have passed by the Worth farm and the old Whiteside homestead, we come to Mt. Vernon Bridge, which is on the State Highway route through Coleraine towards Oxford, now being improved by the State.

It was built originally in 1865 and is of a total length of one hundred and nine feet. By the State Road from this bridge it is three miles to Oxford and by coming up through the heart of Coleraine Township, via Kirkwood and Quarryville, it is about twenty-seven miles to Lancaster.

At this point the fine meadow land is left behind and direct road down the creek are not to be had, and we are in direct line, not more than a mile, from Point Lookout, above Pine Grove, where the East and West Branch unite; it is a hard rough road to drive.

Our next bridge is one of the largest and best known of any on the creek as it was among the first to be built. It is a double arched bridge, the only one on the creek, and is two hundred and four feet in length, built practically upon the very site of the old Pine Grove Forge and Rolling Mill Works. It was swept away by floods twice and rebuilt. It was first built in 1816, and rebuilt in 1853.

Kirks Bridge is the next below and is on what was a national highway in the early days of the nation. It was the stage route from New York, Philadelphia and Washington, crossing the Susquehanna at Conowingo, and as originally built had a double floor or driveway. It was first built in 1827 and is one hundred and seventy feet in length.

The next two bridges spanning the creek are and always have been of iron and comparatively late build; and we do not find a wooden arch until we come to Lees Bridge, which is a low set wooden bridge built near the old land marks of Lees Mill and Woods Mine Hole, well-known to our botanists and geologists. It is close to the Maryland line in the chrome pit and feldspar section. The road crossing it leads out from the extreme Southern end of Little Britain Township towards Rising Sun, in Maryland. This bridge was built first in 1848 and is 146 feet long.

Next and last on the Octoraro, in Pennsylvania, is called Woods Bridge, after the leading Quaker family of that section, who have long been prominent in Lancaster County history. It is on a road but little travelled and in poor repair, leading from Wrightsville over into Cecil County, Md. The bridge was built in 1890, and is one hundred and forty-nine feet in length.

All of the bridges above described as of the old wooden arch truss bridge, ten in number, are inter-county bridges, built and maintained by Lancaster and Chester Counties jointly.

Now returning to the West Branch of this creek, which is not so large or long as the East Branch to their junction, we find six more of the same type bridges, maintained by the County, most of them being on the dividing line between Little Britain and Coleraine Townships.

The first which is in Bart Township is the latest built and is close to the home of David W. Jackson, who has a large farm and mill property near Bartville. It is on a road but little travelled, leading from the Valley Road to the Noble Road at Bartville. It was built in 1878, is one hundred and fifty-six feet in length.

Not far below this bridge we come to the old Clommel Bridge, which crosses the creek near what was the village of that name in Civil War times, but as a village is not now functioning. Near by is a pumping station of the Octoraro Water Company. This bridge was built in 1868, and is sixty feet long and being in poor condition is likely to give place to a concrete bridge before many years.

The next bridge in order down the stream was called the New Bridge which spanned the creek on the new Quarryville-Kirkwood State Road, but this has lately been replaced by a fine concrete bridge in conformity with the construction of the road; so the next we strike is the old Puseyville Bridge. This bridge takes its name after the ancient mill and small village of that name, which was so named because one, William Pusey, in the early dawning of civilization in this section took up a large tract of land and built the mill and village the ownership of which continued in the name till very recently. The bridge is a small one and on a road not much travelled, running from Unicorn to Kirkwood. It is sixty-five feet long and was built in 1851.

From this point down to its intersection at Pine Grove Dam, the West Branch is banked by fine broad meadows, affording ample and rich pasturage for cattle on the adjoining farms on both sides of the creek, which are mostly large tracts and well farmed.

About a mile below we have "Kings Bridge," the first bridge having been erected in 1848, and is eighty feet long. It is named after the well known King family, Quakers, three brothers of whom lived on three farms at and about this bridge; they having inherited the land from their father and improved the lands with buildings. They were intellectual men and good citizens, who made their mark upon the community and left descendants worthy to bear their good name.

A mile or so below this is White Rock Bridge, situated in the village of that name which takes its name from White Rock Forge near by.

It was originally built in 1847, was swept away couple times. It is on the road from Oak Shade to Union, also on the direct road to Nobleville, which road assumes the name of the Noble road as it passes into Coleraine Township.

Spruce Grove is the next and last wooden bridge on the West Branch and is about a mile above Point Lookout, where this branch ends. It was first built in 1847 and rebuilt in 1855, which bridge still stands.

It takes its name from quite a large spruce woods, which covers the hills on the Little Britain side along here; said to be the only spruce land in the County. Some who claim to know say that this timber is the real hemlock which covered the great Susquehanna Water Shed in the early days; if not the same, it is from all appearances very closely related to it. Unfortunately within the past few years this tract of rare timber has been cut off and marketed.

In conclusion I would say that while the impression has gone forth among the public that the old wooden covered bridge, which speaking more accurately means "the burr truss wooden arch bridge" has seen its day and will soon pass away; yet knowing them all and their present condition and uses and their powers to withstand the ravages of time and weather, it is

my judgment that it will be many a day before we see the last of them. They in their day were built of the white pine with which this country was so plentifully supplied fifty years and more ago, upon which the elements have little effect if it is reasonably protected, and though nearly all of them were built from fifty to seventy-five years ago as will be noted; the timbers in them today are sound and of far better quality and endurance than any wood that can be had at this date.

Their weakness today is that they were not built to carry the enormous loads that are now put upon them by the truck loads of ten and twelve thousand pounds, so it is driving them from the State Highways, whereon these trucks travel. However, within the past six years or so the Commissioners have reinforced them with replacement of heavier sills and more numerous joists in the floor bed, which seems to withstand the ordinary load with safety, and no doubt the newest and best of them on the least used roads and country highways will continue with us for many years yet.

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