

Contoocook Riverway Association



Contoocook Station, covered bridge in background, Circa 1933. Wm. Money Penny photo, Brent Collection.

THE CONTOOCCOOK RIVERWAY ASSOCIATION

by John Warren

In 1997 Bob Lewellen, a new arrival to Contoocook, was on his daily expedition to pick up the newspaper when he noticed that the railroad bridge over the Contoocook River did not have a sprinkler system in case of fire. He had moved from Goffstown, where their covered bridge had burned due to just that fact, and he pondered the great historical loss to the community should the bridge meet that fate. He met with a group to discuss the future of the bridge, railroad depot, and the undeveloped land nearby. In the audience was the head of the NH historical resource department, who thought that what they were proposing was a great idea, but they would need an organization and money, neither of which they had.

A couple of years dragged by; it was apparent that the railroad depot was to be sold to commercial interests, with the likelihood that its historical value would be compromised. Thus was formed the Contoocook Riverway Association, which broached the idea of turning the railroad depot into a museum, restoring and maintaining the covered bridge, and turning the adjacent

land into a park. After many meetings, in 1999 the Association bought the depot from the town of Hopkinton for one silver dollar. The covered bridge, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, is owned by the State of New Hampshire. \$400,000 of the restoration project was funded by federal grants administered through the State Department of Transportation, split between the depot and bridge, and another \$70,000 was raised by community donations.

The journey took approximately three years. Restoration of the depot building was first - the roof stripped and replaced with wooden shingles that resembled the roof that had been there until the 1930s. New exterior siding and paint, followed by the sandblasting and painting of the train signal, or semaphore, brought the building's look back to that of nearly a century before. The bridge has since been restored and fireproofed, and a sprinkler system has been installed. In 2007, a wooden Pullman Passenger Coach was donated to the Contoocook Riverway Association and placed on rails behind the depot, as if ready to pass through the bridge once again.

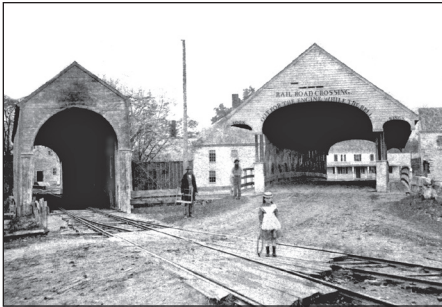
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The bridge, originally built in 1849-50 by the former Concord and Claremont Railroad, was rebuilt in 1889. It is the oldest of four surviving double-web Town lattice railroad bridges. It survives now as the oldest extant covered railroad bridge in the United States. The other double Towns are Pier Bridge, Newport, New Hampshire, 1907; Wright's Bridge, Newport, NH, 1906; and Fisher Bridge, Stowe, Vermont, 1908. It was probably designed by Boston & Maine Railroad engineer Jonathan Parker Snow (1848-1933) and built by carpenter David Hazelton (1832-1908). Under Snow, the Boston & Maine utilized wooden bridges on its branch lines longer than any other major railroad, the last of these constructed in 1916. The nearby Contoocook Railroad Depot was built in 1850 on the earlier Concord & Claremont Railroad.

The bridge was in use as a railroad bridge until 1962. It survived a flood in 1936, a hurricane in 1938, and was moved off its foundations twice during its lifespan and saved from being completely washed down river by the rail tracks running through it. Following its railroad service, it functioned as a warehouse between 1962 and 1990.

The Contoocook Railroad Depot is located in Hopkinton, New Hampshire, in the village of Contoocook. The depot was completed in 1849 as one of the first substantial railroad passenger stations west of Concord on the Concord and Claremont Railroad. The building is one of the best preserved of a small number of gable-roofed railroad stations surviving from the first pioneering decade of rail development in New Hampshire. The Contoocook Railroad Depot is significant under National Register Criterion A as a building that served and controlled the junction of two of the earliest short line railroads of New Hampshire, the Concord and Claremont Railroad and the Contoocook Valley Railroad. The building provided essential passenger service and communications for these interrelated lines.

Under Criterion A, the depot symbolizes the impact of a new technology on a village that had been at the periphery of Hopkinton's economic life. With the arrival of the railroad, Contoocook



Railroad Bridge and vehicle bridge, Circa 1870.

