

Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Bridge Near P Street  
(P Street Bridge)  
Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway, spanning Rock Creek  
0.1 mile north of P Street, NW  
Rock Creek Park  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HAER No. DC-11

HAER  
DC,  
WASH.  
570-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

ROCK CREEK AND POTOMAC PARKWAY BRIDGE NEAR P STREET  
(P Street Bridge)

HAER No. DC-11

Location: Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway 0.1 miles north  
of P Street spanning Rock Creek, Washington, DC.  
UTM: 18/322200/4308575  
Quad: Washington West

Date of Construction: 1935-1936

Engineer: Bureau of Public Roads  
United States Department of Agriculture

Present Owner: Rock Creek Park  
National Capitol Region  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior

Present Use: Vehicular bridge

Significance: The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Bridge near P  
Street is a typical parkway structure of the  
1930s. Its design, materials and construction  
are representative of parkway bridges in  
National Parks.

Historian: Marcia M. Miller, 1988

After years of proposals, Rock Creek Park was created by an Act passed by Congress on September 27, 1890. Containing appropriations to purchase 1605.9 acres of land running along Rock Creek from the Maryland border to the Zoological Park to be preserved as a natural park, the act defined the purpose of the park as providing "for the preservation from injury or spoliation of all timber, animals, or curiosities within said park, and their retention in their natural condition as nearly as possible."<sup>1</sup> At the time, the United States government had designated only two other such areas as natural parks.<sup>2</sup> The Commissioners of the District of Columbia and Chief of Engineers of the United States Army jointly controlled the park (although at this time the military exercised more authority). Their duty was to lay out paths and roads for public use. After purchasing the land, however, Congress did not provide for any improvements to the park for the next seven years.

Since Congress did not appropriate money for work within the park, chain gangs (comprised of District prisoners) completed the improvements to paths and roads. In 1898, Congress finally approved funding to create a road running the length of the park. Beach Drive followed the natural course of the path along the creek.<sup>3</sup> This became, and remains today, the main thoroughfare through the park.

The park remained under the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park until 1918. At this time it became part of the National Park system in the District of Columbia and the duties were transferred to the jurisdiction of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. The officer in charge of the park still reported to the Army Chief of Engineers. In 1925, the new Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital administered the Park after the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds was abolished. Then, in 1933 President Franklin Roosevelt abolished this office, along with the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Commission (established to complete a parkway along the lower end of the creek). The Office of National Parks, Buildings, and Reservations in the Department of the Interior (a temporary name for the National Park Service) gained control of the park at this time. Rock Creek Park thus became one of the National Capital Parks.

The land south of the park, from the Zoological Park to the Potomac

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<sup>1</sup>Mackintosh, Barry. Rock Creek Park An Administrative History. History Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 1985, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>ibid. Yellowstone and Sequoia National Parks were the first to be designated as such.

<sup>3</sup>Beach Drive is named in honor of Col. Lansing H. Beach, Army Corps of Engineers, U.S.A. who served as Secretary of the Board of Control of Rock Creek Park and later as the Bridge Commissioner for the District of Columbia. He is responsible for the early improvements to Rock Creek Park.

River, presented a vast dumping ground as far back as the late nineteenth century. Congress wanted to fill in the valley to rid the city of the sewage and to create easier access between Georgetown and Washington. Although many proponents lobbied for this plan, no action occurred during the next decade. In 1900, the Army Chief of Engineers submitted a report to Congress on "a suitable connection between the Potomac and the Zoological parks".<sup>4</sup> His plan, however, focused on the Mall area and completely ignored the section of the creek valley below N Street. The 1902 McMillan Commission report recognized the need for some resolution to the conflict of filling in the valley versus leaving it open. The Commission strongly approved of the open valley plan for its economy, convenience, and beauty.<sup>5</sup> The Washington Board of Trade also favored the open valley plan. The Georgetown Citizens' Association, however, wanted to fill in the valley for easier access to and from Washington. Thus, several bills submitted to Congress proposed that sections of the valley be filled in to build a road across the creek. Congress took no action on any of the bills. In 1908, a new study analyzed both treatments of the valley. The report called for some kind of parkway: "A park effect of one kind or another is unquestionably the essence of any possible treatment of Rock Creek between Massachusetts Avenue and L Street..."<sup>6</sup> The report suggested four alternatives but favored the full open valley plan with a main drive along the creek. W. J. Douglas, the District Bridge Engineer, also supported this alternative. Still, no immediate action was taken.

Finally, President Taft signed an Act on March 4, 1913 stating that a commission would be established to acquire the land on both sides of the creek to be made part of a parkway. This parkway was to be part of the link between the Maryland/D.C. line to the north and West Potomac Park to the south. Although both the Commission and the parkway were administratively linked with the Park, the parkway never became part of the boundaries. The National Park and Planning Commission, with C. Marshall Finnan in command of the project, administered both the park and the parkway. Once again, however, problems with design, money and land acquisition delayed any action for several more years.

Paving of the parkway began in the mid-1920s with the final section being completed in 1935, and was touted as ranking with the best parkways in the country.<sup>7</sup>

The last section of the parkway, the area between P and K Streets, opened for vehicular use in October of 1935. Because the P Street Bridge was

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<sup>4</sup>Mackintosh, p. 47-48.

<sup>5</sup>ibid., pp. 85-86.

<sup>6</sup>ibid., p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>"New Parkway Here to Rank with Finest," The Washington Evening Star 17 April 1936.

not completed until 1936, vehicular traffic had to be rerouted. Traffic left the Parkway, used the P Street overpass, and reentered the road above the creek.

The Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway bridge near P Street was the last bridge constructed on the Parkway. Plans had been drawn and revised in 1935 and construction of the bridge ran from 1935 to 1936. The bridge, like most parkway bridges of the 1930s, is constructed of reinforced concrete with a mica shist stone facing. A low-level, double-span structure, the bridge's maximum span length is sixty-six feet while its entire length is 111 feet. The width, from curb to curb is forty feet and the deck equals fifty-one feet. There are two sidewalks built along the roadway. The pier is faced with the same mica shist stone but each abutment, as well as the interior of arch, shows board marked concrete. The facing stone is colored in browns, greys and blues to present an unobtrusive appearance. Stone riprap had been constructed along the river on each side to retain the embankments. The granite ring stones along the arch increase in height as they approach the springline in order to offset the illusion of diminished height created by foreshortening. They are approximately three feet at the center and three feet six inches at the springline.<sup>8</sup>

The design and construction of this parkway bridge followed the trend of new parkway architecture. Parkway structures were meant to "melt into their surroundings" so that they would be harmonious with the scenery.<sup>9</sup> These new standard structures, built of reinforced concrete and faced with stone, complemented the park-like atmosphere and became an integral part of the picture.

The P Street Bridge is significant in its association with the other bridges built during the construction of the Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. It is similar to most parkway bridges of the 1930s, built to blend in with the parkway scheme rather than stand as an entity in itself. One hardly realizes when driving that there is a bridge at this location. The bridge is built of concrete and faced with stone, believed to be the most appropriate construction design for parkway bridges. In 1982, repair work was completed on this structure, but it still retains its original appearance.

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<sup>8</sup>U.S. Department of Agriculture. Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway Bridge Near P Street. Revised Plans. Bureau of Public Roads, 1935.

<sup>9</sup>Robbins, Mary Caroline. "Park Making as a National Art," Atlantic Monthly 1987, p. 88.

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