

Merritt Parkway, Silvermine River Bridge
Spanning Silvermine River at the 16.87 mile mark
on the Merritt Parkway
Norwalk
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-121

HAER
CONN,
1-NOWA,
13-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HAER
COMP
1 - ADWA
13 -

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, Silvermine River Bridge

HAER No. CT-121

Location: Spanning the Silvermine River at the 16.87 mile mark on the Merritt Parkway in Norwalk, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.630895.4555130
Quad: Norwalk North, Connecticut

Construction Date: 1938

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

Architect: George L. Dunkelberger, of the Connecticut Highway Department, acted as head architect for all Merritt Parkway bridges.

Contractor: Daniel Deering Construction Company
Norwalk, Connecticut

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Demolished 1955; Replaced 1957

Significance: The bridges of the Merritt Parkway were predominately inspired by the Art Deco and Art Moderne architectural styles of the 1930s. Experimental forming techniques were employed to create the ornamental characteristics of the bridges. This, combined with the philosophy of incorporating architecture into bridge design and the individuality of each structure, makes them distinctive.

Historians: Todd Thibodeau, HABS/HAER Historian
Corinne Smith, HAER Engineer
August 1992

For more detailed information on the Merritt Parkway, refer to the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63.

LOCAL HISTORY

In 1640, Roger Ludlow acquired land along the east side of the Norwalk River from the Long Island Sound to twelve miles inland. A couple of months later Daniel Patrick, a friend of Ludlow, purchased a similar amount of acreage on the west side of the river. These two acquisitions encompassed all of present-day Norwalk.¹

Ten years passed between these purchases and settlement of the region. In 1650, Ludlow sold his land to residents of the Hartford Colony. That same year, these new owners moved to what is now East Norwalk, under the leadership of two surveyors, Richard Olmstead and Richard Webb. In 1651, Norwalk formed a town. The community gradually expanded as an agricultural and shipping center. At one point Norwalk included parts of Wilton, New Canaan, and Westport. By the beginning of the American Revolution, Norwalk included the districts of Norwalk, South Norwalk, East Norwalk, West Norwalk, Broad River, Silvermine, Winnipauk, and Cranbury.²

In summer 1779, the British burned more than 300 structures in the town. The community took several years to rebound from this loss, but by the early 1800s, Norwalk was again an expanding agricultural and shipping community. Larger scale industrial development commenced in 1848, when the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad reached the Norwalk River. Norwalk became a hat-making center. The Volk Hat Company employed more than 500 workers. Other substantial enterprises developed, including the Norwalk Lock Company, Norwalk Iron Works, and Roth and Goldschmidt

¹———, This Is Norwalk (Norwalk: League of Women Voters, 1963), 5.

²Samuel Richard Weed, Norwalk After Two Hundred and Fifty Years (South Norwalk: C. A. Freeman Publishers, 1901), 18-19.

Corset Company. Fueling this development was the arrival of large numbers of Irish and German immigrants.³

Following World War I, Norwalk experienced another population boom, as many New Yorkers who had vacationed in Norwalk for years settled permanently and began to commute. These new arrivals eagerly awaited completion of the Merritt Parkway. After it was finished, the parkway helped to accelerate the residential development of the western sections of the community, especially Winnipauk and Cranbury. During World War II watchtowers were established on the Merritt to spot airplanes and relay the information to Mitchell Field on Long Island.⁴

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

The Silvermine is a moderate-sized river that originates in Ridgefield and merges into the Norwalk River just south of the Merritt Parkway. The Daniel Deering Construction Company of Norwalk, Connecticut, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from New Canaan Road/Route 123, in New Canaan, to West Rocks Road, in Norwalk (ConnDot project #180-51). The contract for the Silvermine River Bridge also went to the Deering Construction Company (ConnDot project #not listed).⁵ The bridge cost \$33,059 and was completed in 1938.⁶ The paving work for this region of the Merritt

³This Is Norwalk, 5-6.

⁴Deborah Wing Ray and Gloria P. Stewart, Norwalk Being an Historical Account of That Connecticut Town, (Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1979), 194, 200.

⁵This Is Norwalk, 6.

⁶"3000 Attend Merritt Parkway Opening; Hear Cross Voice Hope For Extension," Norwalk Hour, 30 June 1938, p. 1.

⁷Contract Card File, Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT.

⁸Silvermine River Bridge, DOT #718; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

extended from Comstock Hill Road, in Norwalk, to West Rocks Road. This contract was awarded to the New Haven Construction Company of New Haven, Connecticut (ConnDot project# 180-95).

The first Silvermine River Bridge was washed out in the flood of 1955. A temporary bridge was constructed seventy-five feet south of the roadway, while the replacement was under construction. Completed in December of 1957, the new bridge is fifteen feet higher than the original and cost \$418,990.⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The original Silvermine River Bridge was a reinforced-concrete arch spanning 40'. The intrados rose 16'-0", almost forming a perfectly round arch, and the extrados curved to taper the arch from a thickness of 3' at the springline to 2' at the crown. The bridge was 117'-6" wide to support fill for the Merritt Parkway roadway many feet higher than the bridge. The arch and the sloped wing walls were supported on wide reinforced-concrete footings on steel piles. The wing walls were oriented 45° to the parkway and the river. Tall, square pylons were placed between the wing walls and the arch, with pylons constructed with the arch and separated from the walls by expansion joints.

The current bridge is a three-span steel beam bridge directly supporting the roadway for the Merritt Parkway. The beams bear on two solid concrete piers over the river and concrete abutments at the bank. The handrail is a concrete parapet, with three horizontal grooves, supporting two steel railings.

⁷Silvermine River Bridge, DOT #718; Bridge Maintenance File.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ray, Deborah Wing, and Gloria P. Stewart. Norwalk Being an Historical Account of That Connecticut Town. Canaan, NH: Phoenix Publishing, 1979.

Weed, Samuel Richard. Norwalk After Two Hundred and Fifty Years. An Account of the Celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the Charter of the Town. South Norwalk: C. A. Freeman Publishers, 1901.

———. This Is Norwalk. Norwalk: League of Women Voters, 1963.

Norwalk Hour. 1937-38.

———. Contract Card File. Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Wethersfield, CT. This includes construction drawings, copies of which are in the HAER field records.

———. Bridge Maintenance File. Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation: Newington, CT.

PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division of the National Park Service, Robert J. Kapsch, Chief. The Merritt Parkway recording project was sponsored and funded by the Connecticut Department of Transportation (ConnDot) and the Federal Highway Administration.

The fieldwork, measured drawings, historical reports and photographs were prepared under the general direction of Eric N. DeLony, HAER Chief, and Sara Amy Leach, HABS Historian.

The recording team consisted of Jacqueline A. Salame (Columbia University), architect and field supervisor; Mary Elizabeth Clark (Pratt Institute) and B. Devon Perkins (Yale University), architectural technicians; Joanne McAllister-Hewlings (US/ICOMOS-Great Britain, University of Sheffield), landscape architect; Corinne Smith (Cornell University), engineer; Gabrielle M. Esperdy (City University of New York) and Todd Thibodeau (Arizona State University), historians; and Jet Lowe, HAER photographer.