

**CONNECTICUT RIVER BRIDGE  
05 WALPOLE – BELLOWS FALLS**

**NH Bridge ID:** Walpole 062/152

**CARRYING:** Bridge Street  
**PRESENT NAME:** Vilas Bridge  
**DATE BUILT:** 1930  
**LAT/LONG:** 43.135277,-72.44005

**CROSSING CHRONOLOGY**

- 1784 First toll bridge, Hale's Bridge, a timber trestle
- 1840 Second toll bridge, Tucker Bridge, a covered Town lattice truss
- 1904 Towns buy bridge, making it free crossing
- 1930 Third bridge, an open-spandrel concrete arch

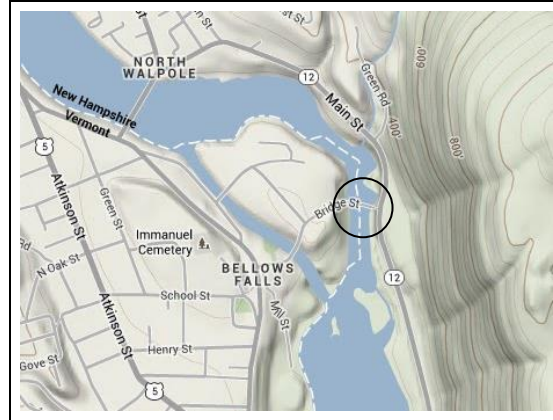


FIGURE 1: Vilas Bridge, built 1930. Downstream side from Vermont shore (Historic Documentation Co. Inc. 2012).

## CROSSING HISTORY

**First bridge:** The initial toll bridge here, built in 1784, was the first one erected anywhere to span the Connecticut River between New Hampshire and Vermont. Colonel Enoch Hale of Walpole was the organizer of this undertaking, funding it as his personal investment. Hale's timber-frame bridge attracted attention on a national scale as a pioneering work of ambition and enterprise that, just one year after the Treaty of Paris brought the Revolutionary War to a conclusion, expressed the young nation's sense of optimism and commitment to its future. The bridge was a major commercial innovation in that it opened access between the developing agricultural countryside of Vermont and the markets and seaports of Boston and Portsmouth. *The Massachusetts Spy*, a Worcester newspaper, reported,

This bridge is thought to exceed any ever built in America, in strength, elegance and public utility; as it is in the direct way from Boston, through New Hampshire and Vermont, to Canada, and will exceedingly accommodate the publick travel into almost any part of the State of Vermont. This bridge is 360 feet in length, and almost 60 feet above high-water mark. Though the attempt was apparently hazardous, yet was executed with no other damage than slightly wounding the Colonel, and the death of a young man who fell 50 feet into the river, on a rock which appeared at the surface of the water.

The bridge was naturally referred to as Hale's Bridge. Colonel Hale had obtained his charter from the New Hampshire legislature in December 1783. Built of squared timbers, it resembled other major wooden bridges in early America, such as Timothy Palmer's Piscataqua Bridge of 1794, in being designed in a strongly arching shape. Bridge historian Robert McCullough describes its construction over the dramatic rocky gorge of the Connecticut:

Timber bents, resting on a natural rock pier dividing the river's channel, supported the structure's two spans. Struts and braces held a crude curving beam, with struts extending from the rock walls of the gorge. This framing carried multiple (end to end) stringers and allowed additional length for the spans, each slightly less than one hundred feet.

Hale did not succeed in enjoying the proceeds of his engineering feat through his entire lifetime. At some date he mortgaged the bridge and charter to Frederick W. Geyer of Boston. Walpole folklore has it that Hale's son lost his father's great asset because while carrying a payment to Geyer in Boston, he encountered his ex-wife and tarried while "making up" with the lady, thereby failing to meet the appointed date for payment and thus enabling Geyer to foreclose. It is known that Geyer did acquire the bridge and, at his death in 1826, left the bridge to his daughter Anna, wife of Nathaniel Tucker. In 1840, the Tucker family had the bridge taken down due to deteriorated condition.

**Second bridge:** Nathaniel Tucker had the second bridge, which became known as Tucker Bridge, built in 1840. This structure, a 262-foot two-span covered bridge of Town lattice truss design, was a long-lived one, lasting until 1930. The bridge was supported by stone abutments and a massive, square stone pier founded on a tall granite outcrop rising as an island in the river. The bridge passed in ownership from the Tucker family to William A. Russell in 1880 and to the Bellow Falls Canal Company in 1902, all the while remaining a toll bridge. The towns of Walpole and Rockingham, VT, acquired the bridge in 1904 and removed the toll.

