The Pine Bank Bridge and Its Changing Meaning Through the Years
By Louis C. Martin

In 1850, The Farmers Every-Day Book advised, "To a community, good roads, good bridges, and railroads or canals, are the same as good fences and fertile fields are to a single farm."
Dunkard Creek meanders through the countryside of Greene County, ducking south into West Virginia before turning back to Pennsylvania and flowing into the Monongahela River below Greensboro. One tributary, Toms Run, flows amid the steep hills, old farms, and two-lane blacktop roads of Gilmore Township. A small concrete bridge there that the state erected over Toms Run in 1962 replaced a 91-year-old covered bridge. That wooden span, the Pine Bank Bridge, was by no means significant in design or cost, nor was its completion heralded by newspapers or politicians. Yet, it is important because it now stands at the Meadowcroft Rockshelter and Museum of Rural Life as a symbol of 19th-century America. Its history tells a broader story of the land it came from.

As the United States grew in the 19th century, Western Pennsylvania became a center of iron and steel production. By 1870, Pennsylvania had 5,000 miles of track connecting a variety of industries and "penetrating almost every corner of the State." Farmers hoped turnpikes and railroads would be built close to their farms to give them an advantage over competitors. In 1850, The Farmers Every-Day Book advised, "To a community, good roads, good bridges, and railroads or canals, are the same as good fences and fertile fields are to a single farm." Accordingly, Pennsylvania farmers invested heavily in turnpike, railroad, and toll bridge companies. While they did not receive great dividends on these investments, they reaped the indirect benefits of quicker and easier access to markets. Still, Pennsylvania's 19th-century transportation systems were merely fair even when weather was at its best.

Greene County farmers produced surplus crops of wheat, so they naturally wanted easy access to markets. Until the early 19th century, farmers there found themselves on equal footing with most other farmers west of the Allegheny Mountains. The Monongahela River, which forms Greene County's western border, flows into the Ohio River at Pittsburgh and was frequently an avenue of trade with New Orleans, the major market for western farmers. Sometimes, however, the upper reaches of the Ohio River were not navigable, so goods had to be shipped downriver from West Virginia. In 1796, the first road was completed through Greene County, ending on the banks of the Ohio River at Wheeling. It provided farmers with an overland shortcut, improving the trade route to New Orleans.

When national trade routes developed, however, Greene County farmers were bypassed. The National Road, completed in 1818, passed through Washington County to the north. In the 1850s, the Baltimore and Ohio and the Pennsylvania railroads passed respectively to the south through West Virginia and to the north through Washington County.

Facing this transportation challenge, Greene County farmers turned from wheat to livestock. It required less labor than growing cash crops, and sheep and cattle could arrive on the hoof, so to speak. Raising sheep was especially suited to Greene County's climate and landscape and required less capital than cattle. The wool industry there thrived even as it declined statewide.

Greene County farmers nonetheless needed a reliable system of roads and bridges to get their crops and livestock to the hubs of...
commerce at Wheeling or Washington, Pennsylvania. One way they sought to improve these roads was by financing local turnpike companies. A turnpike was successfully built from Waynesburg to Wheeling, though a later company organized to extend the road from Waynesburg to Rices Landing on the Monongahela River was not as successful. In 1871, the Waynesburg Republican editor quipped, "Our roads are fine for this season of the year, but no thanks to the Waynesburg and Rices Landing turnpike company." Ultimately this turnpike was completed, but such private enterprises were risky. If there were not enough subscribers, the project could be cut short before completion. Likewise, incompetent financiers could devastate the hopes of investors through mismanagement. Such financial disasters forced farmers to get their goods to markets over roads that were sometimes impassable, and failure meant losing a year’s crop or possibly one’s farm.

Bridges were also essential for transporting grain and livestock over streams and rivers, but they likewise required a large concentration of capital. Wooden covered bridges were the most permanent, but these were only built at critical points to service large numbers of farmers. By the middle of the century, larger and more important bridges were being made of iron, like the Wheeling Suspension Bridge, completed in 1848. Less-permanent structures were built over small streams and creeks by individuals who used the crossing most often. These were made by laying two trees close together over a stream and covering them with cross timbers, but these crossings were only suitable for a cart or wagon. In the last few decades of the century, wooden covered bridges began replacing these temporary crossings.

