

Stony Brook Bridge ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ 11 October 2017

Today we celebrate the completion of extensive repairs and reinforcement to this venerable bridge, the second oldest in New Jersey, which has already served for 225 years. The essential role of a bridge is to span. But in addition to merely connecting two banks of a stream, this remarkable example actually spans the full sweep of Princeton's past, and, newly revitalized, promises to project that continuum far into the future.

Stretching back before recorded history, the route this bridge came to carry once served native peoples as a trail between the great Delaware and Hudson Rivers. With the arrival of European colonists it became "The King's Highway," offering a two day passage between New York and Philadelphia. By the end of the Seventeenth century, the promise of rich farmland drew settlers who struck out from those emerging cities to establish agrarian holdings along this road. Quakers moving East and Lowland Dutch venturing West reflected different Old World traditions and even spoke in different tongues. But as neighbors, together they created new settlements including Princetown, Maidenhead and here, in between, "Stony Brook." Whether raising a barn or building a bridge, when called upon, they labored together, contributing stone or timber or sand and in some cases skills for the common good.

Three hundred years ago a mill was established here to serve these first farms. A wooden bridge was established beside it and served throughout most of the Eighteenth century until the pivotal morning of January 3rd 1777. By dawn's raking light re-enforcements to Cornwallis' army, on their way from Princeton to Trenton, had already crossed Stony Brook and reached the summit of the hill when, behind them, they spotted reflected sunshine glinting off American arms and uniforms. Washington, himself, ordered the destruction of the wooden bridge to thwart the return of the British footsoldiers to defend Nassau Hall. It might be argued that from that day forward, in the absence of the old bridge, the King's Highway was effectively severed forever. As the datestone we reset today bears witness, in 1792 during Washington's presidency, this formidable stone bridge was completed, among the first public works of the new Republic.

Many years ago diaries were discovered in the attic of the stone house next door, penned by the miller who lived there, chronicling day-to-day life in this place. At times, as in 1863, he relates events that he learned about as news spread along this road from Gettysburg and Vicksburg in the conflict that threatened the Nation forged here eighty years before. But he also describes floods and snowstorms, a 105 degree day, the death of a neighbor's child and his labors to help the undertaker dig her grave and bury her in rain squall the following afternoon. And he mentions maintenance of this bridge including an entry describing the work of masons who boiled water to improve their mortar. According to one of the mason's here today the Chinese used boiling water and rice as a bonding agent for the Great Wall.

But walls are meant to divide while bridges create connections. The sheer scope of work for the artisans and engineers charged with rebuilding Stony Brook Bridge has brought together an array of men and women, drawn like their predecessors from disparate backgrounds and disciplines, but united in diligence and dedication, contributing their best efforts to the end that this stout structure, fraught with symbolism, will continue to bind us not only to our past and but to the future, as well. Over the course of this monumental effort those who worked here discovered personal appreciation for those who created this span so long ago. They realized that they had become part of a continuum. It was the masons, themselves, who suggested inclusion of a time capsule not merely out of collective pride in their individual contributions, but as a gesture of good will to those charged with rebuilding Stony Brook Bridge the next time.