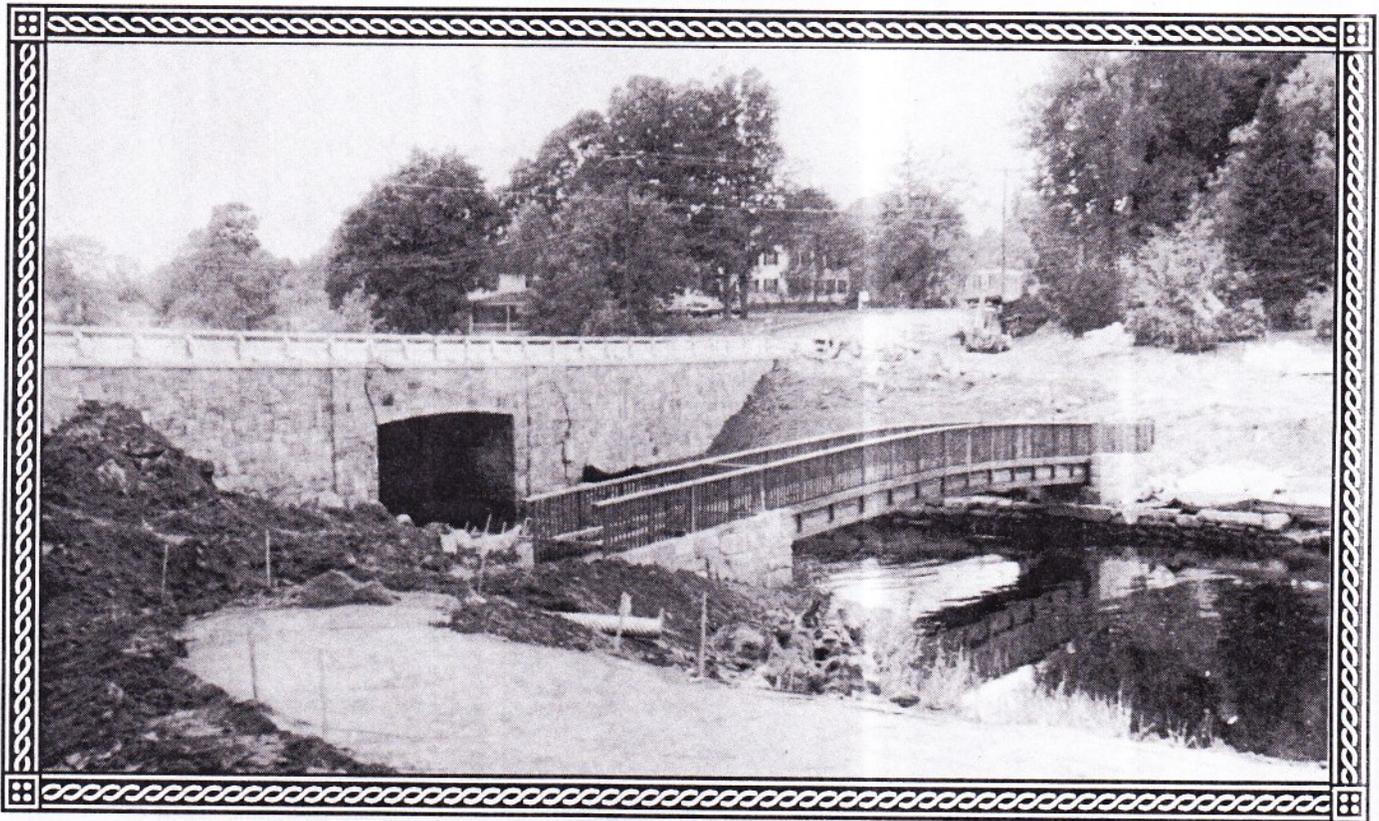


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Trustees of Trust Funds
Cemetery Committee*

TOWN of DURHAM Annual Report



The Oyster River/N.H. Route 108 bridge after its renovation in 1991.