Farmers’ investments in such infrastructure show how they valued reliable transportation, but the most frequent providers of local roads and bridges were local and state governments. The state government had the authority to undertake transportation projects and to aid counties, but municipal governments built and maintained most roads and bridges through the labor of local residents. To fund road maintenance, municipal supervisors issued an annual road tax. The work, however, was only done when convenient for the local farmers and was often poorly supervised. The local transportation system connected post offices with the county seat or more important trading routes such as the National Road, train depots, and riverfront cities. If residents wanted a road extended or improved, they could petition the county; in Greene County, the board of commissioners administered such projects, approving expenditures and organizing the work. Other than overseeing elections, transportation projects were the commissioners’ most important function, and it was through such a county project that the Pine Bank Covered Bridge was built.

Gilmore Township is in the southernmost part of Greene County, bordered to the south by West Virginia. In 1876, one writer observed that the “township, like the rest of the county, is hilly but productive.”

In July 1842, John P. Morris, whose father and grandfather were Greene County veterans of the War for Independence, married Phoebe Eaken and they settled on a 275-acre farm in Gilmore Township. Like most in Greene County, John farmed, but unlike most, his farm was surrounded by two creeks: Blockhouse Run and Toms Run (spelled Thoms or Tom’s Run on some maps). By 1860, John reported three horses and two cows on 175 acres; perhaps he had the luxury of selling 100 acres that he did not need. On December 28, 1859, he and the farmers around him petitioned the county, saying that they labored “under great inconvenience for a graded road from the house of J. P. Morris, Esq. on Toms run to intersect the Dunkard state road leading from John Lantzes [sic] to Jollytown near the house of Justus Eakin.” The viewers appointed by the court did not approve their request.

On April 2, 1871, Morris and other residents petitioned the county government again, saying that “a bridge is much needed. A petition to construct the Pine Bank Covered Bridge was filed.
The contract for the wood work specified the bridge was to be 35 feet in length and gave specific dimensions for the timbers used.

over Toms Run in said township where the public road from Waynesburg to Jollytown crosses the said Run and that the erection thereof will be too expensive for one or two adjoining townships.12 J.S. McConnell, Solomon Hoge, and J.P. Morris were appointed as viewers. Through luck or skilful maneuvering, two of the viewers had a very decided interest in seeing the bridge built: McConnell lived in Morris Township near Nineveh,13 and Hoge lived further down Toms Run.7 Not surprisingly, they reported in its favor on June 17, 1871.8

After being approved, it was the board of commissioners’ responsibility to oversee the project. Their minute books for that time period have not survived, but much can be gathered from their minutes that begin in 1879. The commissioners’ first step would have been to advertise in the local newspapers for bids from contractors or bridge builders for the new project. One such advertisement appeared in the classified section of the Washington Reporter for two bridges built in Washington County in 1871:

To Bridge Builders — The Commissioners of Washington County will meet at the places designated below for the purpose of receiving proposals for the erection of two bridges: At Pollock’s old mill, on Brush Run, in Peters township on WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7th, 1871, at (illegible) o’clock a.m. At the farm of A. Harper, on Brush Run in Peters township, on WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7th, 1871, at eleven o’clock a.m. Plans and specifications will be exhibited on said day. By order of Commissioners. John Grayson, Jr., Clerk. Com’rs Office, May 17th.9

The commissioners would then select the party with the lowest bid and draw up a contract with very specific instructions on how the bridge was to be built, including truss design and measurements. For example, two contracts were drawn up in 1879 for a bridge built in Cumberland Township, Greene County, over Muddy Creek near Eli Bailey’s. The Pine Bank Bridge contracts would have been similar to this, as the spans of the two bridges were the same. One contract was for stone work on the bridge, the second for wood work. Both contracts specified the builders were to do the job in a “good workmanlike manner” and gave specific dimensions for each part of the bridge. The stone work contract specified the span of the bridge, the dimensions of the abutments and wing walls, and type of stone to be used. The crew was paid $348, which included material costs; $75 was paid halfway through the job, with the balance after receiving the commissioners’ approval.