Photo restored by Dane Malcolm.

Village assumed greater economic importance than old Hopkinton Village, becoming the center of most of the town's manufacturing and commerce. It is one of the earliest and least-altered depots of the 1850 period in New Hampshire. Displaying the Greek Revival style, with modifications that proclaim its identity as a new building type, the depot is an important artifact in the history and evolution of railroad architecture in New Hampshire.

From its completion in 1849 until the last trains ran through Contoocook Village in the 1960s, the Contoocook Depot acted as the point of contact between the manufacturing and residential village and the broader commercial world. In 1817, when Eliphalet and Phinehas Merrill wrote the first Gazetteer of the State of New Hampshire, Contoocook Village had hardly come into existence, being then known as "Hill's Bridge" and as the site of water-powered mills operated by Benjamin Hill. The Merrills described Hopkinton strictly in terms of the older main village: "there is in this town a handsome village containing about 50 dwelling-houses, a congregational meeting-house, several stores, mechanic shops, etc." More than twenty years later, still before the advent of the railroad, Contoocook Village continued to be regarded as a place of largely unrealized potential. Writing in 1839, John Hayward described the village in The New England Gazetteer as "a thriving village on the Contoocook River, known as Hill's Bridge, or Contoocookville, where there is a valuable water power, and several mills."

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Aerial view of Contoocook, Circa 1965. Station building at lower left along rails. Photo by Dane Malcolm.

During the early nineteenth century, the township of Hopkinton annually produced considerable quantities of sawn lumber in its several water-powered sawmills. Before the advent of the railroad, lumber that was surplus to the needs of local building was drawn by teams to the Merrimack River, where it was bound into cribs of sixteen-foot lumber. These were floated downriver to various markets through the locks that bypassed the falls and rapids.

Despite such difficulty and labor in marketing local products, the people of Hopkinton were strongly opposed to the railroad when the idea was first broached in 1844. By 1849, however, Hopkinton town meetings began to vote on articles to accommodate the railroad, and many local citizens began to invest enthusiastically in railroad stock. In the fall of 1849, when the first train arrived from Concord, the Contoocook Depot became the site of a great celebratory banquet, served on tables placed under a shed at the station.

Trains traveling northwesterly on the Concord and Claremont Railroad's own tracks were limited at first by the tracks' termination in Bradford,

which was reached in July 1850. Not until the Newbury Cut was completed in 1871 were trains at last able to travel to Newport and finally, in 1872, to make contact with the Connecticut River at Claremont on the railroad's own tracks. Similarly, the Contoocook Valley Railroad, which connected with the Concord and Claremont in Contoocook, was initially completed only as far south as Hillsborough Bridge.

By 1855, barely six years after the arrival of the rails in Contoocook, Contoocookville had begun to reflect its future prominence as the active trading, manufacturing, and commercial center of the town of Hopkinton. In *New Hampshire as It Is* (1855), author Edwin A. Charlton noted that Contoocookville was "the junction of the Merrimack and Connecticut River Railroad and the Contoocook Valley Railroad, and is an active and thriving village." Charlton went on to note that "large quantities of lumber are manufactured here and transported on the railroads to various markets," and that there were in the village "one woolen factory, with a capital of \$7000, and

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employing twelve hands; one tannery and currier's shop, with a capital of \$6000; and nine sawmills.

By 1858, H. F. Waiting's Map of Merrimac County showed many manufactories and shops in Contoocookville. Among them were Kimball's carpenter shop, Osgood's carpenter shop, Merrill's cooper shop, Joab and David N. Patterson's woolen mill, Burnham and Brown's sawmill, grist mill, and shingle mill, a carriage shop, a mackerel kit manufactory, another sawmill, a blacksmith shop, and Abbott's hot houses. The compact part of the village also included two schoolhouses and the Contoocook Academy.

By that time, the railroad depot was accompanied by a freight house, and the map implies that the building later known as the Kirk Building, which stands adjacent to the railroad station, was then owned by the railroad. As noted, the Contoocook Depot was located at the junction of the lines of two initially separate railroad corporations. A summary history of the incorporation and merger of the two lines that met near the depot is given in a description of the Concord and Claremont Railroad in the *Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Railroad Commissioners of the State of New Hampshire* (1879): This road is the outcome of a long series of conflicting and unsuccessful railroad schemes.

