

THE PALIMPSEST

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Why Were Bridges Covered?

Why were bridges covered?

Stock answers of almost 200 years ago would seem to answer the question as well today:

A Pennsylvania carpenter said, "Keeps 'em dry."

A Maryland bridgebuilder felt the same way about it but his answer was more colorful: "Our bridges were covered, my dear Sir, for the same reason that our belles wore hoop skirts and crinolines—to protect the structural beauty that is seldom seen, but nevertheless appreciated."

Others, more romantically inclined, seemed to find other reasons for their existence and called them "Kissing Bridges," for obvious reasons, "Tunnels of Love," "Wishing Bridges," where the wish would be granted if one could hold his breath while going through a covered bridge. Then there was the elderly Iowan who, remembering his 1910 Sunday afternoon buggy rides, said, "Kiss your girl when you go through a covered bridge. A short peck'll do for a short bridge, but

if it's long and dark there's time enough for a hug n'squeeze."

The covered bridge made its appearance in the United States in 1805. In that year, Timothy Palmer, a shipfitter from Newburyport, Massachusetts, who had become a bridgebuilder, was erecting his Permanent Bridge over the Schuylkill in Philadelphia. A local judge, Richard Peters, suggested that the bridge would last longer if its principal parts were covered to prevent rot. Palmer accepted the suggestion and his bridge became the first covered structure in this country.

The roof and sideboards placed on covered bridges were not put there for the protection of travelers and their horses; they were not intended as protection for wagonloads of farm produce crossing the bridge; nor were they the sole protection of sweethearts strolling in the bridge's dark recesses. They did not protect the bridge's flooring. Planks were easy to replace. The covering was not used to keep the snow off.

Roofs were placed on covered bridges to keep the main beams and arches dry. Staunch as these supporting timbers might be, they would rot if left exposed, alternately, to wetting rains and scorching sun.

Among other reasons given for covering bridges were these:

To keep water from joints where it might freeze during the winter and dry up during the summer.

To keep the bridge floor dry because it was often oiled, thus becoming slippery when wet.

Such covering lent strength to the structure. The added weight would more than make up for its bulk by making the bridge more solid.

To give the bridge the appearance of a barn. It was said farm animals tended to stampede when crossing a bridge and seeing rushing water below them. The covered bridge calmed their fears.

The most common reason given was to keep snow from the roadway. This does not seem to be a very good reason nor is it logical. During horse and buggy days, the coming of winter meant that covered bridge floors had to be covered with snow so that sleighs and cutters could cross.

There are many reasons for covered bridges. However, it is important to remember that wood will last a long time in water, a long time in sunshine, but that it can not stand a mixture of the two. An uncovered wooden bridge might last ten years before needing major repairs, such as the replacement of beams. An uncovered wooden bridge treated with a chemical preservative might have a somewhat longer life. But a roofed bridge would last indefinitely.