The contract for the wood work specified the bridge was to be 35 feet in length and gave specific dimensions for the timbers used. The contract also stated it would be a King Post truss, the oldest covered bridge design. It stipulated Lang was to use white oak for the timbers, poplar for the siding, and first-class oak for the shingles. The commissioners agreed to pay $141.60 after the bridge was completed and approved. When compared to contracts for other bridges built that year — one over Little Whitely Creek near Pierceville and one for a bridge across Smith Creek near Waynesburg — it appears that the two contracts for the Muddy Creek were standard with the exception of the bridge’s span.

After the contracts were written and signed, the work began. The bridge builders were probably full-time, skilled stone and brick masons and carpenters. Incidentally, there were no masons in Gilmore Township, but there were probably plenty in neighboring townships to work on the Pine Bank Bridge in 1871. It is not apparent how long such a project took, but judging from the time between the contract and payment on the Muddy Creek Bridge, it was probably no longer than four months. As the Pine Bank Bridge project was approved in mid-June 1871, allowing for time to advertise and accept bids, it probably would have been completed by the end of October or the beginning of November.

The Waynesburg Republican from April 1871 through August 1872 does not yield any mention of the Pine Bank Bridge. It is
possible that because it was one of many bridges in the county at that time, it did not merit mention. Another reason for the omission might be because it served so few of the county’s residents. Finally, the Waynesburg Republican appears to have relied on local residents to provide its news from around the county, and perhaps no Pine Bank or Gilmore residents took the time to send anything to the editor.  

As for John P. Morris, his farm continued to be a success. In 1876, he was elected to the Board of Commissioners, and by 1878, he had enough extra money to buy a buggy for his family to ride the roads of Greene County. Also, in 1881, Toms Run was crossed with another covered bridge; this time a $1,425 double King Post at its mouth.

As the elements took their toll on the covered bridges, beams and shingles rotted, abutments and wing walls crumbled. During the early period, residents petitioned the county for needed repairs. The commissioners handled each request individually, personally inspecting the bridges to determine whether they were necessary. If so, they contracted masons and carpenters to do the work.

In 1894, the Pine Bank Bridge needed repair. The minutes state two commissioners stayed overnight in Jollytown and, on July 19, 1894, went first to the “Pierce Morris Bridge over Tom’s Run, found bridge needing a sill spliced.” A week later, they contracted W. A. Teagarden to repair the sill. They were most likely referring to the bridge at the mouth of Toms Run, where it joins Dunkard Creek. Next, Commissioner M.V. Tilton “went to Pierce Morris Bridge to see work going on at this Bridge, let contract for filling abutments [on Pierce Morris Bridge] to Frank Grover for $8.00,” and, on the same day, contracted W. A. Teagarden to put “a new sill in Tom’s Run Bridge near Pine Bank.” Finally, the commissioners “settled with W. A. Teagarden for material furnished and repairing Pierce Morris and Toms Run Bridges in full.”

On March 10, 1896, the commissioners went to the mouth of Smiths Creek to inspect a covered bridge there and found it “nearly rotted down and not worth repairing.” Instead of replacing it with another covered bridge, however, they purchased an iron bridge from the Pittsburg Bridge Company for $725. On May 19, 1896, they bought three more iron bridges to be erected on Herrods Run and Stewarts Run, and a small one for near John Worley’s farm. The first two cost $525 and the last cost $200.30. These purchases marked the end of an era. While covered bridges were built in Greene County after 1896, the county began using iron bridges with increasing frequency. It was either more economical or easier to buy iron bridges from companies rather than pay workman to build wooden covered bridges. Or, perhaps, the commissioners believed iron bridges would last longer, saving taxpayers money in the long run. Whatever the reason, covered bridges dwindled in number, and those remaining fought the elements to remain in service, only surviving until they became too run-down to merit repair.