The later history of this line includes its lease by the Boston & Lowell Railroad between 1884 and 1887, operation by the Boston & Maine Railroad after 1887, sale of the line by the Boston & Maine to Samuel M. Pinsley of Boston in 1954, and Pinsley's incorporation of the line as the Concord and Claremont Railway Company, first as a Delaware corporation and then as a New Hampshire corporation.

Pinsley progressively obtained permission to abandon various sections of the Claremont and Concord Railway trackage, as follows: West Concord to Contoocook, and West Hopkinton to Emerson, 1960; West Hopkinton-Contoocook-Bradford, 1961; Bradford to Newport, 1964; Newport to East Claremont, 1977; Concord to West Concord, 1984; East Claremont to Claremont Center, 1988; and small abandonments between Claremont and



Passengers boarding train, Circa 1900. Photo from Contoocook Riverway Association Collection.

West Claremont, 1988 and 1994. The trackage on the old Contoocook Valley Railroad between Hillsborough and Emerson had been abandoned in 1942.

Throughout the period from 1849 to 1960, the Contoocook Depot was the commercial hub of Contoocook Village. The building not only served as the point of arrival and departure for travelers to and from the village, but also offered other forms of communication. The railway mail was delivered here, and for some years the depot served as the Contoocook Post Office. The depot was connected to the remainder of the consolidated Boston and Maine system by the railway telegraph, and also served the public as the local public telegraph office beginning in 1866. The depot was connected to the Western Union system during the early twentieth century. When the first telephone connections were installed in Contoocook Village in 1884, one of two telephone offices was at the depot, with Amos H. Currier as agent.

The depot was the local office for Railway and American Express companies. Standing at the junction of the Concord and Claremont and the Contoocook Valley Railroad lines, the Contoocook Depot also served as the focus of a small but very active rail service center. *The Schedule of Property Transferred by the Northern Railroad to the Boston & Lowell Railroad Corporation*, under lease, in effect June 1, 1884, shows that the Contoocook rail center then contained the following buildings: the depot; a depot "ell"; a freight house; an engine house; a water house, measuring; a woodshed; two hand car houses; another hand car house; and a rail shop.

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View of enginehouse, station with platform, and freight house. Circa 1870. Bruce Davison Collection.

Nearby stood a covered bridge, supported by trusses of Childs' patent; this bridge was replaced by the existing double Town lattice truss railroad bridge in 1889.

All of the structures of the Contoocook rail center, with the exception of the depot, freight house, and bridge, were removed by 1904. The engine house and its connected water house are shown in a surviving photograph that can be dated between 1884 and 1887 by the presence of a Boston and Lowell Railroad locomotive.

Some of the more interesting sidelights from Dane Malcolm, Riverway Vice president, include the fact that virtually all the buildings on the site in 1933 are still there, and that this is the only park of its kind with a railroad bridge, depot, and Pullman car still left in the USA. When air mail became a reality, the roof of the railroad bridge was lettered Contoocook NH with a painted compass indicating north so that all the pilot had to do was to carefully lean out of the cockpit to get his bearings. Also at the engine house was an enclosed water tank, which had to be heated with huge amounts of cordwood to prevent freezing in the winter.

The completely refurbished depot currently serves as a museum. It is open occasionally during

the summer months for the Contoocook Farmers' Market, which is held throughout the summer on the depot property extending towards the Contoocook River in the park. Second floor renovations which took place in 2013 have included a meeting room, museum displays, historic document archives and an additional bathroom. The building contains an elevator indoors for handicapped access to the second floor.

Lastly the Riverway has a fine website: (<http://contoocookdepot.org>) with an overview of their laudatory accomplishments. The media pictures are intriguing, but be sure and listen to the videos from Dane Malcolm and Bob Lewellen as they were there when it counted. Isn't it amazing what motivated and determined people can accomplish?



Entering Contoocook from Concord. Circa 1890. Dane Malcolm Collection.