

Time Travel, A Short Trip on Ulster County Roads & Bridges by Vivian Yess Wadlin

Road Revolution

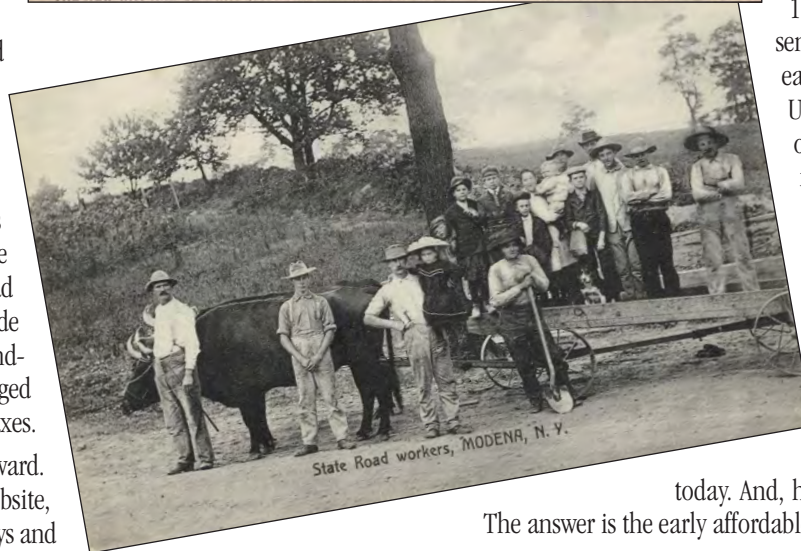
“Public records are the frozen mind of the people.” Thus begins the introduction to transcriptions of Early Records of New York State showing the meetings and laws covering Road Commissioners of Ulster County, Volume I, 1722-1769.

The book is an interesting read, especially if you ever wondered who laid out some of the rural roads we use today and what ever were they thinking?! The explanation is couched in who had the say as to where a road was to be laid out, and just how early eminent domain was used (1791) to make roads a little more direct. The first answer is that in 1691, after the land had been divided into counties, landholders with a minimum income would vote on other landholders to be the road “gurus.” The anointed would decide where a road was needed. Then, landholders along those roads were obliged to maintain them, often in lieu of taxes.

It has gotten a bit more straightforward. According to the ulstercounty.gov website, we learn Ulster County has a Highways and Bridges Division (HW&BD) headed by Brendan Masterson. His department is located in Kingston. The division’s web description relates it “...is responsible for maintaining the structural integrity and safe traveling conditions of county-owned roads within Ulster County, and many bridges, including the right-of-ways associated with each.”

HW&BD plows and sands county roads and bridges, and oversees the reconstruction of both when under its jurisdiction. It maintains its own fleet of light and heavy equipment and the personnel to operate and repair them. The department’s web description continues:

Due to the size of the County and the time involved in traversing it, (HW&BD) maintains ten substations with small crews and limited equipment to ensure the most economical road maintenance throughout the County.



And, Ulster County is big—1.161 square miles—not to mention, its rugged and diverse topography. Nevertheless, the average county resident commutes 28.6 minutes, about a minute more than the average for the US in 2021.

Stepping back for a more comprehensive picture of the roads we travel today, Wikipedia reports that New York has “A state and local highway system encompassing over 110,000 miles (177,000 km) of highway and 17,607 bridges.” That mileage represent more than four times around the earth. A survey of the marked roads in Ulster County lists 2,131 paved miles, of which the county has responsibility for 421.

Looking back on our rural road history, you may wonder how we traveled so far in such a short time, speeding from rutted, indirect, unsafe, often toll-gated private dirt roads to the smoother, safer, and better-routed, and (mostly) free, public roads of

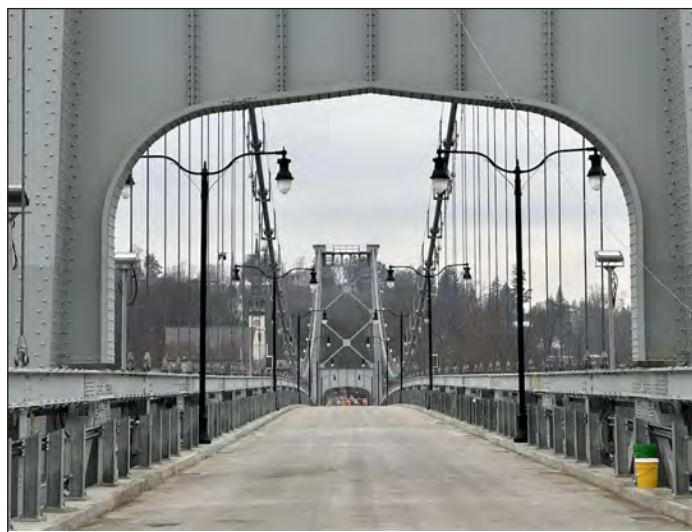
today. And, how about those beautiful bridges?