Ironically, one of their most formidable enemies was water. On July 27, 1896, a flood washed out a bridge on Roberts Run and badly damaged a bridge near Clarksville that was jointly owned by Greene and Washington counties. Years later, G.L. Longthstreth remembered a flood sometime around 1893 or 1894 that brought Toms Run two feet above the Pine Bank Bridge’s floor, but the bridge survived. Meanwhile, Greene County’s commissioners chose to use increasingly stronger materials, and as early as 1910, considered building concrete bridges.

By 1926, Greene County had 350 bridges, some built of wood, some iron, and others concrete. Minutes of the Greene County commissioners noted that many of them were “old and in a state of dilapidation and decay” and required “constant attention in order that they may be used for the accommodation of
the traveling public." Because of this and the many other upkeep challenges for the county, on February 3, 1926, commissioners established the Greene County maintenance department with three full-time workers. Maintenance of the bridges had not been handled case by case for many years, but this decision streamlined the process even more.

In 1930, with roads in disrepair throughout Pennsylvania, Gifford Pinchot ran for governor on the promise that the Commonwealth would take over the responsibility of township roads without raising taxes. He argued that the farmer "needs nothing so much as to be taken out of the mud." True to Pinchot's word, after his victory, the state took over 20,000 miles of township roads on August 15, 1931. The law, however, stated that the Commonwealth would assume the road maintenance but did not authorize the Department of Highways to assume the responsibility for any of the structures on the road with the exception of "drainage structures" with a span of 10 feet or less. Therefore, bridges were still maintained by the township or the county, not the state.

The state also put into effect a township reward system to create a partnership between the state and county to improve roads. This period saw the proliferation of "Pinchot Roads," low-cost, all-weather road surfaces that could get farmers out of the mud. They consisted of 8 inches of gravel compacted to 6 inches with a heavy roller. The surfact had 2 1/4 inches of limestone and two coats of asphalt. In 1931, three-and-a-half miles of road from Pine Bank to Jollytown was surfaced this way with the county contributing $4,000 to the project.

The state highway program kept expanding, taking on more and more roads. In 1933, Pennsylvania assumed maintenance responsibility for the road that ran from New Freeport through Jollytown then northeast to Pine Bank. Still, the Pine Bank Bridge was maintained by the county. In 1937, the General Assembly of Pennsylvania enacted a law stating that where "any county or township is responsible for the construction or maintenance of any bridge on a State highway route carrying vehicular traffic over a stream or mill race" that "the responsibility of such county or township shall be assumed by the Commonwealth" except in instances where private companies were obligated by contracts for construction or maintenance. Thus, while it is possible that the state took possession of it earlier, by 1937, the Pine Bank Bridge became the responsibility of the State of Pennsylvania.

As the 20th century progressed and a majority of Americans lived in cities, many began to reminisce about rural life and fear it was vanishing. "The whole face of America has changed from what it used to be when I was a kid," lamented J. R. Humphreys in his popular book *The Lost Towns and Roads of America*. Soon, he predicted, urban areas would grow together to form "strip cities," one of which would stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. Yet, because of America's "changing topography," Humphreys believed it was possible to take trips on select roads that would make "a Rip Van Winkle who had slumbered 25, 50, even 100 years, think the whole nation still looks pretty much as it should." The journey documented in his book charted a path that went through Greene County. Despite the rise of the importance of coal and various manufacturing concerns, Greene County was still overwhelmingly agricultural. In 1930, 88 percent of its land was used for farming or livestock, and during the Great Depression, 90 percent of its residents lived in rural areas. Still, the county had gone through many changes, and Humphreys did not find a Rip Van Winkle world passing "over small steel bridges, past rusting oil towers, past good farms," on his way by Toms Run.

Similarly, in the early 1950s, local journalist Earle Forrest turned his weekend jaunts into hunts for covered bridges. "The old covered bridge is a heritage," he wrote, "that has come down to us from the long ago; but it is rapidly vanishing from the countryside where it was once so common. When it is gone something precious will have passed, something that we can never replace, something that belongs to the America of our fathers."

