

HAER
IOWA
42-ALD,
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ALDEN BRIDGE
(Main Street Bridge)
Iowa Bridges Recording Project
Spanning Iowa River at Main Street
Alden
Hardin County
Iowa

HAER No. IA-56

BLACK & WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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Location: Spanning Iowa River at Main Street,
Alden; Hardin County, Iowa.
UTM: 15.469160.4707480
USGS: Popejoy, Iowa quadrangle
(7.5 minute series, 1979)

Date of Construction: 1936

Designer: Iowa State Highway Commission

Contractor: Weldon Brothers Construction Company,
Iowa Falls, IA

Present Use: Town Street Bridge

Significance: Alden Bridge was an early and important
project of the Works Progress
Administration (WPA) in Iowa.
Constructed in concrete using rigid
frame technology, it is a prototype of
1930s bridges, popular not only for its
visual appeal, but also because its
labor intensive construction provided
many with work during this depressed
era.

Historian: Juliet Landler and Leslie Pitner,
August, 1995

Project
Information: This document was prepared as part of
the Iowa Historic Bridges Recording
Project during the summer of 1995 by the
Historic American Engineering Record
(HAER). The project was sponsored by the
Iowa Department of Transportation
(IDOT). Preliminary research on this
bridge was performed by Clayton B.
Fraser of Fraserdesign, Loveland, CO.

The Alden Bridge in Alden, Iowa stands as one of the most significant early projects in Iowa by the newly organized Works Progress Administration (WPA), created as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Intended to help alleviate unemployment in Hardin County, the project was approved in 1935, the first year of the new agency, and the bridge was dedicated on July 4, 1936.

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION IN IOWA

Emergency relief work did not begin in Iowa until 1933. As the national depression descended after the stock market crash of 1929, Iowa was in a deep depression by 1932 as farm prices went into serious decline. This came upon the heels of a decade of declining farm exports and prices. Farm workers began to be displaced by new modern machinery. By early 1933, over one quarter of the 200,000 farms in Iowa were under the threat of foreclosure.¹ One half of the counties could no longer support the burgeoning number of unemployed, and many had reached their legal limit of indebtedness. In January of 1933, the Governor of Iowa created the State Emergency Relief Committee, and in May the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was established.² In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was added to the growing number of New Deal agencies, to provide jobs for the unemployed rather than simply to transfer money.³

The WPA was a component of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which was ushered in with his election in 1932. Roosevelt made a series of sweeping changes in the functioning of the federal government, establishing many new agencies and extending federal power to address the effects of the Depression. The first one hundred days of his administration brought a flurry of new programs and agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Relief Act, Emergency Farm Mortgage Act, Agriculture Adjustment Act, and the National Industrial Recovery Act, which profoundly changed the functioning of the federal government. This set of legislation

¹Alan Jones, "The New Deal Comes to Iowa," in Lawrence E. Gelfand and Robert J. Neymeyer, eds., The New Deal Viewed from Fifty Years (Iowa City: The Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, 1983), 21.

²"Iowa Emergency Relief Work," State of Iowa Official Register 1939-40, (Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1940), 370.

³Michael E. Parrish, Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941 (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) 347-8.

brought the federal government deeply into the arrangement of economic and social life in the United States.⁴

In Iowa, the WPA began work in October of 1935, as the successor to the Civil Works Administration. Potential workers had first to be certified by local WPA representatives as eligible, and then would be assigned to a project in their area. Funding for projects was provided by the federal government with materials and equipment supplied by the local government. In March 1936, at the time of the construction of the Alden Bridge, almost 37,500 Iowans were employed by the WPA. Roads and bridges were the main projects in Iowa, as they were both necessary and labor intensive, particularly the construction or improvement of "farm-to-market" roads. By January 1939, 5,568 miles of farm-to-market roads had been surfaced, while 4,690 miles had been re-surfaced, and an additional 7,700 miles of roads were cleared. 11,819 bridges and culverts had been constructed by that time.⁵

The Alden Bridge was among the first projects undertaken by the WPA in Iowa. Hardin County was informed by the state authorities on October 21, 1935 that grants were given for two new bridges in the county, during the first month of the establishment of the WPA. The bridges were to be of reinforced concrete, the most labor intensive type of bridge construction.⁶ Work on the Alden bridge began in January 1936, overseen by Weldon Brothers, a construction firm based in Iowa Falls, another town in the county. The work was done in shifts of 15 men, each of whom were paid \$40 a month for 120 hours of labor.⁷ The bridge was dedicated on July 4, 1936, with L.S. Hill, the state administrator of the WPA, as the keynote speaker. The Alden Bridge was one of the most prominent early projects of the WPA in Iowa, as it was featured on display panels that the WPA sent to the local and state fairs in 1936.⁸

⁴Parrish, 294-6.