**Third bridge:** The third bridge at this location, known as Vilas Bridge, was designed and built by the New Hampshire Highway Department in 1930, with Robie Construction Co. as contractor. The bridge extends 231 feet in length and is a two-span open spandrel concrete arch structure supported by abutments and pier of reinforced concrete. The bridge takes its name from a wealthy

sponsor, Charles N. Vilas, a retired New York City hotelier residing in Alstead, who with no forewarning suddenly paid the entire \$68,000 price of the bridge's construction. Mr. Vilas was noted for his generous donations to civic projects in surrounding towns. Standing in a dramatic natural setting, this visually striking structure, as Robert McCullough asserts, "illustrates, with spectacular clarity, the value of monumental spans at scenic locales."

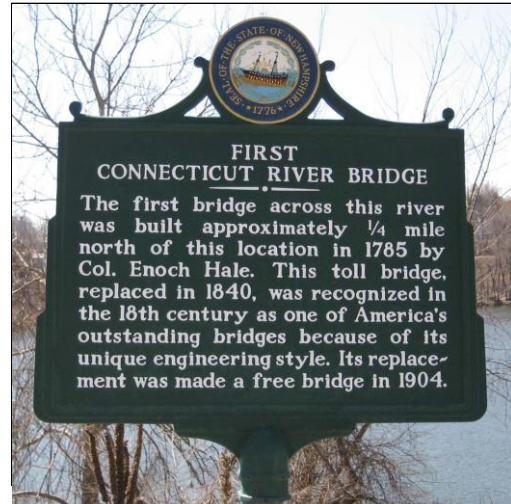
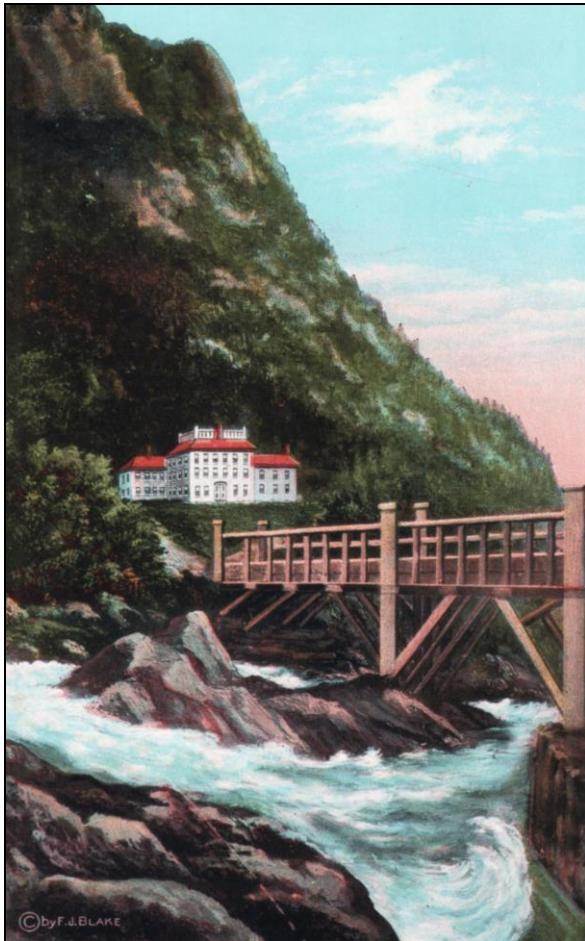


FIGURE 2 (above): NH Historical Marker located on NH 12 in Walpole near site of bridge.

FIGURE 3 (left): Postcard, c.1915, depicting first Connecticut River bridge by Bellows Falls artist & photographer F. J. Blake.