Forrest said his trips embodied "the call of the open road" to far places and new country that the average tourist will never know. Just as with big game hunting, which he had also done, Forrest said his bridge-hunting trips required the proper equipment: a good map, a camera, plenty of film, a car with a full tank of gas, a 50-foot measuring tape, and small nails to hold one end of the tape in place. By this time, most of the roads in Greene County were hard surfaced, taking some of the thrill out of the covered bridge hunt for Forrest: "they are too easy to find, and the roads are too good."

Before Forrest took a trip through Gilmore and Wayne townships one day, he learned from an old man in Waynesburg that there was a hotel in Jollytown where he could get lunch, but when he arrived he was informed that the hotel had been gone for more than half a century. He settled for a banana and a Coke, and proceeded to catalog as many bridges as he could find. He visited the Blockhouse Run Bridge, the Hero Covered Bridge, the Jollytown Covered Bridge, and another bridge, which he found to be in fair condition, covered with plain sheeting and no strips over cracks. There was a sign nailed to
one timber that looked as if it had been there for a long time. Printed in black on tin painted yellow, it read:


Earle Forrest was not sure what to call this bridge. There were two over "Thoms Run" so he could not call them both the Thoms Run Bridge. (He spelled Toms Run with an "h" because he was told that it was named after the Thoms family.) Thus, he gave the Pine Bank Bridge its name because it was located near the Pine Bank Post Office. Robert F. Eakin later wrote to inform Forrest that both the Blockhouse Run and Pine Bank Bridges were on the property of the late John P. Morris, son of the original farm owner.

Earle Forrest's writings on covered bridges were published in the *Washington Observer* in 1953. He concluded, the covered bridge is old, and although it holds up those large, heavily loaded gasoline vehicles, its end is not far off. Only a few years, perhaps, will see the passing of the last one from the creek at the foot of the hill, for many people and most highway officials look upon them as an obstacle to progress. We often wonder, progress to what?

Pennsylvania's highway officials soon saw old bridges as potential for tragedy. In 1958, heightening these concerns, a bridge posted for a maximum weight limit of two tons collapsed as a school bus with 45 children passed over it. While no one was injured, the Department of Highways' officials decided to accelerate the replacement of such bridges. In 1960, it published a pamphlet titled "Pennsylvania's Challenge: Too Many Hazardous Bridges" to educate residents about the problem. In addition to regular construction and maintenance, the department planned to spend $150 million over the following 12 years to replace at least half of the state's 4,439 hazardous bridges. They specifically targeted vertical clearance limitations and weight restrictions, including 81 bridges in Greene County. The Pine Bank Bridge had been inspected on September 29, 1941, and posted with a three-ton safe load restriction. By 1960, it was undoubtedly considered one of the 4,439 hazardous bridges.

In May 1961, Albert Miller, founder of Meadowcroft Village, wrote to Vera H. Wagner, president of the Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society of Pennsylvania, to inform her that the Pine Bank Bridge was scheduled to be torn down and to ask for advice on preserving it. She responded on June 2 that the state was not permitted to sell or give property to individuals and that he
had to ask the township supervisors to have the state transfer the bridge to him. Once the bridge was in his possession, Miller could do with it as he saw fit.4

Miller did take possession of the bridge, and in 1962, Charles Clemens disassembled it for him. When it came time to take down the larger timbers, Clemens got the help of the two contractors who were building a new bridge next to it. They loaded the timbers into Robert "Bud" McCarrel's truck and hauled the bridge up to Avella. Miller built a foundation using 14 yards of concrete and limestone, and they reconstructed the bridge there.5 The following year, on August 15, 1963, Vera Wagner wrote to congratulate Miller on the preservation of the Pine Bank Bridge and to present him with a plaque from the Theodore Burr Covered Bridge Society.6 In 1970, a dedication ceremony was held at Meadowcroft. Several distinguished guests attended, and the Lamplighters singing group paid homage.