The answer is the early affordable horseless carriage.

Rules of the Road

No longer galloping, the horseless carriage changed everything. The US Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 established a federal funding system for state road projects and covered NY road construction. Now that automobiles were driving up road use, the act also spelled out national vehicular and driver laws.

On the safety side, it isn’t only the safer materials and construction methods used. There is the ever-evolving history of government-imposed driving restrictions, and the loss of all those faceless crash-dummies that have made our travel, if not our driving etiquette, relatively saner. The first rein on our impulsive driving behavior was designated in 1652. The Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam



Images top down: Postcard “The New Way and Old Way.” Postmark 1929. shows ferry and its replacement, the Wurts St. Bridge. Postcard: “State Road workers, MODENA, N.Y.” Wurts Ave. New Paltz, N.Y.” Photo Feb 2024, soon to be opened Wurts St. Bridge with upgrades.

prohibited “...wagons, carts, and sleighs from being driven at a gallop.”

Spanning Waters

Ulster not only has a lot of land to navigate— it has a lot of water.* Fortunately for us, we’ve never stopped building bridges or replacing them—one locally is being rebuilt as this is written.

That bridge lies between Port Ewen and Kingston. Originally known as the Rondout Creek Bridge, then christened the Kingston-Port Ewen Suspension Bridge, it is now called the Wurts Street Bridge. It was closed in September 2020 due to safety issues. Its fate was uncertain.

The bridge originally opened to great celebration. According to the September 29, 1921 *Kingston Daily Freeman* page one article, “Ten Thousand Hear Governor at Rondout Creek Bridgehead.” The article details the parade from the armory to the bridge comprised of fire companies, schools, and other civic and private organizations. It also noted the new bridge was “...the largest suspension bridge built in the country since 1909.” The graceful suspension bridge was added to the National Register of Historic Places in April of 1980. Its much larger sister, the Mid Hudson Bridge at Poughkeepsie, did not come into service until 1930. Both bridges eventually sank local ferry service to the financial depths.

Shortly after the Rondout

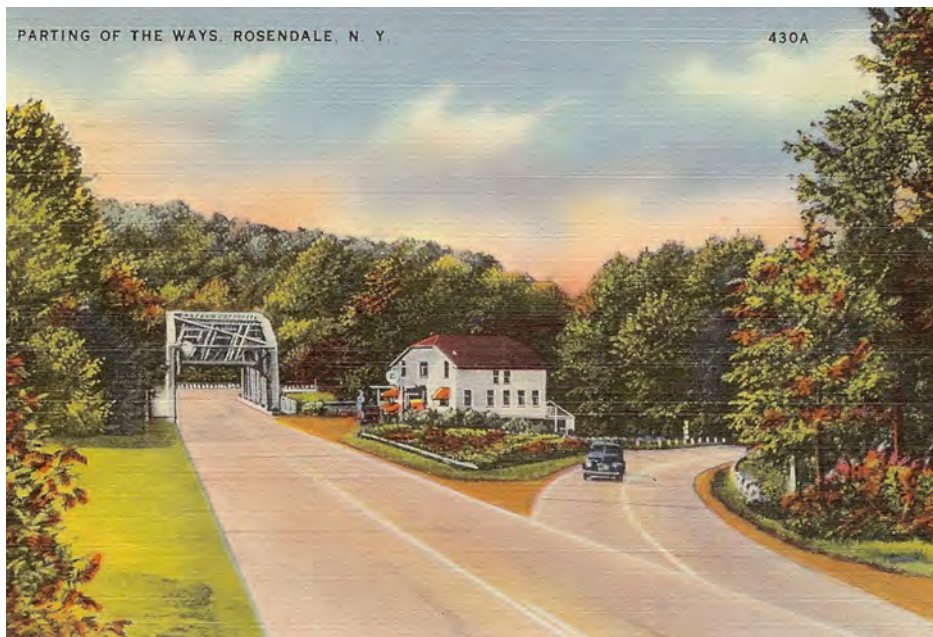


Bridge was inaugurated, an 84-year-old Washington Roebling, builder of the Brooklyn Bridge (1888) came to see his company’s work on this smaller structure.** Roebling’s company had provided some of the original design work, and the cables and suspenders for it. Most of the rest of the Wurts bridge structure was fabricated by the American Bridge Company of Elmira, NY and Ambridge, PA.

