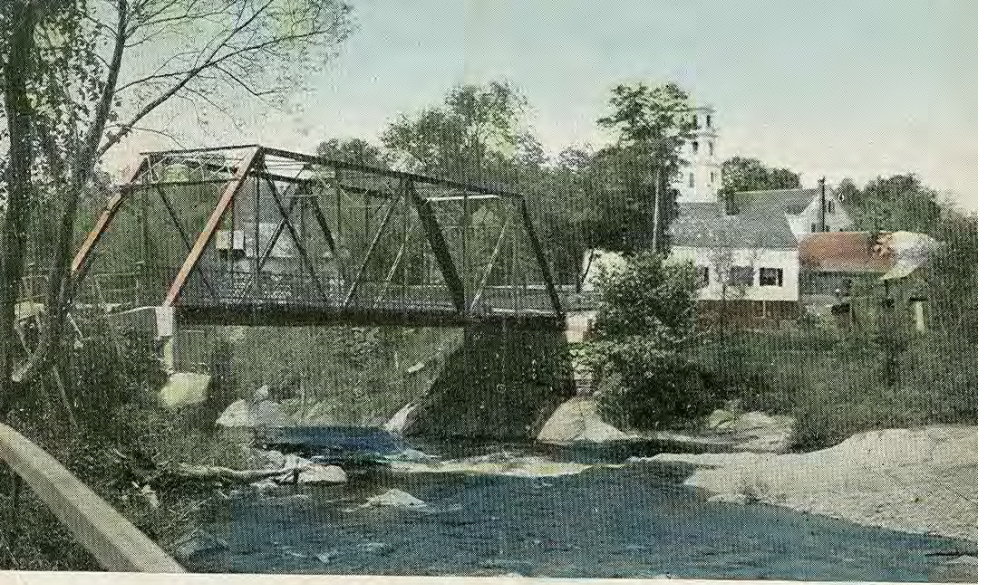


The Town of Wentworth New Hampshire



New Iron Bridge, Wentworth, N. H.

Annual Report 2013

When the first road in the town of Wentworth was laid out on October 1, 1783, it crossed "the Great bridge over bakers river" and then passed along on the west side of the river to Warren town line. The nature of the crossing can only be imagined, but the first of many Great Bridges at this location was soon erected over the Baker River. The Orford Road, laid out in 1804, began at the "West end of Aiken Bridge" and ended at the Connecticut River Bridge in Orford. Thus we may be ascertained that the bridge on this site was deemed vital to the town at its earliest settlement.

In 1785, a great freshet inundated the interval lands, sweeping away one of the first of the bridges on the site. Aiken's mills was also swept away during the 1785 flood, and for the next one-hundred fifty years, many were the occasions when the river would carry great quantities of driftwood and debris down stream leaving deposits along the lowlands after the raging stream had passed. A meeting was called with four days' notice for the inhabitants to meet at the house of John Aiken on October 3, 1785, "to see what method the town will take to rebuild the great bridge across bakers river by Mr John Aikens grist mill to Ebenezer Gove Constable for said town". The town voted to rebuild the bridge over the river and "voted to raise 50 pounds to build said bridge". John Aiken, Ephraim Page, and Lemuel Kezer were chosen committee to build the bridge with the instruction that the bridge "shall be built as soon as may be". The town also voted to provide ten gallons of rum to raise the bridge. Aside from selecting a moderator to preside over this meeting as the first order of business, this was the only action taken by the town at the meeting. It is presumed that it was necessary that the bridge be speedily rebuilt to serve the interests of the town.

In 1805 this bridge was again rebuilt at a cost of \$144 to the town. The building of the bridge was assigned to David Currier, the lowest bidder on a proposed plan drawn up by Captain Gove. In the fall of 1866 a new covered bridge was built over the river, which lasted for nearly fifty years in its elevated position over the great expanse. It is this latter bridge, which is pictured in numerous postcards of the town.

To fully appreciate the significance of the bridges erected on this spot, it must be realized that this was the only route of travel across the river in this area. No modern expanse such as that south of the falls existed and no desire to build one appeared to rise until well into the era of the modern automobile. Great pains were taken to insure that the bridge was always passable. In winter someone was responsible for keeping the interior roadway of the bridge covered with snow in order for sleighs to pass over the otherwise bare surface. Many receipts show a receipt of twenty-five cents was paid for "snowing the bridge". At night a lantern was placed in the windows of the homes at each end of the bridge to make it possible for anyone passing through the bridge to see the silhouette of an oncoming sleigh or carriage. Such seemingly insignificant acts should not pass without reminder of their importance to the people of one-hundred years or more ago.

It would come to pass that this Great Bridge, having served its purpose for the near half-century, would be replaced by another more sturdy bridge. Two thousand dollars was raised to build an iron bridge and an additional five hundred dollars was appropriated to build a sidewalk for the bridge. In 1909, Canton Bridge Co. was paid \$990 for building the bridge, which arrived by train. A sum of \$126.29 was paid for tearing down the old bridge and repairing the abutments. And another \$17.50 was paid for moving the bridge from the station to the site. In all, the cost for the new bridge was \$1133.79, amazingly similar to the cost of erecting the old covered bridge nearly a half-century previous. Such costs may never be heard of again.

The 'new' bridge is shown on various postcards. The old covered bridge was featured on the cover of the 1978 town report and the iron bridge appeared on the town report for 1958 and 1983. The iron bridge has been closed to vehicle traffic for several years and its future remains uncertain. The State of New Hampshire retains ownership of the bridge and no plans appear forthcoming for its repair, a newer Route 25 bridge having replaced its necessity some seventy years ago. Again in the limelight in the past year, the cover of this year's report is dedicated to the project of repairing or replacing this old and neglected historic landmark in the town.

*Cover picture & description
Submitted by Francis Muzzey*