

# Covered Bridges

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2020

STAR BEACON **D1**



WARREN DILLAWAY | STAR BEACON

Jay and Terrie Miller and their dog Kimber, all of Jefferson, check out the Smolen-Gulf Covered Bridge on Saturday morning. Tourists and area residents gathered at covered bridges throughout the county on Oct. 10 even though the annual Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival had to be canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## Romantic appeal

### Covered bridges are nostalgic for many people

**BY SHELLEY TERRY**  
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JEFFERSON — Few pieces of American history have the romantic appeal of covered bridges, yet local experts say most people don't know that much about them.

Ashtabula County boasts 19 covered bridges, including the shortest and the longest in the United States. To celebrate this unique collection of covered bridges, the county hosts a Covered Bridge Festival each year on the second weekend of October. However, this year's festival was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Covered bridges take people back to a different time," said Timothy Martin, county engineer. "Ashtabula County is fortunate to have so many of them."

Ashtabula County author and historian Carl E. Feather reiterated Martin's sentiment.

"There are very few functional, public connections to the 1800s remaining in our county," he said. "The Ashtabula County Courthouse comes to mind as one of them, but the covered bridges are in a unique class because they are accessible day and night. Their architecture is rustic, functional and photogenic. They ooze nostalgia. They are original, modified only to make them even more functional."

A key principal of historical preservation is functionality.

"We lose railroad depots, commercial structures and even old houses because we can't find a practical application for them in the modern world," Feather said.



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Ellen and Tom Klug, far left, of Cleveland, walk on the Harpersfield Covered Bridge.

## Covered Bridge Festival will return Oct. 8-9, 2021

**BY SHELLEY TERRY**  
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The Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival would have celebrated its 38th year last weekend. The festival brought food, crafts and displays to Jefferson, as well as at the county's 19 unique covered bridges.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced organizers to cancel this year's festival, but they look forward to hosting it next year on Oct. 8-9, 2021.

With more than 150 covered bridges throughout the state, Ohio ranks second in the nation for the most covered bridges.

Both the longest and the shortest

"Without an endowment, these old buildings are doomed. The covered bridge is self-covered by its function. As long as it provides passage across the waterway, it earns its keep. And it pays aesthetic dividends in the process."

### THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF THE BRIDGES

The bridges speak of a time when pioneers had to make due with what the land provided,

Feather said. They had plenty of timber, and water power for milling it, at their disposal. Stone for the abutments came from Windsor Township quarries.

The men who designed the bridges, such as Ithiel Town (Town lattice), were historical figures. Town, for example, was a Connecticut-born architect and engineer, one of the nation's pre-eminent in the first half of the 19th Century, according to Feather.

drivable bridges are in Ashtabula County — the 613-foot Smolen-Gulf Bridge spanning the Ashtabula River and the 18-foot Liberty Street Bridge in Geneva. There are of five types of covered bridges in Ashtabula County: Howe truss, Pratt truss, Town lattice truss, Burr Arch and Inverted Haupt truss.

Ginger Whitehead, director of the festival committee, said the most important aspect of the festival is the ability to visit different bridges and support a variety of community charities and causes.

Last year's festival featured a parade, crafts, a car show, food and entertainment.

"So you have the man who designed the state capitol of Connecticut also designing covered bridges [via patent] in the Connecticut Western Reserve," he said. "Likewise for William Howe, who patented the Howe truss in 1840. The truss enabled railroads to reach westward by providing engineers with a truss that could carry the heavy railroad loads across the streams of the Western Reserve and beyond. And it also worked for horse-

and-buggy traffic and 2019 SUVs."

The fact that Ashtabula County boasts bridges designed by former county engineer John Smolen, of Jefferson, will also, in time, give additional historical status to the wood bridges.

"We can't overstate the treasures that Mr. Smolen and his work are to this county," Feather said. "We are blessed to be his contemporaries; it is like sharing the same time and place with any great architect or civil engineer."

Smolen, who owns an engineering company, said his favorite covered bridge is the first one of nine that he designed and built — the State Road Covered Bridge in Monroe Township. It's a Town lattice, built in 1983, he said.

