

A Low Truss Iron Bridge with Stone Abutments

By Larry Kidder

In the 19th century the roads of Pleasant Valley were a combination of public roads and private lanes connecting them to individual farms. All the roads and lanes were dirt until about the turn of the 20th century when the county roads began to be improved with the use of crushed stone. Local road supervisors in each neighborhood, such as Andrew B. Hart in Pleasant Valley, organized the local farmers to maintain the public roads. Farmers also maintained the lanes they used to get to their farms from the public roads. One such lane, today's Hunter Road, connected Pleasant Valley Road in Mercer County with route 518 in Hunterdon County. In 1889-1890 a new iron bridge was built across Moore's Creek for Hunter Road, providing access to the farm of Charles Miller, today's Howell Farm, and others north of the creek.

Today, the bridge is closed and horse drawn wagons and farm equipment cross Moore's Creek at a ford, as generations of Pleasant Valley farmers did before any bridge was built. At some point someone built a bridge across the creek, but by 1889 it needed replacement. Just why Mercer County became interested in building an iron bridge on Hunter Road isn't known. Perhaps the old bridge could not be used and the road was becoming an important thoroughfare between the counties or perhaps a number of farmers along the road petitioned for the new bridge. Whatever prompted it; on August 7, 1889 about half of the Mercer County Freeholders boarded a train in Trenton and headed for Pleasant Valley. The train headed north up the Delaware River, soon paralleling the Delaware and Raritan feeder canal, passing through Washington Crossing and Titusville before stopping at little Moore's Station at the end of Pleasant Valley Road where the freeholders got off.

It was a hot, August day and the freeholders began the long, dusty walk down the dirt Pleasant Valley Road to the site of the proposed new bridge, about a mile and a quarter distant. Just after passing the intersection with Valley Road they passed the old, dilapidated Pleasant Valley school house, sandwiched between the road and Moore's Creek with its front façade virtually in the road. When they got to the corner of Pleasant Valley and Hunter Road a few steps later they saw the partially constructed new school house that the citizens of Pleasant Valley had begun in July. After noting the progress on the new school, they walked the couple of hundred yards up Hunter Road to Moore's Creek and the old bridge they were considering replacing.

Undoubtedly, several of the area farmers came out to talk with the freeholders and make their case for the new bridge. Perhaps their wives brought out some refreshments for them as well. The freeholders did their considering, asked their questions, and finally made their decision. Then, having decided to build a new bridge, the freeholders needed to get back to Trenton but didn't really relish the idea of walking back to Moore's Station and waiting for a train. They were already hot and dusty enough. So, they prevailed on one of the local farmers, Charles Miller, whose farm entrance was only a few feet from the northern terminus of the proposed bridge, to hitch up a team and take them by wagon to Titusville where they could presumably wait in more comfort, perhaps at the Delaware Hotel, for the next train to Trenton.

Mr. Miller, undoubtedly pleased by their bridge decision, obliged the freeholders and got his wagon ready. The freeholders climbed aboard and they set off down Hunter Road, passed the new school construction, turned onto Pleasant Valley Road, passed the old school house, went the mile to Moore's Station, and then turned south on today's route 29 heading for Titusville. On August 18 the Titusville correspondent for the *Hopewell Herald* told what happened next. "...it is reported that on the way down some of [the freeholders] thought that Mr. Miller was not driving fast enough and began plying the willow themselves. Certain it is that they came down the road at a rattling pace until they reached a short turn in the road where it crosses Clayhunce's canal bridge, where they were suddenly stopped in their wild career by the overturning of the wagon. One wheel, one spring and all the bows were broken, and it is said that one of [the freeholders], after crawling out of the wreck, remarked that "these bridge meetings did beat h__l."

Charles Miller survived the wreck, but there is no word on whether he was hurt or if he was reimbursed for the extensive damage to his wagon. The Pleasant Valley correspondent, Rachel Williamson, didn't even mention the incident, but simply reported in the August 8 edition that the, "Board of Freeholders met yesterday at Pleasant Valley and decided to build a low truss

iron bridge with stone abutments. A committee was appointed, consisting of Drake, Risdon and Maguire.”

The freeholders wasted no time and just 11 days after the meeting in Pleasant Valley the *Trenton Times* reported on August 18 that, “The contract for the iron work of the bridge near Moore’s Station has been awarded by the Committee of the Board of Freeholders of Mercer County to the Variety Iron Works, of Cleveland, Ohio, for the sum of \$920.”

Rachel Williamson noted progress on the bridge over the next few months in her Pleasant Valley columns for the *Hopewell Herald*. She reported that work on the “new bridge near the school-house” began on Tuesday, September 29, 1889. By that time school was in session, but it isn’t clear whether the new school house was ready for use yet. It clearly had not been ready when the school year began a few weeks earlier. On October 22 she noted that, “Work on the bridge is progressing nicely under the supervision of Mr. Chatten, of Pennington.” Samuel H. Chatten was a 45 year old stone mason who lived for many years in Pennington Borough on the west side of North Main St. He and his wife had twelve children, at least two of whom also became stone masons.

During the weeks in October when Samuel Chatten was working on building the abutments and reinforcing the earth ramps leading up to them, the school children must have watched the progress during recess and on their way to and from school. When the abutments were complete and horse drawn wagons brought the pieces of steel for the trusses, they passed by the school house and the kids must have been fascinated by the age of steel coming to the dirt, wood, and stone world of the roads and bridges they knew so well. The local residents, including the school children, watched the bridge take shape as iron piece was connected to iron piece and the thick wooden deck was laid.

Four months later Rachel Williamson reported that, “The new bridge above the school house is now completed and ready for use by the public since last Thursday [February 18, 1890].” The *Trenton Times* reported that the freeholders accepted the bridge on April 9, 1890, thus closing the story of the construction of the bridge. With the coming of spring we can imagine the school children all trying to be the first to run across the completed wooden decked bridge and listening for the echoing clip clop of horse hooves and rumble of wagons as farmers began crossing it. The creek near the bridge probably became a popular swimming hole and the kids must have tried fishing from the bridge. In years past, the water level in Moore’s Creek was deeper than today and area resident Lowell Hunter recalls that the shad from the Delaware River came up as far as the bridge at least twice, once in his lifetime and once in his father’s.

In its more than 90 year history the iron bridge saw a lot of traffic, including the milk trucks of the Cromwell family who owned Howell Farm in the 1930’s and 40’s and the West Amwell horse drawn school bus, the “hack”, that brought children from the Mount Range district to the Pleasant Valley school in the 1920’s. The bridge provided a safe and fast way for the farm families living at Howell Farm and further up Hunter Road to get their produce to market, visit neighbors, or drive their families to the school house for the many social events that took place there. In the 1920’s it allowed many people from Hunterdon County to attend the popular Calf Club Fairs held at the school house that attracted hundreds of people to the Valley from a wide surrounding area.

In 1982, when the iron bridge on Moore’s Creek was about 92 years old, a fully-loaded concrete truck going south on Hunter Road missed a turn and crossed over it. Although the bridge was rated for 5 tons, it carried the 20-ton load without any apparent difficulty. But, when the truck turned around and crossed it again, the top of the downstream truss buckled. Soon afterward the bridge was closed and barricades were placed on either end with signs posted at the top and bottom of Hunter Road warning drivers that the bridge was out. Now the wagons and farm equipment of Howell Farm must use a ford in the creek to cross it, giving visitors on wagon rides a good view of the old low truss iron bridge and the high quality stone abutments built by Samuel Chatten that still support it.