

Bridging Belmont



This covered bridge was bought for \$1 in 2013 from Dover, and broken into three sections. One section was installed two years ago, and the second and third sections were combined for a second bridge over the Tioga River in Belmont. (Courtesy photo/Ken Knowlton)

Reused span may connect area hiking trails

By ROGER AMSDEN, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — The second of two covered bridges across the Tioga River is now in place, thanks to the efforts of a team of volunteers that has devoted countless hours to project over the last 10 years.

The second bridge is located west of Great Brook Village and connects to the Belmont Village Spur Rail Trail which, for 40 years (1889-1929), provided railroad service to Belmont Village.

The bridge provides a link to a largely overlooked element of the town's past and is part of an ongoing project to establish hiking and biking trails along the former spur line as part of a Belmont Village revitalization effort.

Spur Railroad History

Diane Marden's history of Belmont says that the four-mile-long Tilton and Belmont branch of the Boston & Maine railroad opened on Aug. 17, 1889, and closed in 1929.

It was designed to serve the freight needs of the Gilmanton Mills hosiery business, later known as the Belmont Hosiery Company, which was located at the Belmont Mill.

The spur line started in East Tilton at Belmont Junction and passed the current 3M property in Tilton before crossing the Winnepesaukee River on a long trestle at the lower end of Silver Lake.

Its first stop was at Gardner's Grove in Belmont where a small summer resort was located. Another stop was near the Tioga River and the final stop was located across the Tioga River from the Belmont Mill at the Belmont station.

Although built to serve the mill's shipping needs, the line ended on the opposite side of the river and cargo had to be transported up Main Street and across the 1870s-era Depot Street bridge and back down the road leading to the station.

In 1934, the rails, bridges and trestles were removed after the Interstate Commerce Commission approved having the line dismantled.

Revitalization Effort Planning

Woody Fogg, a member of the town's historical society and coordinator for the placement of the two bridges over the river, said the project arose from the selectmen's appointment of the Belmont Revitalization Committee in 2010. The committee worked to develop a strategy to improve downtown Belmont based on a design charrette conducted in conjunction with Plan New Hampshire.

Some of the resulting projects already completed include Penstock Park; the upgrading of lighting, water, sewer, drainage and roads in the Village; the relocation and renovation of the bandstand; the construction of the Tioga Pavilion; and a new parking lot next to the Belmont Mill. It also included the placement of two covered bridges along what will soon become the Belmont Village Spur Rail Trail.

Key Land Donation

In 2010, the town applied for a \$90,000 grant from the Land and Water Conservation Fund for a pavilion and river walk project and needed to come up with matching funds that would include labor and donations.

A 2011 donation by Dick and Betty Persons of Gilford of a 20-acre parcel of land, which included the site of the former Belmont station, served as the town's match for the grant.

Voters approved a warrant article that same year, appropriating \$178,359 for the pavilion project and river walk, with \$90,000 coming from the grant and an \$88,539 match from the donated land.

The grant was received from the National Park Service in 2012 and work started on the pavilion project.

Town buys bridge for \$1

In 2013, the Belmont Conservation Commission, led at that time by Ken Knowlton, found out that a 154-foot-long covered bridge, which would help meet the needs of the project, was available.

The Dover City Council sold the eight-foot-wide wooden bridge to the Belmont Conservation Commission for \$1 in July of 2013.

Built in 1996 at a cost of \$162,845, the bridge was removed with a crane in 2010 to make way for a waterfront development. It was taken apart with its roof removed and brought to Belmont in three sections by contractor Mark Roberts.

In December 2015, the first 50-foot bridge section was put in place across the Tioga River behind the Belmont Mill, where a pedestrian bridge which would have been built with volunteer labor as part of the downtown project, as originally envisaged.

Knowlton, Fogg and Ron Mitchell, with the help of Belmont Public Works equipment and operators, built the abutments and a pathway for that first section behind the Mill, and Mark Roberts and his sons hauled that section from the Public Works yard and set it on the abutments with their 75-ton crane. The volunteers, with assistance from American Legion Post 58, replaced the damaged siding, repainted the bridge and restored the gable end. Rod Pearl and Sons reroofed and re-sided the other end. Post 58 volunteers, along with volunteers from the United Way Day of Caring and Belmont High School students, cleared the brush and undesirable trees along both sides of the Tioga River from the Route 140 bridge downstream to the covered bridge, opening up the view and exposing a stone retaining wall that had been hidden by brush.

Fogg said that most of the funding for the first bridge installation came from the balance of the grant that paid for the pavilion, with an additional \$13,000 from a New Hampshire Bureau of Trails recreation grant obtained by Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin.

Second bridge put in place

Another \$73,000 grant from the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails was obtained last year to support the placement of the other two sections of covered bridge on the second river crossing behind Great Brook Village.

Mitchell, Fogg and the Belmont Public Works Department built the abutments last fall and Mark, Jeff and Matt Roberts, along with volunteers Mitchell, Fogg, and Knowlton, placed the second bridge last month.

Long steel beams were placed from temporary cribbing built next to east side of river to the abutment on the west side. One bottom section of the bridge was lifted by crane onto the Roberts' lowbed, which had been specially modified for the purpose and hauled to the crossing site. One end of that section was set on the east abutment with their 75-ton crane and the other on specially modified rollers placed on the steel beams across the river. The roof for that section was then hauled to the site, installed on the bridge and bolted in place. The second section was then hauled in and bolted to the first, followed by the roof for that section.

Once this longer bridge was assembled, Blouin Steel fabricated and installed new connection plates that were reconfigured to accommodate the different stresses in the trusses associated with the loading in this application. Then the entire bridge was lifted and rolled across the long beams, set on jacks and cribbing, jacked down onto the abutments and bolted in place.

Fogg said that what remains to be done includes repairing, replacing and repainting the siding, shingling the roof and installing lighting on the bridge. Then the trail will be re-graded and opened for public use.

He said the trail will then run all the way from the Tioga Pavilion next to the Belmont Mill, across the first bridge (called the Slippery Rock Crossing, as it was way back in the early 1900s), along approximately 7/10 of a mile of railroad line, across the second bridge and along another 1.3 miles of rail line out to South Road.

Fogg said there are long-term plans to continue the trail further west, along the rail line across the Tioga River behind the Coca-Cola plant and out to Route 140. Eventually, the trail will join the main trail that is being developed along the rail line from Franklin to Laconia and Lakeport.

"This project could not have been accomplished without the involvement of Mark Roberts and his sons, Matt and Jeff, who donated much of their time and the use of their cranes, heavy equipment, specialized jacks and beams and welders," said Fogg. "The Roberts family have a long history of doing things like this for their town and their contributions are greatly appreciated, along with those of dedicated volunteers like Ron Mitchell, Ken Knowlton, Chris Fogg and American Legion Post 58 and the support and hard work of town officials like Rick Ball, land use technician, and the Belmont Public Works Department. This is a showcase of how much can be accomplished by public-spirited people working together to do good things at little cost to the taxpayers of their town."



Mark, Matt and Jeff Roberts, along with Ron Mitchell, were among the volunteers who installed the old bridge in Belmont recently. (Courtesy photo)



1st section set on beams, with roof being lifted in place with LE Roberts' 75 ton crane (Norm Jackson)



Woody Fogg (left), Ken Knowlton (on bridge) and Jeff Roberts (right) guiding bridge on to bearing pads. (Rick Ball)