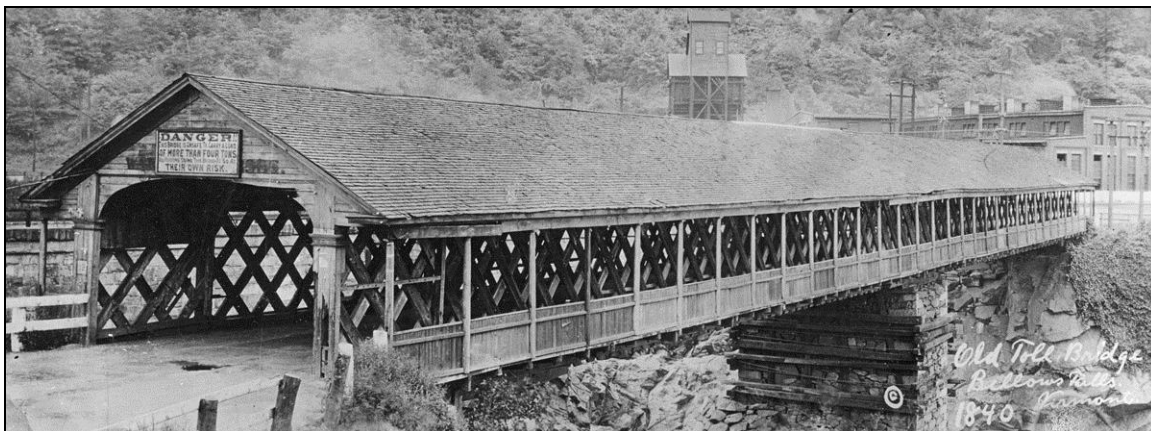


FIGURE 4: Tucker Bridge, toll bridge built 1840 (Cheshire County Historical Society).



FIGURE 5: Tucker Bridge photographed in 1888 by J. A. French of Keene, NH. Note photographer at center foreground (Cheshire County Historical Society).

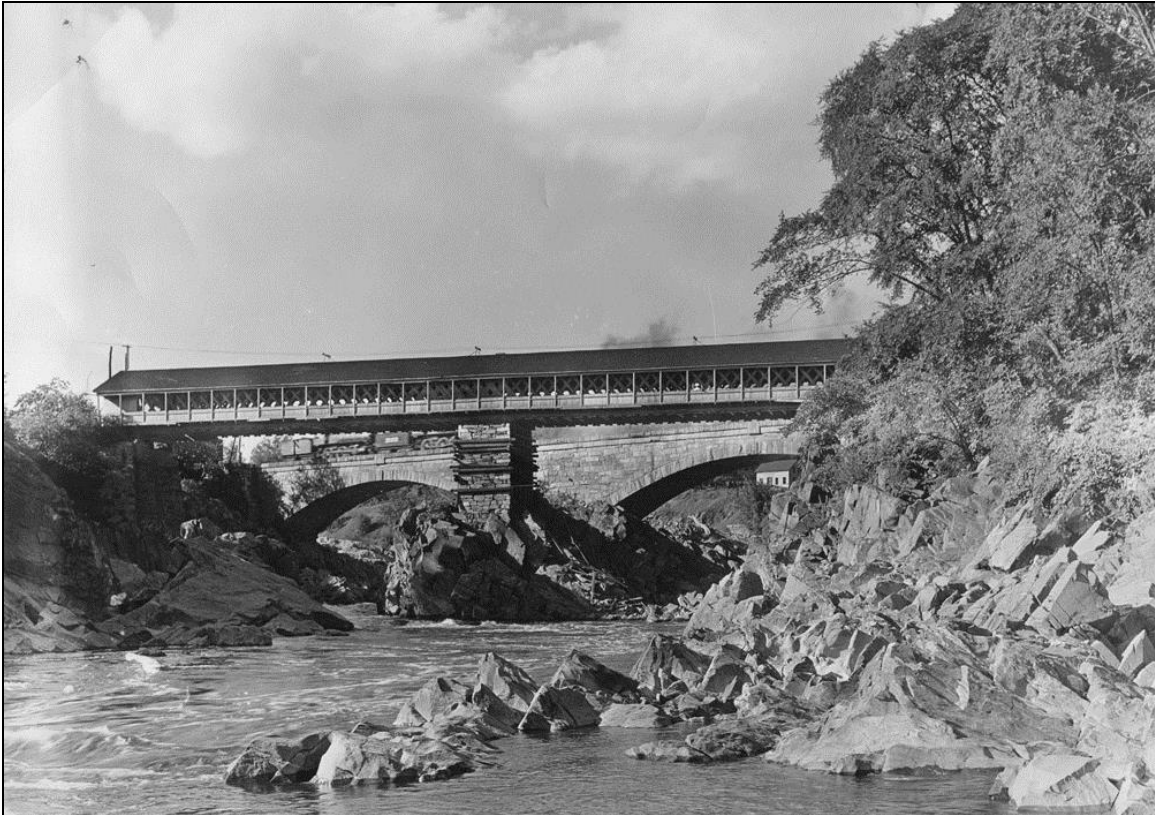


FIGURE 6: Tucher Bridge, downstream side, shown sometime after construction of the Fitchburg Railroad stone double-arch railroad bridge in 1902 (in background). Note two steam engines, just visible, crossing bridge to North Walpole railroad yard (Cheshire County Historical Society).



