

Merritt Parkway, Marvin Ridge Road Bridge
(Weed Avenue Bridge)
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 15.13 mile mark
New Canaan
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-86

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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HAER No. CT-86

Location: Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 15.13 mile mark in New Canaan, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.628605.4553770
Quad: Norwalk North, Connecticut

Construction Date: October 1937

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

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

Contractor: M. A. Gammino Construction Company
Providence, Rhode Island

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Used by traffic on Marvin 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, Connecticut, 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."

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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

The southern end of Marvin Ridge Road begins at Weed Avenue and proceeds Talmadge Hill neighborhood. The Daniel Deering Construction Company of Norwalk, CT, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from South Avenue/Route 124, in New Canaan, to New Canaan Road/Route 123, in Norwalk (ConnDot project #180-34). While the Marvin Ridge Road Bridge is within this section of the Merritt, the grade separation and bridge contract went to the M. A. Gammino Construction Company of Providence, RI (ConnDot project #180-61).⁶ The bridge cost \$32,057 and was under construction from July 2, 1937 the fall of that year. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from Lapham Avenue, in New Canaan, to Comstock Hill Road, in Norwalk. This contract was awarded to the New Haven Construction Company of New Haven, CT (ConnDot project# 180-94). In 1990, all loose and spalling concrete was removed removed from the Marvin Ridge Road Bridge and its deck replaced. The bridge was then patched, sealed, and painted (ConnDot #89-91).⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Marvin Ridge Road Bridge is a single-span, reinforced-concrete slab spanning 66' across the Merritt Parkway at a skew of 17°-23'-30". Parallel wing walls form the approach for the underpass. The bridge provides a 30' wide roadway for Marvin Ridge Road. This bridge was originally built with a rigid frame design similar to other bridges on the Merritt Parkway. An arched veneer gives the impression of the arched rigid frame span.

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

⁷Marvin Ridge Road bridge, DOT #714; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

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When the bridge was rebuilt as a slab, the original architectural detailing was retained. The two prominent features of the bridges are urns and railing panels. Precast panels form a niche, made with blue vitreous aggregate, for an urn made with white marble aggregate. The panels are placed near the top of the pylons. Precast Connecticut coat of arms are located on the inside of two of the pylons. The recessed geometric pattern in the railing parapet forms a strong horizontal line across the bridge length. This pattern is repeated between two urns below the springline of the former rigid frame. The urns molded into the face of the abutments under the span are silhouettes of those on the pylons.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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New Canaan Advertiser. 1932-1940.

----- . "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.

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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.