



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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SHELBURNE'S 1897 MEADOW BRIDGE FACES POSSIBLE DEMOLITION

Despite its designation as a nationally significant engineering monument and its receipt of a coveted "Save America's Treasures" grant, Shelburne's Meadow Bridge is facing possible demolition. In 2005, the rural town of Shelburne, New Hampshire, was awarded a \$220,000 "Save America's Treasures" grant for rehabilitation of the structure. The award is one of only two competitive "Save America's Treasures" grants ever made for preservation of a bridge in the United States. But no progress has been made in rehabilitating the bridge since receipt of the grant, which is due to lapse on March 1, 2009.

Built in 1897 by the Groton Bridge and Manufacturing Company of New York, Meadow Bridge is a pin-connected steel Pratt truss structure. It is composed of three high or "through" spans, each just over 133 feet in length, one low or "pony"

truss span nearly 74 feet long, and one short stringer



Meadow Bridge (1897), Shelburne, NH, before removal of endangered trusses to shore in 2004.

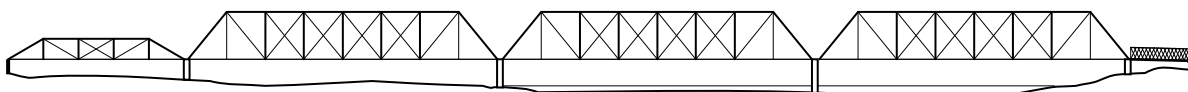


Meadow Bridge as it appears in 2008, with one river span moved to the southern shore of the Androscoggin River and the second river span visible in the distance on the northern shore.

approach span. With a total length of 504 feet, Meadow Bridge is one of the longest pin-connected bridges ever built in New Hampshire, and is one of only a few dozen multi-span pin-connected bridges to survive in the United States. The bridge is supported by now-rare cylindrical steel piers rather than by a stone substructure.

Meadow Bridge was bypassed by a new downstream span in 1984 but remained a state-owned span. By 2000, one of its four piers was being undermined by riverbed scour, causing two of the trusses to lean and twist.

Following strong expressions of public sentiment for preserving the bridge, the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) developed plans to prevent the loss of the two endangered trusses. In 2003, NHDOT offered to pay 80%



of the estimated \$1.4 million cost of rehabilitation if the town would raise 20% of project costs (\$280,000) and assume ownership of the bridge after restoration.

In November 2003, the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation awarded Shelburne's bridge preservation committee \$5,000 to develop plans to save the bridge and provide public benefit from the preserved structure. The committee contracted with the North Country Council, the regional planning commission that serves fifty-one northern New Hampshire communities, to draft a plan.

North Country Council staff members developed an imaginative plan to transform Meadow Bridge into the centerpiece of a recreational park that would celebrate the history and ecology of the Androscoggin River and the place of the bridge in American transportation and engineering history. The park would provide a site from which to enjoy the beautiful prospect of the Mahoosuc mountain range to the north and east, and of the Carter-Moriah range of the White Mountain National Forest to the south. It would provide a safe site to launch canoes in a river that is increasingly treasured for recreation. The plan was also intended to be used as a vehicle for raising the remainder of the 20% non-

DOT share of preservation costs.

Meanwhile, NHDOT contracted with Chesterfield Associates of Westhampton, New York, to move the two endangered trusses to temporary storage on the banks of the river. In the bitter cold of February, 2004, a single huge Manitowoc Model 999 crane with a 160-foot boom picked up the two spans, each estimated to weigh 72,000 pounds before the removal of its wood plank floor, and placed the trusses gently on temporary steel trestles on each side of the river. The undermined river pier was later lifted from the bed of the stream to await replacement.

Despite Shelburne's receipt of a rare "Save America's Treasures" grant, the tiny community has been thwarted by one proviso of the proposed preservation plan: NHDOT's requirement that the town assume ownership of the state-owned bridge following its rehabilitation. The burden of owning and maintaining a bridge that no longer serves highway traffic has proven to be too daunting a challenge for a town of 380 people. So far, NHDOT has not relented on this point. Meanwhile, the "Save America's Treasures" grant, already granted a one-year extension until March 1, 2009, may be lost after that date. Loss of substantially all of the 20% match for the

costs of rehabilitation, won at great effort, would probably doom the bridge.

The threat to Meadow Bridge illustrates a pervasive preservation crisis in New Hampshire and nationwide. Bridge preservation was theoretically strengthened with the passage by Congress of an important transportation law in 1987. This act created a historic bridge program that codified a Congressional finding that it is in the national interest to encourage the rehabilitation, reuse, and preservation of bridges that are significant in American history, architecture, engineering, and culture. Despite the pervasive recognition of the significance of these structures, a workshop on historic bridges held in Washington, D. C., in December 2003, came to a dire conclusion: half of the nation's historic bridges had been lost in the sixteen years since passage of the law.

Meadow Bridge is far from the only threatened historic bridge in New Hampshire. Yet the potential loss of a nationally significant span when the means of its preservation seemed to be in hand is the strongest possible illustration of the threat that faces our transportation and engineering history.

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