

Merritt Parkway, Ponus Ridge Road Bridge
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 12.36 mile mark
New Canaan
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-81

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, Ponus Ridge Road Bridge

HAER No. CT-81

Location: Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 12.36 mile mark in New Canaan, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.624425.4552810
Quad: Stamford, Connecticut

Construction Date: July 1937

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

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

Contractor: Mariani Construction Company
New Haven, Connecticut

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Used by traffic on Ponus Ridge Road to cross the Merritt Parkway

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 1684, John Finch of Stamford received the first grant of land in present-day New Canaan. Few others followed immediately. In 1700, Samuel Smith, Thomas Benedict and Thomas Seymour, each received a forty-four acres of land on Canoe Hill from the town of Norwalk. This area steadily expanded over the next thirty years. In 1731, Connecticut's General Assembly established Canaan Parish out of parts of northwestern Norwalk and northeastern Stamford. The region's civil status was unchanged, but residents were allowed to form their own church.¹

For the next fifty years the Canaan Parish steadily developed into a farming region, but after the Revolutionary War when agricultural prices fell, local farmers were forced to search for an alternative economy. This resulted in the dramatic expansion of the shoe-making industry. As this trade developed, residents viewed civic control by Norwalk and Stamford as a hinderance. In 1796, community leaders petitioned the General Assembly for independent status. The town of New Canaan was created in 1801; renamed because Canaan, CT had been incorporated in 1739.²

As New Canaan continued to develop around the expanding shoe industry, a center village formed with six distinct districts on the periphery: Oenoke Ridge, Ponus Ridge, Silvermine, Smith Ridge, Talmadge Hill, and West Road.

The building of the railroad in 1868 failed to bring new enterprises but the economy was enriched by the coming of the summer boarder, once again giving employment to whole families. Concurrently a new business grew, the buying and selling of real estate. Old farm-houses were remodeled and new mansions built for summer sojourners, many of whom became year-round residents, commuting to New York and nearby cities to work.³

¹"Important Dates in the History of New Canaan," (Pamphlet, New Canaan Historical Society, 1976).

²Mary Louise King, The Making of Main Street, (New Canaan: New Canaan Historical Society, 1971), 5-7.

³"Important Dates in the History of New Canaan."

Because of its central location, Warren Creamer, the Merritt Highway project engineer of surveys and property acquisition, opened his main field office in New Canaan in 1931. Most local residents favored the Merritt Parkway going through New Canaan, but conflict arose over where the roadway would be located. Originally it was to take a northern route, but the town of Wilton objected to having the parkway, forcing the Merritt to go through the southern districts of Ponus Ridge, Talmadge Hill, and Silvermine. Most property was quickly acquired. However, Lewis B. Lapham, one of New Canaan's wealthiest citizens, refused to part with a 150-acre tract. Lapham died in 1934, upon which his heirs too refused to sell the property unless an old oak on the land was spared. When the roadway was built, it had to make a slight bend to avoid the "Lapham Oak."

Robert Hurley, commissioner of public works, condemned the road as being unsafely close to the tree, and he was probably right. The first fatality on the Merritt happened on August 7, 1939, when a Brooklyn man fell asleep at the wheel and hit the tree. The old oak was subsequently removed in February 1940.⁴ Controversy also arose over draining Raymond's pond, a local recreational spot, for the roadbed, but unlike the Lapham Oak, sentiment did not prevail to save the pond.⁵ Despite initial problems, the parkway would ultimately help to make New Canaan a prosperous residential community.

⁴"Highway Surveyors Have Gone Through Talmadge Hill District," New Canaan Advertiser, 2 March 1932, p. 1.

"Lewis B. Lapham Doesn't Want to Sell to State," New Canaan Advertiser, 23 November 1933, p. 2.

"150 Acres Transferred to State, Lapham Only One Left," New Canaan Advertiser, 27 December 1934, p. 1.

"Lapham Estate Finally Bought, Last Link Needed," New Canaan Advertiser, 25 June 1936, p. 1.

"Brooklyn Man Dies in Crash On Merritt Parkway When Car Hits Famous Oak Tree," New Canaan Advertiser, 10 August 1939, p. 1.

"Famous Oak Tree Removed Saturday," New Canaan Advertiser, 1 February 1940, p. 1.

⁵"Merritt will Drain Raymond's Pond," New Canaan Advertiser, 3 September 1936, p. 1.

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

Ponus Ridge Road is a continuation of Hope Street in Stamford and proceeds north through New Canaan to the New York state line. The road was named after Chief Ponus, a leader of the Shippan tribe in the Wappinger Confederacy of the Delaware Nation, who signed over Ponus Ridge to Nathaniel Turner in 1640.

The Osborn-Barnes Construction Company of Danbury, CT, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from Guinea Road, in Stamford, to Ponus Ridge Road, in New Canaan (ConnDot project #180-31). While the Ponus Ridge Road Bridge is located within this section of the Merritt, the bridge contract went to the Mariani Construction Company of New Haven, CT (ConnDot project #180-41).⁶ The bridge cost \$30,522 and was under construction from November 6, 1936, to July 9, 1937. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from Wire Mill Road, in Stamford, to Lapham Avenue, in New Canaan. This contract was awarded to the New Haven Construction Company of New Haven, CT (ConnDot project# 180-93). The Ponus Ridge Road Bridge has received little maintenance since it was built.⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Ponus Ridge Road Bridge is a single-span, reinforced- concrete, barrel-type rigid-frame bridge spanning 64'-9-3/4" and carries a 30' wide road (Ponus Ridge Road). Parallel wing walls, 42'

⁶Contract Card File, Map File and Engineering Records Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Wethersfield, CT.

⁷Ponus Ridge Road Bridge, DOT #708; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

long, form the approach for the underpass. The Merritt Parkway travels under the bridge at a skew of 13°-34', with a clear roadway 60' wide.

The rigid-frame design allows the engineer to decrease the structural material at the center of the span, thus forming an arched opening. (See the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63, for a more detailed description of the rigid-frame.) The intrados of the span rises 3' from the springline to the crown, while the extrados rises at a 3 percent grade from the knee to the crown. The frame thickness at the crown is 21". The outside of the knee is squared with a notch, and the inside of the knee is a corner with an obtuse angle. The frame leg thickness increases from the base to the knee. The exposed face of the legs remains vertical, and the hidden face slopes away from the roadway. Presently, the drains in the frame legs are rusty, and vines cover part of the bridge span. The minimum clearance provided is 14'-3" at a distance 20' for the centerline of the roadway and 12'-9" at 30' from the centerline.

The concrete surfaces are rusticated in a Classic revival style to imitate smooth stone voussoirs across the arched span and quoins at the corners of the pylons and the rigid frame. An arch motif is inset on each wing wall and on the face of the exposed legs of the frame. The drawings show this arched space stippled, translating into exposed black aggregate and a shell-patterned texture on the concrete. The Connecticut coat of arms on a precast cartouche is the keystone ornament. The railing is a classically-influenced balustrade. A solid parapet with an arch occurs at each pylon and the end of the wing wall.

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-----, "Important Dates in the History of New Canaan." Pamphlet, New Canaan Historical Society, 1976.

-----, 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.