1991

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



DURHAM TOWN COUNCIL

BACK ROW:

Scott Hovey, Clayton Follansbee, Arthur Grant, Ann Vogelmann and William Healy

FRONT ROW:

Barbara Yates, Patricia Samuels (Council Chairwoman), Sarah Voll and John Kraus

THE OYSTER RIVER BRIDGE & ROUTE 108: A TRIUMPHANT TRANSFORMATION

In the 1990s, it is known as the bridge that carries New Hampshire Route 108 over the Oyster River. In the 1770s, it was a simple wooden structure that brought early settlers along the north and south shores of Oyster River together at the fall line, where fresh and salt waters meet. A span supported by stone abutments and wingwalls, built to last by local craftsmen in the 1890s, saw a century of use before frequent repairs and reinforcements failed to wear well with an increasing load of heavy traffic.

Concerned engineers from the New Hampshire Department of Public Works and Highways first approached Durham Selectmen in 1983 with their proposal for a project that would improve N.H. Route 108 from Bennett Road to Coe's Corner, and replace the bridge over Oyster River. An informational meeting was held the next year, calling for public comment on preliminary plans for a rise in elevation along the road that would flatten the natural roll of the landscape, and invite greater speed on a widened road and bridge. Citizens unanimously rejected the proposal as inappropriate and out of scale with the rural character of Durham, in a part of the Town's Historic District eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. In responding to these objections, the engineers discussed possible alternatives with the Town officials and planned a formal public hearing to be held in 1985. The controversy was such that this hearing was not held until a special committee of the Executive Council was appointed the next year to "determine whether there is occasion for laying out of a section of NH Route 108 in the Town of Durham." After listening to many "interested parties" and reading the evidence, the committee determined that "for the accommodation of the public" there was occasion for replacing the bridge but not for upgrading Route 108 other than at the approaches to the bridge." Commissioner Stickney responded to this by agreeing to hold a granite facing in retaining the existing profile of the bridge; to post the speed limit at 30 mph; and to insure that the bridge grade would be no higher than necessary to provide minimum 30 mph site distance criteria. He remained firm, however, on the need for complying with federal funding requirements for two twelve-foot travel lanes, two eight-foot shoulders and two six-foot sidewalks — fifty-two feet of width for a bridge less than fifty feet long.

Still dissatisfied with these proportions, Chairman Frank Heald, acting for the members of the Historic District Commission, sought Executive Council help in contacting the Advisory Council on Historic Preser-

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OYSTER RIVER BRIDGE, CONT'D.

vation in Washington, D.C. for a second opinion. A representative from their office came to Durham to view the scene with the proposed plans, and to meet with the public. He, in turn, discussed the problem of raising and widening the bridge with the Federal Highway Commission. A Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was signed by both of these agencies and with the N.H. State Preservation Office, reinforcing public opinion in supporting a "bridge as low in height as possible and keeping the width less than fifty-two feet." A last act of the Board of Selectmen in 1987 was to accept the MOA and the decisions of the Commissioner regarding the bridge.

As the new Council/Town Administrator form of government in Durham was organizing, the N.H. Department of Transportation served notification of the need for review of the final design plans for the bridge. About this time, a paragraph in the report of a consulting engineer caught the attention of Terry Hundley, Durham's first Town Administrator. It suggested that the bridge might be lowered were the turning lane onto Old Landing Road from Route 108 eliminated. Terry quickly consulted residents of the road and, following public hearings, an ordinance was passed "for discontinuance subject to gates and bars of the Old Landing Road at the intersection of N.H. Route 108," to take effect April 1, 1989. This decision sent the designers back to the drawing board, and prompted another request from the Historic District Commission for a Public Hearing before the final design was put to bid. The Council asked for written questions from the public prior to posting the hearing. With members of the Legislature, the Executive Council and the Department of Transportation present, all aspects of the bridge replacement were reviewed, with final acceptance of the fact that it was a necessary safety move and the only realistic option for Durham.

Only the width of the bridge remained a major problem. When Ralph Freedman followed the late Terry Hundley as Town Administrator, he suggested that a separate foot bridge might eliminate the need for bridge sidewalks and, at the same time, create a safe and attractive link between Town parks on both sides of the river. This was acceptable to all concerned, and after months of demolition followed by construction, the ribbon was cut with all due ceremony on a windy 30th of October, 1991 — a testimony to the patience and perseverance of the public and public officials in working through the process in effecting change.

Maryanna Hatch, Durham Historic Association Museum



*The ribbon cutting ceremony celebrating completion of the Oyster River Bridge/NH Route 108 Project.
October 30, 1991*