

Merritt Parkway, Merwins Lane Bridge  
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 22.3 mile mark  
Fairfield  
Fairfield County  
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-106

HAER  
CONN,  
1-FAIRF,  
24-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record  
National Park Service  
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# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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HAER  
CONN,  
1-FAIRF,  
24-  
(DAPL)

## Merritt Parkway, Merwins Lane Bridge

HAER No. CT-106

**Location:** Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 24.3 mile mark in Fairfield, Fairfield County, Connecticut  
UTM: 18.641455.4559910  
Quad: Westport, Connecticut

**Construction Date:** May 1940

**Engineer:** Connecticut Highway Department

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

**Contractor:** Louis J. Bacco Construction Company  
Stamford, Connecticut

**Present Owner:** Connecticut Department of Transportation  
Wethersfield, Connecticut

**Present Use:** Used by traffic on Merwins Lane 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

Fairfield was known as Uncoway or "looking forward to a valley" by the Indians that inhabited this region when Europeans first arrived. In 1637, Roger Ludlow landed at Uncoway and named it Fair Fields. Later that year Ludlow defeated the Pequot Indians in the Great Swamp Fight, ending the Pequot Wars.<sup>1</sup>

With the Pequot's demise, Ludlow took immediate steps to obtain a commission from the General Court of Connecticut to begin a new settlement. In 1639, with commission in hand, Ludlow and four others journeyed back to Fair Fields, and acquired land from the local Indians. The original purchase consisted of the present-day communities of Fairfield, Black Rock, Easton, Redding, Weston, and Westport. Three years later, Ludlow convinced Governor Hayes to hold General Court in Fairfield twice a year. Thus, early in its history, Fairfield became a place of unusual importance in the Connecticut colony.<sup>2</sup>

During the first half of the eighteenth century, trade flourished among Fairfield and other communities on the Atlantic coast. By 1745 Fairfield was the third-largest town in the colony. As it expanded eleven neighborhoods developed: the Beach Area, Tunxis Hill, Stratfield, Grasmere, Greenfield Hill, Mill Plain, Holland Hill, the University area, Southport, Black Rock Turnpike, and the Center. Early Fairfield was primarily an agricultural and trading node, with properties along the original roads developing the quickest. Thus, the Boston Post Road played a prominent role early in town development.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Rita Papazion, Fairfield Connecticut, 350 Years, (Fairfield: Fairfield House, Inc., 1989), 6.

<sup>2</sup>Papazion, 6.

<sup>3</sup>George O. Pratt, Fairfield in Connecticut, 1776-1976, (Fairfield: Fairfield Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 5.

On the morning of July 7, 1779, the British set fire to a large section of Fairfield's downtown. It would be several years before the community rebounded from the loss. During the nineteenth century, the municipalities of Redding, Weston, Easton, Westport, and Black Rock split off from Fairfield. The industrialization of Bridgeport and the increased popularity of commuting brought further change to the town's demography. Improved transportation meant that factory workers could live in Fairfield and work in Bridgeport. Between 1900 and 1910, Fairfield's population increased by 50 percent to 6,134, heralding the start of the town's transformation into a suburban community. By 1920, the population almost doubled again to 11,000. Fairfield developed in a conservative manner, though, implementing its first zoning ordinance in the early 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

On to this backdrop the Merritt Parkway was built, and conflict quickly developed. Local residents sought the benefits of increased land values and reduced traffic congestion on the Boston Post Road, but worried about over-development and traffic choking residential areas. Their solution was to allow the parkway to follow a northerly route with few on and off ramps. This group promptly formed the Greenfield Hill Improvement Society. Local business leaders aimed to reduce congestion on the Boston Post Road without losing customers; they wanted the parkway to parallel the Post Road and have several exits throughout the community. Local entrepreneurs rallied around the Fairfield Lion's Club and the Fairfield Businessmen's Association. After several petitions and town meetings Commissioner Cox settled on a compromise; the road would have several interchanges, but exit 43 in Greenfield Hill

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<sup>4</sup>Pratt, 21-25.

would not be built.<sup>5</sup> After the parkway was completed, both groups appeared to be satisfied with the results.

#### BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

Merwins Lane starts at Redding Road and proceeds north through Merwins Hill before ending at Catamount Road. The Peter Mitchell Construction Company of Greenwich, Connecticut, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from North Avenue, in Westport, to Congress Street, in Fairfield (ConnDot project #180-56). While the Merwins Lane Bridge is located within this section of the Merritt, the bridge contract was awarded to the Louis J. Bacco Construction Company of Stamford, Connecticut (ConnDot project #180-77).<sup>6</sup> The bridge cost \$40,297 and was under construction from September 18, 1939 to May 18, 1940. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from Easton Road/Route 136, in Westport, to Congress Street, in Fairfield. This contract was assigned to the A. I. Savin Company of East Hartford, Connecticut (ConnDot project# 180-135). The Merwins Lane Bridge was completed after this section of the Merritt Parkway opened, forcing traffic to use an at grade crossing

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<sup>5</sup>"Greenfield Hill Residents Oppose New Highway Entrance," Fairfield News, 9 September 1938, p. 1.

"Cox to Visit Fairfield Over Entrance Controversy," Fairfield News, 16 September 1938, p. 1.

"Local Businessmen Want Entrance at Cross Highway or Redding Road," Fairfield News, 13 January 1939, p. 1.

"Lions Club Offering Petitions For Merritt Parkway Approach," Fairfield News, 27 January 1939, p. 1.

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

until it was finished. In 1988, the Merwins Lane Bridge had deck rehabilitation and patching work done (ConnDot project #170-340).<sup>7</sup>

### BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Merwins Lane Bridge is a double-span, reinforced-concrete, barrel-type rigid-frame bridge. Each frame spans 40' over two lanes of the Merritt Parkway. The bridge provides a 30' wide roadway for Merwins Lane. Parallel reinforced-concrete wing walls, 35'-6" long, form the approach for the underpass.

The two frames have a leg in common at the center pier. 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 2' from the springline to the crown, while the extrados remains horizontal across both frames. The frame thickness at the crown is 14". Both faces of the frame leg slope backward slightly from the footing to the knee, maintaining a constant thickness. The minimum clearance provided is over 14' at the edge of the pavement.

The Merwins Lane Bridge features one of the most whimsical of architect George Dunkelberger's designs on the Merritt Parkway. Each 7'-long panel of the metal railing contains three sections. The center section, about one-half the panel length, is filled with a cobweb inhabited by one spider. The spider's location is different on each railing panel. The end sections are mirror image designs featuring butterflies, in profile, on bent stalks. Large precast butterflies perch on triangular corbels on the face of the pylons. Smaller precast butterflies occupy steps at the corners of the pylons.

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<sup>7</sup>Merwins Lane Bridge, DOT #735; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

The backdrop for the precast butterflies is an overlapping clapboard pattern on the wing walls and the pylons. The concrete is finished similarly at the center pier and on the exposed legs of the frames. Pilasters are formed on the legs and the wing walls when the surface batters except under the railing posts. The only smooth concrete occurring on the bridge is on the spandrels. The construction drawings indicate that the clapboard pattern was formed with reverse molds, but in a public address, architect George Dunkelberger claims the bridge is faced with 2"-thick architectural slabs.<sup>8</sup> Dunkelberger also indicated that the tone of the concrete was green, but that tint has since faded.

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Fairfield News. 1938-1939.

----- 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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<sup>8</sup>George L. Dunkelberger, "Highway Architecture," Connecticut Society of Civil Engineers Annual 12 (1942): 129.

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.