

2017 NYS Historic Preservation Awards

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Commissioner Rose Harvey, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and
Historic Preservation

Beaverkill Covered Bridge Presentation

Despite its location in a remote, mountainous part of northern Sullivan County, the Beaverkill Covered Bridge played an important role in the settlement of the region and in its social and economic history. The bridge was built in 1865 to span the upper Beaverkill Creek and helped to provide access to a region that was nearly unpassable until its construction. The local economy was dependent first on logs floated down the creek, then on tanneries that stripped the region's hemlock trees, and finally on tourism, more precisely, fishermen – and women, who flocked to regional farmhouses and campsites after the coming of the railroad in the 1870s. In the twentieth century, the New York State Conservation Department (now State Parks and DEC) began to accommodate fisherman and other automobile tourists in small roadside parks where early campers could pull off and enjoy amenities such as fireplaces and privies. The Beaverkill Campground, located on either side of the bridge, was opened in the 1920s and enhanced in the mid-1930s by the CCC; it is considered the second oldest public campground in the Catskill Park.

The Beaverkill Covered bridge was built by John Davidson, a Scottish immigrant, who built two other covered bridges for the town of Rockland, both near Livingston Manor. All three exemplify the Town lattice truss, which is

characterized by closely spaced diagonal members secured where they overlap with wooden pins. Davidson's bridges show a variation not otherwise found in New York – they have additional diagonal members at the ends of the trusses that radiate from one point in a fanlike manner to provide extra stability.

In the 1990s, the Friends of the Beaverkill Community formed to advocate for the preservation of several threatened historic sites in the Beaverkill Valley. The covered bridge, a critical element of the community's identity, was the group's top priority. Although preliminary studies began, a detailed inspection in 2013 revealed major structural problems and the bridge was closed to traffic.

At that point, an extraordinary team came together, led by the Friends of Beaverkill, the Open Space Institute, and the Catskill Riverkeeper, who together provided essential support and coordination, assisted by Sullivan County and the town of Rockland, and supported by two state agencies, the Departments of Conservation and Transportation, all of whom worked cooperatively with the State Historic Preservation Office to design and implement an innovative preservation plan for the bridge. Outstanding among them was the Department of Transportation, which designed a project specifically to preserve the bridge while maintaining its historic integrity.

The result was a \$2.6 million dollar project in which the wood decking, siding, roof, and some supporting members were replaced. Original materials and methods were used when possible, and similar materials were substituted where they were not. The goals for the ramps and abutments was to replicate the

appearance of the original dry laid stone walls using modern methods to provide stable foundations, while reusing original materials to replicate the vertical stone-faced outer appearance. The width and curve of the approaches were carefully calculated to match the originals.

The newly restored bridge preserves one of the town of Rockland's most beloved landmarks; equally important, the project shows the value of multiple public and private partners working together for the public good