



Recorder photo/Paul Franz

Built for \$32,000 in 1903, the Schell Bridge in Northfield is slated for demolition — a \$300,000 job.

Losing a bridge to the past

After nearly nine decades, Schell Bridge to disappear

By RICHIE DAVIS

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Of course, we know better to disbelieve much of what the state says, just on general principle. But if the commonwealth of Massachusetts ever gets the funding together, its Department of Public Works has plans to reduce the turn-of-the-century iron structure to merely a piece of history.

The 500-foot-long bridge spanning the Connecticut River is already a hefty hunk of history. Francis Robert Schell gave the town \$32,000 to build it as an "enduring memorial" to his mother and father.

Rosa Johnston of the Northfield Historical Commission said Schell built the bridge to replace one downstream that carried trains as well as horse traffic.

Northfield, the only Massachusetts town split by the Connecticut River, had been trying since the 1950s to get state or federal assistance in fixing the bridge, which was built to handle 10 tons of traffic.

But in January 1985, selectmen gave up the struggle, and the bridge — its trusses and plates rusted, its bearings corroded, its braces buckled — was closed.

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File photo

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Despite a lobbying effort by residents, town officials and legislators, the state couldn't justify the cost of repairs, estimated in 1984 as up to \$1.5 million to bring the bridge up to 1903 standards. A new bridge, it was estimated, would have cost \$2.25 million.

Not only has the bridge been closed since then, but barricades have kept pedestrians and bicyclists from using it as a link between the east side and west side of town.

The Legislature has appropriated more than \$300,000 to demolish the bridge — 10 times the cost of constructing it, but a fraction of what repairs would have cost.

At one point, according to the town history, motorists were greeted at the bridge with a frightening sign: "Bridge closed to trucks and buses — others proceed at own risk. Per order of selectmen."

If that wasn't enough to send fear into my heart as I crossed the rattling bridge when I lived in town several years back, there was the panic of spotting a car in my rear-view mirror that had followed right behind me onto the structure, so that we — and the weight of our rigs — were testing fate together. (I'd always wait at the end of the bridge if there was a car just in front of me, to give him time to get across as I said my prayers.)

West Northfield residents, who once complained about the bridge's closure because of fears of slower response time for emergency vehicles, are now silent. People in East Northfield, who could save driving to the transfer station across the river if they didn't have to go across the Bennett Meadow Bridge at Route 10 a couple of miles south, have lost hope of ever seeing the rusty bridge replaced.

It may, in fact, be little to grieve over, this white elephant of a bridge — damaged in the flood of 1936 and never quite the same since. But even apart from the grandeur of its design, it is part of a sad footnote in Northfield history.

The Schell Chateau, a summer home for two completed in 1903 for about \$3 million by Schell, was a French-style castle, with turrets and gables, rising five stories high.

Sold after Schell's death in 1928 to what is now Northfield Mount Hermon School, the 98-room mansion with a unique double-spiral staircase, cross-shaped chapel and brocade walls, was eventually converted into an annex to the Northfield Inn, where conferences and proms were held.

Too expensive to maintain, the Chateau began to deteriorate, and by the early 1960s, it was no longer structurally safe. In 1963, its furnishings were auctioned off for \$9,700 — perhaps the price today of two of its chandeliers alone, it's been observed — and the magnificent landmark was razed.

The 125-room inn, built by Northfield Mount Hermon founder, evangelist Dwight L. Moody in 1888 to accommodate visitors to his summer bible conferences, didn't get a liquor license until 1969. But it had no trouble attracting notable guests like President Theodore Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Henry Cabot Lodge and William Jennings Bryan.



File photo

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The Moody Mansion, which as the Northfield Inn played host to such luminaries as Teddy Roosevelt and Amelia Earhart, was razed in 1977.

Then, a decade after the neighboring Chateau was torn down, the inn's own financial problems became apparent, leading to its demolition as well. After a long search for a suitable buyer — with prospects including the town and a meditation group — the grand inn closed in November 1976 and was razed four months later.

Surely Schell Bridge, which squeaked and shook every time a car traversed it, had little of the magnificence of the chateau or the inn. But in 1981, it was determined eligible for the state register of historic landmarks.

It's noteworthy that the cost of destroying these structures costs as much as, or more than, building them. With a little dynamite, with a wrecker's ball, these treasures that have stood for years can be eradicated in a matter of minutes. Given the enormous costs today and the little attention we devote to the future, we know that nothing of similar grandeur will ever take their place.

The fact that we could allow the Schell bridge, like the inn and the Chateau, to be destroyed shows that we also pay little homage to the past. Its passing — like those of the two grand buildings — marks the loss of another tangible piece of a town's fascinating, colorful history.



Davis is a reporter for The Recorder.