

Old Military Road Bridge (Joyce Road Bridge)
Joyce Road spanning Rock Creek, west of
the intersection with Beach Drive
Rock Creek Park
Washington
District of Columbia

HAER No. DC-18

HAER
DC,
WASH,
567 -

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HAER
DC,
WASH,
567-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
OLD MILITARY ROAD BRIDGE (Joyce Road Bridge)

HAER NO. DC-18

Location: On Joyce Road at the intersection of Beach Drive
spanning Rock Creek.

UTM: 18/323012/4314140
Quad: Washington West

Date of Construction: 1929

Designer: Bridge Division of the D.C. Engineering
Commission

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

Present Use: Vehicular bridge

Significance: The Old Military Road Bridge is not typical of
the early bridges constructed in Rock Creek
Park. Unlike most park bridges designed to be
harmonious with the surrounding environment in
the selection of materials and design, this
steel beam bridge with concrete abutments,
stands in sharp contrast to the picturesque
setting.

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."¹ At the time, the United States government had designated only two other such areas as natural parks.² 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) constructed 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.³ 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.⁴

In 1918, the Olmsted Brothers reported on the park's development and

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

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

³Beach Drive is named in honor of Col. Lansing H. Beach, Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Army, 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.⁴

⁴President 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), in 1933. 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, and remains today, one of the National Capital Parks.

expansion. Approved by the Fine Arts Commission, the Olmsted Report was adopted in 1919 to guide development. Olmsted believed that park structures "should be so designed and located as to fall naturally into place as part and parcel of the scenery, and should never stand out as objects complete in themselves with the surrounding landscape becoming merely a background."⁵ James L. Greenleaf, who replaced Olmsted as the landscape member of the Fine Arts Commission, wrote that structures should be simple forms, easily assimilated by the rustic scenery. They should not be carried to the extreme in trying to blend with the scenery.⁶ The designers of this bridge apparently paid little attention to such directions.

With these ideas in mind, new roads and structures were constructed elsewhere to expand the park. Old Military Road, however, predated the park's existence. This road was used by the Union Soldiers in 1862.⁷ The soldiers needed an easily accessible route between all of the forts which ringed the city of Washington. As part of this road, the Engineer Corps constructed a military road across Rock Creek at the present location of the Joyce Road Bridge. The road stretched between Chain Bridge (Fort Sumner) and Georgia Avenue (Fort Stevens) providing a direct route on which supplies and reinforcements could be easily routed between forts.

The Union Army constructed the first bridge on Military Road in 1862. Another bridge was built in 1905 to span Rock Creek at this site. This bridge, considered outdated for the park's needs, was removed by the contractors before construction began on the existing bridge in 1929.

The Bridge Division of the Engineer Commission of the District of Columbia, under the jurisdiction of the Office of Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, designed the present Old Military Road Bridge (Joyce Road Bridge) in 1929. The contract was awarded to L. B. Davidson of Washington, D.C. Construction costs for the bridge equaled \$18,487.⁸

The Old Military Road Bridge is a flat single span composed of steel beams resting on ornamental reinforced concrete abutments. The outer beams are encased in concrete so that no steel is visible except from the vantage point of the Creek directly under the bridge. The ornamental concrete balustrade as constructed, is more elaborate than the design shown on original plans. The bridge is fifty-four feet long, exclusive of approaches which total thirty-six feet additional. Overall width is fifty-seven feet, with a

⁵Mackintosh, p. 40.

⁶ibid., p. 42.

⁷Spratt, Zack. "Rock Creek's Bridges" Columbia Historical Society Records, v. 53-56, 1955-1956, pp.107-108.

⁸Vertical file on "Bridges" located in the Washingtoniana Room of the Martin Luther King Public Library.

thirty-eight foot roadway, and two six foot wide side walks.

Plans are in the final stage of development to remove the Joyce Road Bridge and completely replace it with a new bridge at the same location. They envision reproducing, as nearly as possible, the balustrade and other style features, on a modern structural design. A portion of the abutments and the wing walls will be reused but all components of the span will be new. Tentative schedule calls for construction to begin in May 1989.⁹

⁹According to E. Macdougall Palmer, Rock Creek Park, National Park Service.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "Bridges." Vertical file located in the Washingtoniana Room of the Martin Luther King Public Library, Washington, D.C.
- Goodkind, Morris. "Architectural Consideration in Bridge Design." American Concrete Institute Journal (Sept.-Oct. 1935): 28-38.
- Mackintosh, Barry. Rock Creek Park An Administrative History. History Division, National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C., 1985.
- Office of Engineer Commissioner, Washington, D.C. Bridge No. 13, Military Road Bridge. Bridge Division, 1929.
- Spratt, Zack. "Rock Creek's Bridges." Columbia Historical Society Records v. 53-56, (1955-1956): 101-134.
- Tweed, William C., Laura E. Soulliere and Henry G. Law. National Park Service Rustic Architecture: 1916-1942. National Park Service Western Regional Office Division of Cultural Resource Management. February 1977.
- U.S. Department of Interior. Mt. Vernon Memorial Highway Historic Resources Study. Appendix E - Specifications for bridges. National Park Service. 1987.
- U.S. Department of Transportation. Bridge Safety Inspection Report Joyce Road over Rock Creek, Rock Creek Park [Bridge # 3450-022P]. Federal Highway Administration, Eastern District Federal Division, 1986.