

# Schell Memorial Bridge Threatened

In 1987 the Northfield (MA) highway department took its flat-bed truck to the east side of the Schell Bridge, lifted a steel barrier off the truck, welded it to the bridge, and then did the same to the west side. Ever since, the bridge over the Connecticut River has remained closed and slowly but surely, with lack of maintenance, been allowed to deteriorate.

Schell Memorial Bridge was built in 1903 by Francis R. Schell, a wealthy diamond merchant from New York City who came to Northfield to stay in his country home, which he called "The Chateau." To reach his property, he traveled from the railroad station in West Northfield across a double-decked bridge that carried a roadway on the lower deck and a railroad on the upper. Reportedly, one day Schell was crossing the bridge in a carriage when sparks, cinders, and the noise of a passing train frightened the horse and almost spilled Schell and his passengers into the river. After this terrifying experience, he decided a new bridge was needed.

Schell hired consulting engineer Edward B. Shaw of Boston, and work began. According to a HAER report completed in 1990, "The Schell is unique in that it functions as a continuous truss under a live load; under dead load it works as a simple truss span with cantilevered ends. Freight car springs placed under the abutment ends of the bridge counter

upward movement of the ends when the bridge had a live load in the center." Not only does the bridge have some unusual engineering details, it is also considered one of the more architecturally engaging bridges in the region for once Schell decided to make the bridge a memorial bridge to his deceased father, he had the engineer add ornate Gothic Revival-style details. The 515-ft.-long bridge has a distinctly light and airy appearance. Its Gothic Revival elements were reportedly meant to suggest the union between nature and the spiritual, or perhaps for Schell the idea of immortality.

When the railroad era gave way to interstate highway travel in the 1950s, the Schell Memorial Bridge took on a new identity. For Northfield residents the bridge became a means to get around town or travel to Vermont without having to get on the freeway. For boaters, canoeists and kayakers, it became a landmark. For the Town of Northfield it became a liability. In the absence of funds to maintain and rehabilitate the bridge, the Northfield Town Meeting decided to close it and seek demolition in 1985.

The bridge continues to stand primarily because the town has not had the funds for demolition. In 2003, the Schell Memorial Bridge was named one of the ten most endangered landmarks in the state. Galvanized by the listing, Friends of



Schell Memorial Bridge, copy of original elevation.

Jerry Wagner, photos



Schell Memorial Bridge, ca. 2006



Portal of the Schell Bridge. The steel plates were welded to the bridge portals in 1987 but some of the Gothic Revival-details can still be seen.

Schell Bridge organized to save the bridge and to encourage interest in rehabilitating it for pedestrian and bicycle use. During the past 20 years trails have proliferated in the Pioneer Valley, and it has become obvious to some Northfield residents that the Schell Memorial Bridge could make a strategic link joining the Franklin County Bikeway, which ends abruptly in Northfield at Moody Street, to bike paths in New Hampshire, Vermont, and western Massachusetts.

The Picker Engineering School at Smith College has provided the Friends of Schell Bridge an independent assessment of the bridge's condition as a basis for future plans. The Picker Program selected the bridge for a year-long study by one of its senior design teams. Working with two professional structural engineers from firms in New York City, the seniors evaluated and tested the bridge's steel members.

They determined that the bridge is structurally sound and a good candidate for rehabilitation.

Today the Schell Bridge is so much a part of the Northfield historic landscape that it would be tragic to see it dropped into the river. It is no longer the grand entrance to Northfield for railroad travelers, but it can have a new purpose in the 21st century if local and state officials can be persuaded to rehabilitate the bridge for pedestrian use. Currently, the Schell Bridge is scheduled for demolition in late 2007 or 2008. The Friends of Schell Bridge are mounting a campaign to prevent demolition. To support their effort or learn more: [www.schellbridge.org](http://www.schellbridge.org) or Maureen Spaulding, [mospaulding@comcast.net](mailto:mospaulding@comcast.net).

Maureen Spaulding and Sue Ross

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## Historic Bridge News

New York City Dept. of Transportation has finished an engineering study and secured funding to reopen the **High Bridge** over the Harlem River to pedestrians. The bridge has been closed for more than a decade due to safety concerns, but community interest in reopening the bridge has been strong. The High Bridge was built in 1848 to carry the Old Croton Aqueduct. It was designed with a "promenade" atop the stone arches that rise 116 ft. above the river and span a total length of 1,250 ft. The rehabilitation project, which is estimated to cost \$60 million over 10 years, includes structural repairs, incorporation of modern safety features (e.g. railings that meet current codes), rehabilitation of two gatehouses, and wheelchair ramps. Info: [www.nyc.gov/parks](http://www.nyc.gov/parks).

The Newport (NH) Historical Society is raising funds to match a government grant to restore the **Pier Bridge**, a covered lattice-truss bridge built in 1906-7 by the Claremont &

Concord Ry. over the Sugar River. With a span of over 216 ft., it claims to be the longest covered railroad bridge in the world. The C&C abandoned the bridge some time ago, and it is now maintained as part of a rails-to-trails facility by the NH Dept. of Resources & Economic Development. The grant will be used to apply a fire-retardant chemical and install a sprinkler system to protect against arson. It will also be used to repair a leaky roof and replace the sideboards. The NHS is requesting donations. Info: Kathy Butcher, Pier Bridge Committee Chairman, 49 Myrtle St., Newport, NH 03773; (603) 863-8588.

The NY Dept. of Transportation and VT Agency for Transportation are studying options for replacing or rehabilitating the 2,186-ft.-long **Lake Champlain Bridge**, also known as the Crown Point Bridge, which opened to traffic in 1929. The bridge's main span is a 1,014-ft.-long, high-level, continuous, through truss. Consulting engineers Fay

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