"Covered bridges appeal to people because they are in a rural setting, which is scenic itself, and they are historical," Smolen said.

The bridges are historical because humans interact with them and create their own stories, such as a 4-H Camp Whitewood hiker walking along the Wiswell Road Covered Bridge in Windsor Township, cooling off in the old swimming hole under the Olin Bridge or wading in the Grand River, under the shadow of Harpersfield Township's bridge.

"The bridges are part of our stories, both as a county and individuals and families," Feather said. "These stories, like the bridges, span generations."

Feather's books, including "Ashtabula County: A Field Guide," are available at Bridge Street Art Works, 1009 Bridge St., Ashtabula.



**1. Netcher**

1544 Netcher Rd, Jefferson  
 CLEARANCE: 14' 6" (2.7 mi. from Center of Jefferson) The bridge over Mill Creek was open to traffic in 1999. It features a timber arch with inverted Haupt Trusses. The "Neo Victorian" designed structure is 110' long, 22' wide, and 14' 6" high.



**2. South Denmark**

2670 South Denmark Rd, Jefferson  
 CLEARANCE: 9'0" (2.7 mi. from Netcher Rd Bridge) Built in 1890, this Town lattice bridge spans Mill Creek. The 81-foot structure was bypassed in 1975.



**3. Caine**

4699 Caine Rd, Pierpont Township  
 CLEARANCE: 11'0" (6.7 mi. from S. Denmark Rd Bridge) This first Pratt Truss bridge in Ohio was built in 1986 in honor of Ashtabula County's 175th Anniversary. The 124-foot long bridge traverses the west branch of the Ashtabula River.



**4. Graham**

4646 Graham Rd, Pierpont Township  
 BYPASS (5.9 mi. from Caine Rd Bridge) Built from remnants of a bridge washed downstream in the 1913 flood, the bridge now sits in a small park on the south side of the road.



**5. Root**

4680 Root Rd, Conneaut  
 CLEARANCE: 8'4" (3.9 mi. from Graham Rd Bridge) A 114-foot-long Town lattice built in 1868, Root Rd Bridge was raised 18" during the rehabilitation in 1982/83. New laminated girders and a center concrete pier were also added.



**6. Middle**

910 Middle Rd, Conneaut  
 CLEARANCE: 13'6" (8.3 mi. from Root Rd Bridge) This 136-foot-long Howe Truss bridge was built in 1868 over Conneaut Creek, which is a favorite Stealhead Steam. It was rehabilitated in 1984 with the help of 7 volunteers.



**7. Conneaut Creek**

5899 State Rd, Conneaut  
 CLEARANCE: 16'2" (5.1 mi. from Middle Rd Bridge) Containing 97,000' of southern pine and oak, the State Rd Bridge was erected in 1983 across Conneaut Creek. This 152-foot-long Town lattice was the first covered bridge designed and built by County Engineer, John W. Smolen, Jr. A 4' opening spans the length.



**8. Creek**

371 Creek Rd, Conneaut  
 CLEARANCE: 11'4" (3.4 mi. from State Rd Bridge) The construction date of this 125-foot-long Town lattice bridge is unknown. It sits 25' above Conneaut Creek and was renovated in 1994.



**9. Benetka**

4500 Bennetka Rd, Sheffield Township  
 CLEARANCE: 11'0" (11.5 mi. from Creek Rd Bridge) A 138-foot-long Town lattice with Arch bridge, Benetka was built about 1900. It was renovated in 1985 when a laminated arch 9" wide, 38" thick, spanning the length of the bridge, was added.



**10. Olin**

1880 Dewey Rd, Plymouth Township  
 CLEARANCE: 12'0" (2.5 mi. from Benetka Rd Bridge) Olin's have owned property next to the bridge since it was built in 1873. The 115-foot-long Town lattice structure over the Ashtabula River was renovated in 1985.