The Rondout span’s construction began in 1916, but was interrupted by a WWI steel shortage. It was completed five years later. Fortunately, the bridge’s beauty and history convinced the powers of the day to rebuild it, though most traffic had already been flowing over a newer structure.

Restoration Progresses

According to Pete Fontana, a steelworker (Iron Workers Local 417) on today’s bridge project, the names of companies involved in the original bridge are still clearly stamped on the materials each supplied, including Bethlehem Steel and Pen Co. Pete’s enthusiasm for the bridge was evident. He remarked that he and other workers are fascinated with its history. His company, Northeast Structural Steel, works on the re-



Images top down: Postcard, “Skillipot Chain Ferry from Port Ewen to Rondout.” “Parting of the Ways, Rosendale, N.Y.” 1930s postcard. Photo: Perrine’s Bridge, Rosendale/Esopus, NY 2024. Toll house with trolley under it. circa 1925. Old New Paltz Road, Highland, NY.

storage of many historic structures. Pete likes that about his work.

He noted that during the bridge's original construction there was a woman welder. It was unique enough at time that "...people actually came to watch her weld." Today, there was also a female welder on the project—as far as we know, no one came to watch.

In 1921, the Strand section of Kingston at the north end of the Wurts bridge was already a bustling business port with access to a well-developed street and highway network, the Hudson River, the D&H Canal at Eddyville via the Rondout, and the Rondout itself. Roads and canals connected the Strand with the vast extractive industries located in Pennsylvania (coal) and New York (cement, bluestone, lumber) that required shipping to a sprawling New York City and beyond.

Although probably accustomed to the wait for the "Skillipot," "Riverside," or "Transport," ferries plying between Port Ewen and Rondout, travelers must have rejoiced at the new bridge's beauty and convenience—the latter especially in the winter when previously there would have been no regular vehicle conveyance.

A brief description of the Wurts' project justifies the hefty price tag. A team led by A. Servidor/B. Anthony Construction Corp won the bid—44.6 million dollars (now, with approved overruns, it's over \$57 million) Funding by the federal and state government (taxpayers).

The work includes replacement of the existing suspension cables, other major steel repairs and replacement, new bridge deck, sidewalks, lighting, pedestrian fences, concrete traffic barriers, work on the concrete cable anchorage chambers, installations to retard rust in critical areas, and much more.

For more information and details on the bridge's history, its impact on the

surrounding communities, and re-construction, see the impressive website wurtsstreetbridgefilm.com. Also, for a concise history of the bridge, consult William B. Rhoads' book "Kingston, New York, The Architectural Guide."



Gratitude

The Wurts Street bridge is scheduled to reopen in May 2024. As you cross it, give a thought to Mr. Masterson, Pete Fontana, the lady welders, Washington Roebling, and all the other thousands of men and women whose hands, minds and hearts help you drive around so safely and easily today.

Oh, and a hat tip to the crash dummies.



**The Fall 2023 issue of About Town's lead story, "Water Works," is on the incredible fortune of Ul-*

ster County residents who explored, settled, and traded here based on the blessing of its abundant waterways.

***"Roebling's Gifts," Fall 2019 story in About Town on the Roebling family contribution to the High Falls Aquaduct of the D&H Canal, the Brooklyn Bridge, and many other structures that changed our lives.*

Image above: Postcard celebrating the completion of a road from the New Paltz Landing (Highland Landing now) to the village of Highland and on to New Paltz, with other connection to Kingston and Newburgh.

Below: Souvenir shoe brush celebrating the opening of the Rondout Creek Bridge. It reads "Souvenir Kingston, N.Y. Rondout Creel Bridge. State Highway Link to Kingston, NY. Catskill Mts. Ashokan Reservoir and the West. Thanks to Marion Zimmer and Deborah Silvestro of Port Ewen for this image.

