

Merritt Parkway, North Avenue Bridge
Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 22.58 mile mark
Westport
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-103

HAER
CONN,
1-WESPD,
11-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HAER
CONN,
1-WESTPO,
11-
(Page 1)

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Merritt Parkway, North Avenue Bridge

HAER No. CT-103

Location: Spanning the Merritt Parkway at the 22.58 mile mark in Westport, Fairfield County, Connecticut

UTM: 18.639030.4558550
Quad: Westport, Connecticut

Construction Date: January 1939

Engineer: Connecticut Highway Department

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

Contractor: Peter Mitchell Construction Company
Greenwich, Connecticut

Present Owner: Connecticut Department of Transportation
Wethersfield, Connecticut

Present Use: Used by traffic on North Avenue 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.¹

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.²

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.³

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."⁴ Westport remains a manufacturing center to the present day.

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

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

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

³Haggeman, 3.

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

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.⁵

BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION HISTORY

North Avenue starts at Long Lots Road and proceeds north to Coleytown Road just north of the parkway. The Osborn-Barnes Construction Company of Danbury, CT, received the contract to grade the Merritt Parkway from the Newtown Turnpike to North Avenue, in Westport (ConnDot project #180-55). While the North Avenue Bridge is located within this section of the Merritt, the bridge contract was awarded to the Peter Mitchell Construction Company of Greenwich, CT (ConnDot project #180-74).⁶ The bridge cost \$39,183 and was under construction from April 29, 1938, to January 3, 1939. The paving work for this region of the Merritt extended from the Easton Road/Route 136, in Westport, to

⁵"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.

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

Congress Street, in Fairfield. This contract was assigned to the A. I. Savin Company of East Hartford, CT (ConnDot project #180-135). The North Avenue Bridge has received little maintenance since it was built. Recently it had some spalling concrete was removed and patched.⁷

BRIDGE DESCRIPTION

The North Avenue Bridge is a single-span, reinforced- concrete, barrel-type rigid-frame bridge spanning 63'-10", with a clear roadway of 30' at a 4.07 percent grade. Parallel wing walls, 43' and 33'-6" long, form the approach for the underpass. The Merritt Parkway travels under the bridge at a skew of 90-14'-45", with a clear roadway of 60'.

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 almost 6'-6" from the springline to the crown, while the extrados rises a few inches from the knee to the crown. The frame thickness at the crown is 24". The outside and inside of the knee are curved. The exposed face of the legs remains vertical, and the hidden face slopes away from the roadway to increase the frame leg thickness from the base to the knee. Presently, the concrete on the south-facing spandrel is spalling.

The detailing of the North Avenue Bridge is stylistically Art Deco. A vertical emphasis is achieved with 16-1/2" wide panels on the wing walls, the spandrel faces, and the exposed legs of the rigid frame. The panels appear to overlap. Three of these panels at the pylons are replaced with scraffito panels of a white floral pattern on a black background. The floral panel tapers to a single stalk with curled offshoots. The white color results from a white vitreous aggregate with ten percent micaceous materials added. The black color results from a mixture of half Swedish emerald pearl and half

⁷North Avenue Bridge, DOT #732; Bridge Maintenance File, Engineering Department, Connecticut Department of Transportation, Newington, CT.

Wisconsin black aggregate. A 30" square panel similar to those at the pylons is placed at a step at the end of the wing walls. The curled offshoots of the floral pattern are repeated in the wrought iron railing panels that are set between three-panel wide posts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Robert. "Saugatuck History." Manuscript, Westport Public Library Vertical File, 1968.

Dort, Wakefield. Westport in Connecticut's History. Bridgeport: Warner Bros. Co., 1935.

Haggeman, Julie. "Founding of West Parish of Fairfield." Manuscript, Westport Public Library Vertical File.

Westporter-Herald. 1938-1939.

———. "Westport, Connecticut, a preliminary directive plan." Prepared by the Section of City Planning, Department of Architecture, School of the Fine Arts, Yale University, 1947.

———. 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.