FIGURE 7: Tucher Bridge, Bellows Falls end, shown sometime after 1902. Sign above portal reads: "2 dollars fine if any person rides or drives on this bridge faster than a walk." Sign on wall reads "Bellows Falls Village Limits Automobile Laws will be Strictly Enforced (Cheshire County Historical Society).

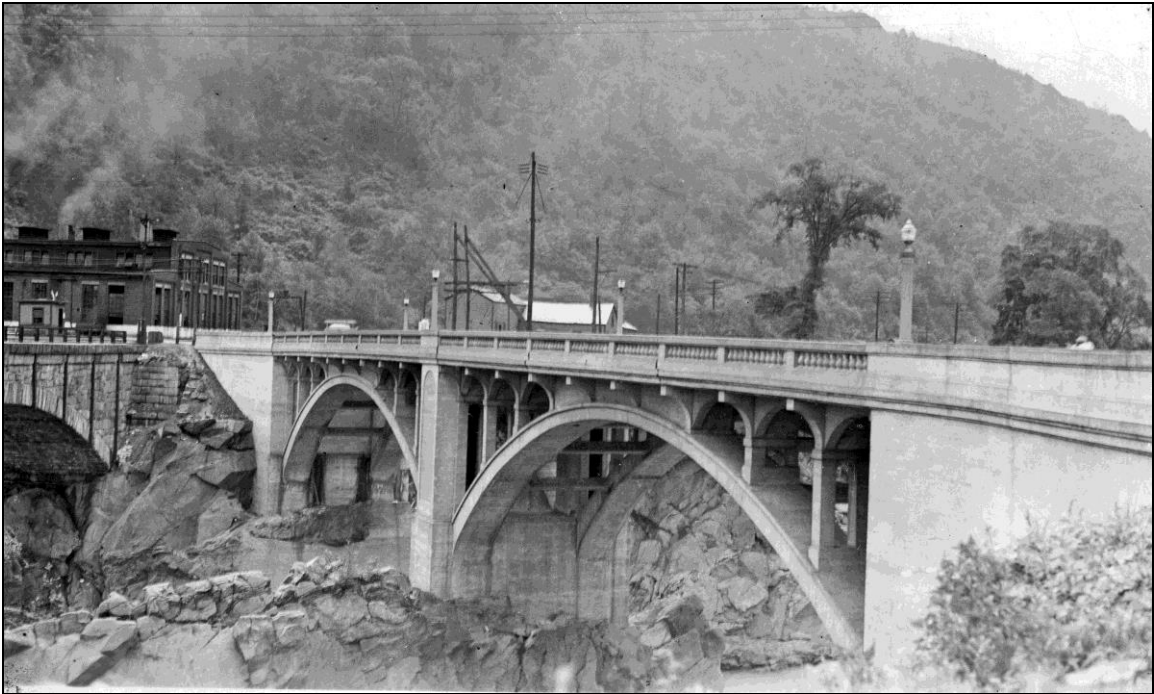


FIGURE 8: Vilas Bridge in 1941, upstream side. Note stone arch railroad bridge at left (NHDOT 1941).



FIGURE 9: Vilas Bridge in 1941 from Vermont side (NHDOT 1941).

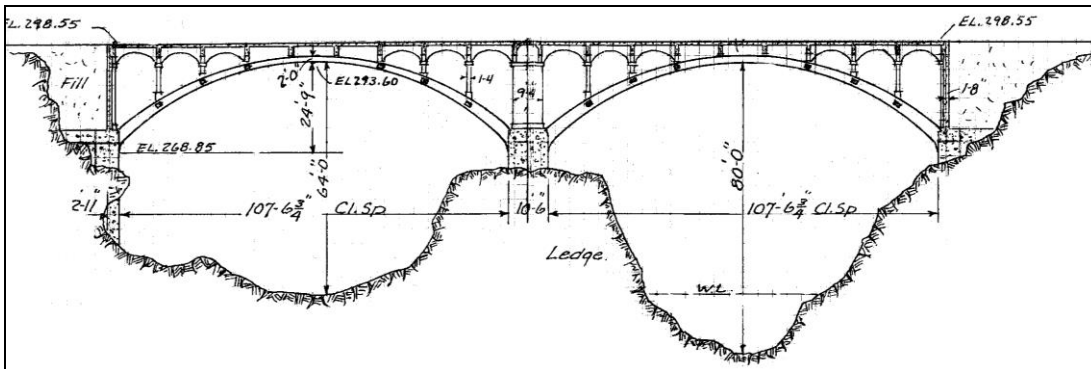


FIGURE 10: Vilas Bridge in elevation (NHDOT 1941).

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