

History of the Pisgah Covered Bridge

By Randle E. Brim

According to county historian Mac Whatley, the first two covered bridges in Randolph County were authorized in 1845 at Cedar Falls and at Franklinville. The Cedar Falls Bridge was completed in 1846 and the Franklinville Bridge in 1848. Whatley states that “Randolph has long been considered North Carolina’s foremost covered bridge county.” More covered bridges are said to have been built in Randolph County than in any other county in the state. In the 1920’s, Randolph County could count more than 60 covered bridges but less than 10 by the 1950’s. In 2010, the county has one surviving covered bridge.

Located on the West Fork Branch of the Little River, within the Uwharrie National Forest, approximately 14 miles southwest of Asheboro, N.C., survives one of the two remaining covered bridges in the entire state of North Carolina. Most unique of all covered bridges in Randolph County, the Pisgah Bridge has survived the ravages of time and history. The 54’ length Pisgah Covered Bridge was built in 1911 by J.J. Welch. (John Jackson Welch, 1863-1935). Many historical writers and newspaper accounts have the bridge’s length at 40’, and a few have it at 51’, but the construction details prove it to be a 54’ bridge.

Unlike many of the county covered bridges having been built by county funds, the Pisgah Bridge appears to have been built by private sources, namely J.J. Welch, and maybe assisted by his family members, including his brother J.D. Welch. By 1900, the Welch family had become a prominent and prosperous family in the Pisgah Community, helping to establish the nearby “Welch Brush Arbor” which became the Mount Lebanon Baptist Church. The two-room Welch School was also built at the same location.

By 1911, the Welch family, especially brothers J.J. and J.D. had amassed vast acreages of land. Anecdotal history states they employed many of the young men in the community to work on their farms and sawmills. In one tract alone, J.J. had consolidated a 540 acre tract bounding on the west side of the West Fork Branch of Little River where he would build the famous Pisgah Covered Bridge. He needed a suitable crossing to move crops, produce, and wood products to the Seagrove and other markets for his goods. Because of the quickly growing markets brought by the Seagrove Train Depot and the rail line to the region, the little Seagrove village was alive with commerce as it was about to be incorporated in 1913. Brothers J.J. and J.D. cast their financial eyes on the newly thriving village. J.J. purchased Seagrove lots in 1911 and was listed on the first Seagrove tax list of 1914. He had further ties to the Seagrove Mill & Store Company. In 1918, J.D. became a co-partner in the newly organized Seagrove Hardware Company. When the first meeting was held in 1920 to organize the Bank of Seagrove, both brothers J.J. and J.D. were present. J.D. became the bank’s first president.

The bridge construction was reported to have cost a modest \$40, which supports the theory that J.J. Welch built the bridge without any county assistance. An examination of the original tread boards in the bridge by Building Contractor William Moffitt testifies to this modest cost. The original bridge was built with a combination of freshly cut white oak and recycled virgin forest pine boards. The virgin forest pine boards were recycled

Page 2 of 5; The History of the Pisgah Covered Bridge

from an older structure. Based on the holes, the mortise slots, and the grains in these floor runners of virgin forest pine, Moffitt believes the 1911 builder re-used the boards from much older structures, such as a grist mill, dating back well into the early 1800's. When these boards were originally cut, according to Moffitt, the grain count indicates the tree would have been 120 to 150 years old. This means that these virgin pine running boards probably first sprouted as a tree in the late 1600's.

Prior to the bridge's construction in 1911, this river area was forded approximately 60' downstream. The depression of the old wagon road and the river ford crossing area can still be observed in 2010. Moffitt states that anecdotal local history indicates that the old ford crossing may have been used for some years after the 1911 construction for wider equipment crossing.

First hand testimony reveals that the first man to drive a team of mules and a wagon through the bridge upon its completion in 1911 was Matthew Cagle. During the bridge's reconstruction in 2004, Claude Morris and his wife Villie happened upon the bridge scene. In a conversation with Moffitt, Morris pointing to a nearby rock, proclaimed, "I was standing on that rock when the first man, Matthew Cagle, and his team of mules and wagon, crossed over the newly finished bridge!" Moffitt taken back, thinking that Morris was thinking of another later dated bridge, responded, "Are you sure Mr. Morris, that bridge is more than 90 years old?" Morris responded, "How old do you think I am?" Moffitt stated that he felt like crawling under that rock when Morris said that he was 102 years old. In 1911, Morris was about 10 years of age when he joined the community people celebrating the first crossing. On May 18, 2004, and 93 years later Morris attended the celebration of the reconstructed bridge.