⁵Chet Billings, "WPA in Iowa," in Iowa Official Register, 363-4.

⁶"New Bridge for Alden Approved by WPA Heads," The Alden Times, October 24, 1935, 1.

⁷"Work Started on New Bridge Tuesday Over Iowa River at Alden," The Alden Times, January 30, 1936, 1.

⁸This is seen in photographs of the display: "The United States Work Projects Administration Iowa Photographs," MS 260, 6/9, held in Special Collections, Iowa State University Library.

ALDEN AND HARDIN COUNTY

Alden Township sits in the northwest part of Hardin County. The first settler came to the township in 1851. The township is named for Henry Alden, who settled the area in 1854. Alden had a town platted in 1855, then called Upper Town. Additional areas were platted in 1856 and 57, but a financial crash in 1857 stopped short the town's growth, and residents left to continue west. The town was incorporated as Alden in 1879.⁹ Alden never grew to the size or prominence of Eldora, the county seat, or Iowa Falls, the largest town in the county.

Alden served as the closest commercial center for the farmers of the township. It was home to the Alden Creamery, where the dairy farmers brought their milk. At the construction of the Alden Bridge, the town was home to a bank, hotel, two cafes, grain elevator, and a general store. Alden is the smallest town in the United States to be home to a Carnegie Library, which was built in 1914.¹⁰

RIGID FRAME DESIGN

The bridge was of a concrete rigid frame design, which replaced a deteriorating iron truss bridge. Two 75 foot arches, for a 150 foot total span, cross the Iowa River. The rigid frame design is a type of girder span. The rigid frame was adapted to bridge design from framing buildings. The first rigid frame bridges, which used steel girders, were built by Arthur G. Hayden, the designing engineer for the Westchester County, New York, Park Commission. The bridges were used on two scenic parkways, the Bronx River and Cross County. The rigid frame was both economical and aesthetic in design and became popular for parkways.¹¹

CONCLUSION

With a population that hovers around 800, Alden still resembles the small Main Street community it was in the 1930s. Running parallel to the Iowa River, its commercial street is lined with a few retail stores, a cafe, a bar, the library, and the town

⁹William J. Moir, ed., Past and Present of Hardin County, (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1911), 270-4.

¹⁰The History of Hardin County, Iowa, (Springfield, Illinois: Union Publishing Co., 1883), 24-5.

¹¹Carl W. Condit, American Building, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 259-60, 226-7.

office. A small public park overlooks the river and Alden bridge, the town's centerpiece. After sixty years of service, the Alden Bridge is showing signs of wear. In spots, concrete is spalling or cracked, and puddles collect on its sidewalks. Its structure, however, remains sound, and the bridge still serves as the area's most important crossing over the Iowa River.

SOURCES CONSULTED

- Jones, Alan. "The New Deal Comes to Iowa." in Lawrence E. Gelfand and Robert J. Neymeyer, eds. The New Deal Viewed from Fifty Years. Iowa City: The Center for the Study of the Recent History of the United States, 1983.
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- Parrish, Michael E. Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992.
- State of Iowa Official Register 1939-40. Des Moines: State of Iowa, 1940.
- "The United States Work Projects Administration Iowa Photographs," MS 260, held in Special Collections, Iowa State University Library, Ames, Iowa.
- "Work Started on New Bridge Tuesday Over Iowa River at Alden." The Alden Times. January 30, 1936, 1.

ADDENDUM TO
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This appendix is an addendum to a 6-page report previously transmitted to the Library of Congress.

APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Interested readers may consult the Historical Overview of Iowa Bridges, HAER No. IA-88: "This historical overview of bridges in Iowa was prepared as part of Iowa Historic Bridges Recording Project - I and II, conducted during the summers of 1995 and 1996 by the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER). The purpose of the overview was to provide a unified historical context for the bridges involved in the recording projects."