

Merritt Parkway, Newtown Turnpike Bridge  
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 20.3 mile mark  
Westport  
Fairfield County  
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-98

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## Merritt Parkway, Newtown Turnpike Bridge

HAER No. CT-98

**Location:** Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 20.3 mile mark in Westport, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.635595.4557930  
Quad: Norwalk North, Connecticut

**Construction Date:** June 1939

**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 the Newtown Turnpike 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 1648, five settlers migrated west from the town of Fairfield and established homesteads along the Saugatuck River. Residents of Fairfield referred to this region as Green's Farms, because of John Green who settled there. The church referred to this region as the West Parish of Fairfield.<sup>1</sup>

For the next century this rural community grew slowly. By the late 1700s the town was known as Saugatuck. In 1806, schooners started making weekly runs between Saugatuck and New York City. The town developed into a shipping center, with two shipyards. This was due in large part to the Saugatuck River which was navigable farther inland than any other stream in Fairfield County.<sup>2</sup>

In 1824, the parish of Saugatuck presented a petition of civic independence to Fairfield's town leaders. In 1835, the Connecticut legislature created the town of Westport from parts of Fairfield, Norwalk, and Weston.<sup>3</sup>

The arrival of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad in 1849, further bolstered the economy. "The building of the railroad ushered in a new era. The wharves along the Saugatuck disappeared as did the vessels that had for many years docked beside them. When the new railroad station for Westport was built, several factories opened in the vicinity."<sup>4</sup> Westport remains a manufacturing center to the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Haggeman, "Founding of West Parish of Fairfield." (Manuscript, Westport Public Library Vertical File), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Adams, "Saugatuck History," (Manuscript, Westport Public Library Vertical File, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Haggeman, 3.

<sup>4</sup> "Westport, Connecticut, a preliminary directive plan," prepared by the Section of City Planning, Department of Architecture, School of the Fine Arts, Yale University, 1947.

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The completion of the Merritt Parkway enabled Westport to also become a bedroom community for New York City. Residents actively encouraged construction of the parkway in their town, especially when it appeared that the Merritt might follow a more northerly route through the communities of Wilton and Weston. Conflict did arise as the roadway was being constructed. Local business leaders were concerned that there would not be enough exits to give motorists access to Westport's commercial district. These fears were alleviated when the second section of the parkway to open, ended at Weston Road/Route 57, depositing all traffic onto Main Street. Civic leaders were then distressed by the congestion this generated in the business district. The problem was solved when the next link of the parkway opened to the Huntington Turnpike.<sup>5</sup>

#### BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

The Newtown and Norwalk Turnpike was completed in 1829, and served as the primary link between northern agricultural areas and the port at Norwalk. This road eventually became known as just the Newtown Turnpike.

The Osborn-Barnes Construction Company of Danbury, Connecticut, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from the Newtown Turnpike to North Avenue in Westport (ConnDot project #180-55). While the Newtown Turnpike is located within this section of the Merritt, the

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<sup>5</sup> "Westport Wants Entrance at Cross Highway, But Fairfield Opposed," Westporter-Herald, 18 November 1938, p. 1; "The Newest Plan is For Traffic Leaving Parkway to Use Wilton Road; Those Entering Go Thru Narrow Main Street," Westporter-Herald, 9 December 1938, p. 1; "Chamber of Commerce to Petition for Routing of Parkway Traffic Via Compo Road," Westporter-Herald, 10 January 1939, p. 1; "Westport Chamber of Commerce Wants Traffic From Merritt Diverted Somewhere Besides Main Street," Westporter-Herald, 13 January 1939, p. 1; "Cox Promises to Examine Ramp Issue," Westporter-Herald, 24 January 1939, p. 1.

grade separation and bridge contract went to the Louis J. Bacco Construction Company of Stamford, Connecticut (ConnDot project #180-69).<sup>6</sup> The bridge cost \$31,294 and was under construction from November 18, 1938, to June 2, 1939. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from the Newtown Turnpike to Easton Road/Route 136 in Westport. This contract was awarded to the A. I. Savin Company of East Hartford, CT (ConnDot project# 180-100). The Merritt Parkway opened in this area before the Newtown Turnpike bridge was completed, requiring a grade crossing until the bridge was completed. The Newtown Turnpike Bridge has received little maintenance since it was built. Over the years some spalling concrete was removed and patched.<sup>7</sup>

#### BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The Newtown Turnpike Bridge is a double-span, reinforced-concrete, barrel-type rigid-frame bridge. Each frame spans 45'-7-1/2" over two lanes of the Merritt Parkway. Parallel wing walls form the approach for the underpass. The bridge provides a 45' clear roadway for Newtown Turnpike.

The rigid-frame design differs from most of the other bridges on the Merritt Parkway because it is shaped like a segmental arch, instead of an arched beam. (See the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63, for a more detailed description of the rigid-frame.) The twin frames are completely independent except for a shared footing at the center pier. The frame legs are less than 5' tall above the roadway so they appear to be part of the arch. Each arch rises 12'-6" above the

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

<sup>7</sup> Newtown Turnpike Bridge, DOT #726; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

springline. The frame thickness increases from 1'-3" at the crown to 2'-6" at the wall. The spandrels of the arch are filled with gravel and bounded by reinforced-concrete walls at the faces. The minimum clearance provided is 14'-0" at a distance of 10' perpendicular to the centerline of the roadway.

The Newtown Turnpike Bridge displays one of the most extensive uses of cast stone on the Merritt Parkway. The broken range, smooth ashlar masonry appearance comes from large sheets of 6"-thick, brown cast-stone facing. The cast stone is used as the formwork for the structural concrete. (See the Merritt Parkway History Report, HAER No. CT-63, for a more detailed discussion of cast stone.) The voussoirs of the arch are sized with varying depth to match the shape of the arch of the rigid-frame. The tops of the voussoirs are straight cut at the crown, changing to notched cut at the haunches, and back to straight cut at the springline. The abutments and center piers are identified by triangular-shaped corbels at the parapet.

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———. 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.