Moffitt also learned during the reconstruction project that one of the local saw millers who sawed the first oak timber and boards for the original bridge was W.D. Hurley. As it turned out, the grandson, Eugene Hurley, from several generations of Hurley saw millers, re-sawed his grandfather's bridge timbers being reused in the bridge. Hurley was delighted to use and volunteer his portable sawmill for the reconstruction.

In 1931, the county road system was assumed by the State of North Carolina. Thus began the ownership and maintenance of the Pisgah Covered Bridge by the state and NCDOT that continued until it was relinquished to the North Carolina Zoological Park in 2004.

The bridge escaped one of the deadliest 20th century storms, Hurricane Hazel of 1954, when the branch rose to just beneath the floor level. In 1970, the Pisgah Covered Bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The bridge remained on the National Register after its flood destruction in 2003 because the bridge was rebuilt to its exact original dimensions at its original location, reusing more than 90% of the original bridge pieces.

After 1957, the covered bridge fell into disuse when a new state bridge was built approximately 60' upstream to replace the old one and the road was realigned. Gov. Kerr Scott instituted a program of paving roads and building bridges in rural communities. However, NCDOT retained ownership and maintenance responsibility of the covered bridge. By 1994, dilapidation of the covered bridge had become more apparent, and

Page 3 of 5; The History of the Pisgah Covered Bridge

NCDOT committed \$18,000 for its repairs. On May 13, 2004, NCDOT signed a right-of-way agreement and released its ownership and maintenance rights of the Pisgah Covered Bridge to the N.C. Zoological Park. It was the last covered bridge in North Carolina to be maintained by the Division of Highways.

Around 1995, Dr. David Jones, Executive Director of the N.C. Zoo took a particular interest in the bridge which began a new chapter in the bridge's preservation. He visualized that a restored Pisgah Bridge in its rural setting was a vital and integral part in providing a unique rural blend of tourism to the county visitors and in preserving a historical heritage of Randolph County. Dr. Jones initiated an effort in April 1998 to refurbish the bridge and build a connecting nature park, including picnic tables and nearby walking trails along both sides of the branch. The project involved a partnership with NCDOT, The Piedmont Land Conservancy, the Land Trust for Central North Carolina, the adjacent property owners Gerald C. Parker, Sr. and Norah Joan Benfield Parker (the west side of the branch), and James Brye Baker and Lena Strider Baker (the east side), along with the residents of the Pisgah community. More than \$73,000 in donations were raised during the 1998 campaign. On September 16, 1999, a dedication ceremony marked its completion.

In 2001, about two years before the devastating storm that would crush the Pisgah Bridge, Nora Lucas Miller took a class at RCC that would help insure the bridge's survival as it was originally built. Miller was enrolled in a class entitled "Historic American Buildings Survey." Her instructor, Benjamin Briggs, suggested that she draw the Pisgah Covered Bridge. Miller spent about 10 days at the bridge recording detailed measurements, making sketches of the architectural details, taking photographs, and making notes. Taking these materials back to the classroom, and using specialized computer software, she produced scaled models of different components of the covered bridge. Reported to have been devastated when she heard of the bridge's destruction, she freely offered her drawings, plans, and photographs to William Moffitt, the lead contractor who supervised the bridge's rebuilding. Moffitt stated that Nora Miller and her work "played a very vital role in the rebuilding of the bridge."

The disaster occurred on early Sunday morning, August 10, 2003, when rain storms and waters levels surpassed those of Hurricane Hazel, surging 14' above the normal level. By daybreak, the high waters had floated the bridge off its stone foundational piers. A wreckage of large assembled components and smaller pieces lay scattered among the tree limbs and river rocks approximately 100' plus downstream. The emotions of the Pisgah community people were stricken and distraught. They had lost part of their local identity and their most important historical structure. Randolph County was without its remaining one covered bridge. Many individuals rushed to the location and carried away memorabilia pieces, most of which was later returned for rebuilding.