The Pine Bank Bridge still stands at the entrance of the 19th-century village at Meadowcroft Museum. Visitors can see the fine craftsmanship and design that has enabled it to survive for so long as a symbol of rural life in Pennsylvania. Yet the bridge's importance has shifted over the years. For the people it first served, it was an integral economic link. In the years that followed, various county commissioners viewed the bridge simply as one of the many structures the county was obligated to maintain. To Earle Forrest, it was a valuable part of a vanishing American countryside. In the early 1960s, the Pennsylvania Department of Highways saw the bridge as a hazardous structure. Finally, Albert Miller saw a monument that needed saving. The Pine Bank Bridge has meant many different things to many different people, but always bridging a gap, whether over water or between ways of life.

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1 Steven Fletcher, Pennsylvania Agriculture and County Life, 1840-1940 (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1955), 2:320.
4 Majewski, 769-770.
5 Fletcher, 322.
7 Powell, 55-58.
8 Waynesburg Republican, March 1, 1871.
9 Vernon White, Covered Bridges: Focus on Kentucky (Berea, Ky.: Kentucky Imprints, 1985), 1-10.
10 Fletcher, 321-22; Also see Pennsylvania Historical Records Survey, Inventory of the County Archives of Pennsylvania: Greene County, Number 30 (Waynesburg: Board of County Commissioners, 1940), 52.
11 Caldwell's Illustrated Historical Centennial Atlas of Greene County (1876).
14 Road Docket No. 2, Greene County Courthouse, Waynesburg, Pa., 170.
15 Road Docket No. 2, Greene County Courthouse, Waynesburg, Pa., 427.
17 McConnell's Map of Greene County, 17; Caldwell's Illustrated Atlas, 95.
18 Road Docket No. 2, Greene County Courthouse, Waynesburg, Pa., 427.
19 Washington Reporter, May 24, 1871.
20 Also, as a weekly newspaper, April 1871 through August 1872 is about 64 issues with about four pages each totaling 256 pages. Thus, it's possible that I simply missed such a mention.
21 Inventory of the County Archives of Pennsylvania: Greene County, Number 30, 222.
23 Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, January 6, 1879 through December 3, 1891, p. 40.
24 For examples see Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, January 6, 1879 through December 3, 1891, pp. 37-38; and January 5, 1891 through December 3, 1896, p. 23.
25 Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, January 5, 1891 through December 3, 1896, p. 44-45.
26 Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, January 5, 1891 through December 3, 1896, p. 46, also see p. 49.
27 Ibid., 50.
28 Ibid., 178.
29 "Pine Bank Covered Bridge," handwritten notes of Albert Miller.
31 Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, October 19, 1925 to January 31, 1927, p. 48-51.
33 G. Wayne Smith, 766; Also see Minutes, Greene County Commissioners, January 4, 1932 to December 30, 1933, pp. 103-106.
34 Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1931), 1372.
37 G. Wayne Smith, 777, 931.
38 Humphreys, 84.
40 Forrest, 11.
41 Ibid., 15.
42 Ibid., 12, 13, 53-54
43 Forrest, 48, 76-91, 99-100; Forrest also noted that it was marked with a maximum capacity of two tons.
44 Ibid., 126-127.
45 Forrest, 54; His observations were published in the Washington Observer on February 4-7, 9-14, 16-21, March 25, and April 14, 1953, and in the Washington Reporter on February 4-7, 9-14, 16-21, and April 1, 1953.
47 Pennsylvania Department of Highways, Form No. 432, Iron-Steel or Timber Bridge Record in possession of Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life.
48 Vera H. Wagner to Albert Miller, June 2, 1961, Meadowcroft Museum.
49 Albert Miller, "Pine Bank Covered Bridge (King Post Truss)," handwritten, Meadowcroft Museum.
50 Wagner to Miller, August 15, 1963, Meadowcroft Museum.

Louis C. Martin's historical interests include 19th-century Appalachian and regional history and 20th-century labor history. His research on the Pine Bank Covered Bridge was conducted during a summer internship at Meadowcroft. He received his M.A. in History at West Virginia University where he is now working on his Ph.D.