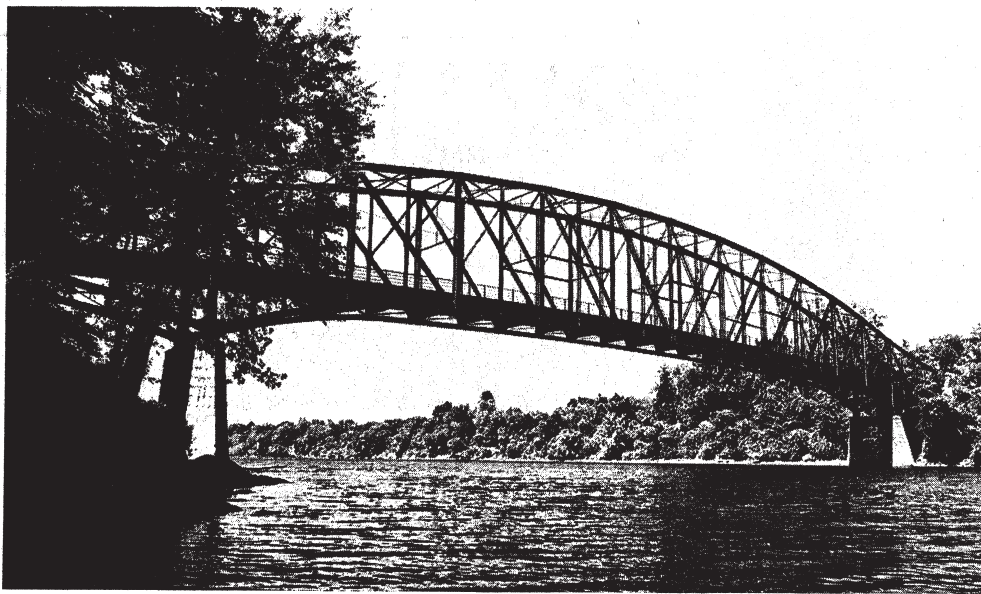


erving The People Of Franklin County Since 1792

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Recorder file photo

The Schell Bridge in Northfield. Money remains the problem with restoring the bridge for use.

# Still the stuff of dreams

## Money holds up Schell Bridge restoration

**M**aureen Spaulding occasionally buys a lottery ticket. She dreams of winning enough money to buy the Schell Bridge and restore it.

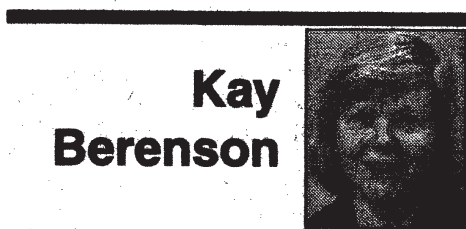
She envisions the historic Northfield bridge being used again by hikers and bicyclists as part of a series of Connecticut River parks, tying in with the existing boat ramp and other nearby outdoor recreation areas.

It's a wonderful vision shared by many others. The problem is finding the money. That's why Maureen sometimes daydreams about a lottery win. Either that or finding a really rich friend for the bridge. Someone like Francis Schell, the wealthy New Yorker who paid for the structure to be built more than a century ago when Northfield was at the center of Dwight L. Moody's evangelistic enterprises and Schell had a chateau there to entertain friends.

Maureen lives not far from the bridge in a farmhouse her husband's grandfather bought in 1917. The 32-acre farm stretches to the New Hampshire border, with towering trees, dense woods and a sunny garden with pea vines climbing a wire fence, bush and pole beans and an orchard in the back.

The Victorian farmhouse, complete with a large wraparound front porch is, like the Schell Bridge, tied to Northfield's past. The previous owner, "one of the reverends" associated with Moody, wrote sermons in a study behind the house. These days, the house is filled with books from Maureen's online bookselling business.

Maureen is a relative newcomer in town, moving here in 2001 after her marriage to husband David. She's been working to save the bridge almost since then. Her husband took



**Kay  
 Berenson**

her to the bridge and talked about how he'd ridden across it on his bike as a teenager. She was taken by its beauty.

The bridge, still standing though it's been closed to traffic for decades, can be seen easily from the boat ramp off Route 63. From that vantage point, it's easy to see why many people call the Schell "the most beautiful bridge on the Connecticut." It's easy to see how the bridge could be a recreational asset and tourist draw for the community, how it could be part of a plan to create a regional bike and hiking path that would lead up into Vermont.

That the bridge is still standing is a testament both to its fundamentally sound construction (the bridge is considered historically significant because of its engineering) and the dogged determination of Spaulding and many others to protect it. The bridge was named by Preservation Mass as one of the 10 most endangered historical landmarks in Massachusetts in 2003. Studies have been done showing that the bridge could be restored. The bridge has its own Web site and glossy brochures with pictures about its past and plans for its future. But nothing much seems to be happening toward its restoration right now.

To get close to the bridge these days, you park and walk down the closed East Northfield Road, trying to avoid the deep green border of poison ivy that blankets the side of the road. Erosion has cut a huge gully along one side of the road. A pile of empty bottles lies nearby. The road dead-ends at a solid sheet of thick

metal, tall and wide, intended to block any access to the bridge, pedestrian, bicyclist, even views of the bridge. Nothing good is happening at the bridge now. And that's the frustration its supporters feel.

Maureen was one of the founders of the Friends of the Schell Bridge, a nonprofit corporation that has worked to save it, though she is no longer associated with that organization.

With help from others, including Marie Ferre of the Northfield Historic Commission, Maureen organized and held a giant tag sale to sell off a barn full of old tools from her husband's family. They made about \$1,000 from that sale and opened a bank account for the bridge.

Maureen helped with campaigns that created signs and shirts with the "Save the Schell" logo on them, organized petition drives and arranged for public meetings to stop plans to demolish the bridge. The signs still dot front yards along Northfield's Main Street. Others have contributed much time and money as well. Maureen still wears her shirts with the logo. But the bridge is still waiting.

There's debate about how much is really needed. Some estimates say it would cost \$25 million to restore and reopen it. That would include making it safe for emergency vehicles. Maureen says a contractor in Vermont will do it for \$10 million.

But no one, so far, has come up with the money.

And so Maureen and others are, for now, left to hope for that winning ticket or that really rich "friend of the Schell."

Kay Berenson, publisher emeritus, served as publisher of The Recorder from 1996 to 2009. She is a former college English teacher, reporter, editor and award-winning editorial writer. She and her husband live in Shelburne. E-mail her at ksberenson@yahoo.com.