The two minds of the local contractor William Moffitt and the zoo director Dr. David Jones quickly came together to review the possibilities of reconstructing the bridge. The retrieved bridge's members were disassembled, sorted, dry stacked, surveyed and analyzed. Word quickly went out to encourage the souvenir collectors to return their portions, without retribution, so that the bridge could be rebuilt. Two 18

Page 4 of 5; The History of the Pisgah Covered Bridge

wheel trailers were parked at the site for the returned pieces. Community residents and many of the N.C. Zoo Staff were involved in collecting the scattered bridge pieces. When fully accounted for, more than 90% of the bridge's members and materials were accounted for and would be reused in the rebuilt bridge.

Dr. David Jones, Director of the N.C. Zoological Park, spearheaded the overall leadership of the bridge's restoration and led the fundraising efforts to raise the necessary monies to rebuild the bridge. The N.C. Zoological Society was the designated agency through which contributions were donated. William Moffitt, a lifetime resident of the community, was selected as the lead contractor to head the rebuilding process. After detailed study, Moffitt determined that it would cost approximately \$80,000 to rebuild the \$40 original bridge.

Beginning on November 11, 2003, William Moffitt and his crew began the intensive work of rebuilding. As they laid the bridge off and obtained the level lines across the water, they discovered that the original bridge was out of level by only one eighth of an inch! Working through the winter, whenever possible, Moffitt and his 20 member crew completed the wooden bridge by March 31, 2004. All the stone ramps and adjacent rock walls were completed by the end of April, 2004. On May 1, 2004, the community came together and gave a work day clearing and cleaning the grounds, moving and placing 16,000 pounds of gravel, by wheel barrows, throughout the grounds and the trails.

Perhaps no other date exemplifies the community spirit and emotions of the Pisgah Community and their determination to save and to keep their Pisgah Covered Bridge more than November 15, 2003. Having been given a goal to raise \$5,000 to \$7,500 in monies to help rebuild the bridge, by day's end they had netted \$21,500. It was known as the "Pisgah Covered Bridge Festival" and held at the Union Community Building. About 100 volunteer workers put on the event, and 700 to 800 people participated in the day's event and donations. Moffitt said that it "became the biggest day Pisgah Community and the High Pine Community had probably ever seen."

On May 18, 2004, Dr. David Jones, Director of the N.C. Zoo, led a ribbon-cutting rededication ceremony, at the Pisgah Covered Bridge site, to honor the rebuilding of the historical bridge. NCDOT Secretary Lyndo Tippet was a featured participant, along with other local officials. More than 250 people attended the event. Dr. Jones stated, "This represents a quieter time gone by when things were less rushed and the sound of tumbling water in the creek was all that could be heard apart from the birds' songs and rustling leaves." Jones summed up the feelings of those in attendance when he said, "You don't know what you've got until you've lost it."

The total expenditures for the entire Pisgah Covered Bridge restoration project of 2003-2004, which included the adjacent grounds, picnic area, parking area, and trails, came to \$88,000. \$90,000 was donated as of July 23, 2004. After this date, NCDOT gave an additional \$5,000. The balance of the project money went into a Pisgah Covered Bridge maintenance fund.

Those individuals and groups to be historically credited for the bridge's survival are many. Space would not be adequate to detail and names lost to history would be absent. But the following come to the forefront: the Pisgah Community, its people from

Page 5 of 5; The History of the Pisgah Covered Bridge

1911 to 2010; in particular the first property owner on the west side of the bridge, J.J. Welch to the property's current owners, Gerald C. Parker, Sr. and Norah Joan Benfield Parker; the first property owner on the east side, Sam Graves, via to Lacy Strider, to the property's current owners, James Brye Baker and Lena Strider Baker; the Land Trust for Central N.C.; the Piedmont Land Conservancy; Dr. David Jones and the N.C. Zoological Park and its staff; the N.C. Zoological Society; William Moffitt, Jr. and his 20 member crew; NCDOT; Randolph County elected officials; numerous individuals of Randolph County and beyond; numerous donors, both small and large; and many volunteers.

Sources Consulted:

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N.C. Zoological Park Files

William Moffitt Files

William Moffitt Interviews, December 2009