



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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KEENE ARCHED BRIDGE WINS FRIENDS

One of the largest stone arch bridges ever built in New Hampshire has gained the support of a local committee and city and state officials. The Cheshire Railroad arched bridge in South Keene, completed in 1847, is the focus of efforts to improve its care and enhance its recreational potential. The bridge is owned by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) and administered by the New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development (DRED) as a trail crossing over the Branch River.

With a span of ninety feet and a height of fifty, the bridge is the most impressive of many remarkable structures along the corridor of the Cheshire Railroad. Built under the supervision of engineers Lucian Tilton and W. S. Whitwell, the Cheshire surpassed all other rail lines in New Hampshire in its mastery of masonry construction and its bold use of stone arches



Cheshire Railroad Arched Bridge

South Keene, N. H., 1847
(Photograph by James L. Garvin)

for its many stream crossings. The line included twenty arched bridges and culverts along its 43-mile route, as well as more than a hundred stone box culverts and cattle underpasses and impressive cuts and fills.

Acquired by the Boston & Maine Railroad in 1900, the line was officially abandoned along most of its length in 1972. In the early 1990s, NHDOT purchased approximately forty linear miles of the railroad, turning the corridor over to DRED's Trails Bureau.

Because a widened and heavily traveled Route 101 has severed the bridge from more northerly sections of the right-of-way in Keene, the span is currently limited in its usefulness as a trail crossing. But it is a favorite of rock climbers, who are attracted by its huge, rusticated stones and unmortared joints.

In 2004, historian David R. Proper of Keene, then a member of DHR's State Historical Resources Council, notified state agencies that the bridge was in deteriorating condition. Saplings are growing in some of the narrow joints, their roots expanding between the stones, and larger trees cover the flanks of the bridge, threatening to dislodge stonework if they are toppled by the wind. The earthen fill over the great arch is being eroded by the tires of all-terrain vehicles. Water is saturating the structure, hanging as icicles from the soffit of the arch in winter.

Reacting to the situation, Philip H. Faulkner, Jr., of Keene convened an ad hoc committee of representatives from eight local organizations in late 2005 to study and protect the bridge. The committee included representatives from the Keene Heritage Commission, the Historical Society of Cheshire County, Pathways for Keene, Friends of Open Space in Keene, the Foundation for the Preservation of Historic Keene, the Keene Bicycle Pedestrian Path Commission, the Rails to Trails Committee of the Friends of Pisgah State Park, and the Swanzey Bicycle Pedestrian Committee.

After meeting with DHR staff, the committee began to develop a proposal to seek a professional inspection and an engineering study of the structure.

The bridge was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places on March 22, 2006, potentially qualifying it for various grants. On April 6th, the Keene City Council voted unanimously to support the local committee's plans to develop a conservation and maintenance plan for the bridge. On April 13th, members of the Keene committee, together with Keene planning director Rhett Lamb, presented their plan to representatives of the New Hampshire Department of Transportation, the Department of Resources and Economic Development, and the Federal

Highway Administration at a meeting in Concord.

Recognizing that lack of maintenance and preservation planning posed serious threats to the bridge, the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance designated the span as one of the "Seven to Save" properties in New Hampshire in October 2006.

The ad hoc committee proposed a two-stage process. First, the committee pledged to find funding to employ consultants to inspect the bridge, evaluate the effects of vegetative growth and water infiltration, and recommend treatment.

With that report in hand, separate funding will be sought for remedial work where needed. A plan for interpreting and maintaining the bridge will be developed by a partnership that will include the eight Keene based organizations, the New Hampshire Department of Transportation, the New Hampshire Department of Resources and Economic Development, and the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources.

In the summer of 2007, Keene Heritage Commission member Jeananne Farrar submitted a Preserve America grant application for funding to assess the condition of the bridge. In September, Preserve America announced that the City of Keene will receive a grant award

of \$25,000. In November 2007, the city received another \$25,000 from the New Hampshire Land & Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP). Keene now has a total of \$50,000 to evaluate the condition and needs of the bridge in preparation for actual conservation work on the structure.

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