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## 11. SMOLEN-GULF

7001 State Rd, Ashtabula

**CLEARANCE:** 14'6" (2.6 mi. from Olin Bridge) The longest covered bridge in the U.S. is of Pratt Truss construction. Engineering and structural design by John W. Smolen, Jr. (former County Engineer) and architectural design was done by Timothy J. Martin (current County Engineer). Dedicated in 2008, it is 613' long and stands 93' above the River. With clear width of 30' it will support full legal load traffic and has a life expectancy of 100 years.



## 14. Doyle

1300 Doyle Rd, Jefferson

**CLEARANCE:** 13'6" (1.8 mi. from Jefferson) A 94-foot-long Town lattice bridge built in 1868, Doyle spans Mill Creek, a tributary of the Grand River. This bridge was renovated in 1987 when a laminated arch was added.



## 17. Mechanicsville

1153 mechanicsville Rd, Geneva

**CLEARANCE:** 10' (4.6 mi. from Harpersfield Bridge) Longest single-span Covered Bridge in Ashtabula County, this 156' long Howe Truss with arch was built in 1867. The arch is 15 layers of 2 x 8 lumber and encased by large beams which form the X's of the Howe Truss. Believed to be the oldest of the County's bridges, it was renovated in 2003.



## 12. Riverview

Indian Trails Park, 4761 State Rd, Ashtabula

This bridge is 150' long and 14' wide, making it one of the larger bridges, yet it carries only pedestrian traffic. It mirrors the Pratt arch design of its big brother, Smolen-Gulf, which rises above. Both cross the Ashtabula River at Indian Trails Park. Riverview, dedicated in 2016, provides exercise trails and a place to enjoy the beautiful river scenery.



## 15. West Liberty

94 West Liberty St, Geneva

**CLEARANCE:** 15' (10.6 mi. from Doyle Rd Bridge) The shortest covered bridge in the U.S., Liberty spans only 18'. The structure is supported by a single Kingpost and its roof is a scissor Truss which gives the bridge a light, open feeling. Timber for this bridge was harvested from county land owners. The bridge was modularly constructed by students of Ashtabula County Joint Vocational School (now A-Tech).



## 18. Riverdale

3349 Riverdale Rd, Rock Creek

**CLEARANCE:** 9'6" (9.2 mi. from Mechanicsville Bridge) This 114-foot-long Town lattice bridge sits high above the Grand River. Center steel bracing was added in 1945, and in 1981, the floor was rebuilt and glue laminated girders added to the interior. This creates a bridge-within-a-bridge and narrows the passageway. The road at the east end of the bridge washed out in 1987 and a new concrete abutment was built.



## 13. Giddings

1400 Giddings Rd, Jefferson

**CLEARANCE:** 15'6" (8 mi. from Smolen-Gulf Bridge) Pratt Truss construction was used for this 107-foot-long bridge built in 1995. It crosses Mill Creek in Jefferson Township. At this point, the tour returns to Jefferson (3.5 miles back) via Jones Rd, Rt 167 and Rt 46.



## 16. Harpersfield

1122 Harpersfield Rd, Geneva

**CLEARANCE:** 10'9" (3 mi. from Liberty St Bridge) This two-span Howe Truss bridge is 228' long and is the second longest bridge in Ohio. Built in 1868, it's listed in the National Register of Historic Places. A 1913 flood altered the river, requiring a steel bridge to link the covered bridge to the north approach. A walkway was added in 1992.



## 19. Windsor Mills

7696 Warner Hollow Rd, Windsor

**CLEARANCE:** 11'3" (14.5 mi. from Riverdale Bridge) Windsor Mills is 120' long and spans Phelps Creek, a tributary of the Grand River. Built in 1867, the Town lattice bridge rests on abutments of sandstone (quarried nearby) and creek stone. The field stone center pier was replaced with stone-look concrete when it was renovated in 2002-03.

# Driving tour still draws visitors despite COVID-19 pandemic

BY BRIAN HAYTCHER  
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The Covered Bridge driving tour has been a popular attraction for visitors to Ashtabula County this year.

The tour is made up of two loops. The first, which covers the northeast section of Ashtabula County, will take drivers through 13 covered bridges over a 69-mile drive, according to information from the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival. The southwest tour goes through six bridges, and covers 68 miles.

The tour was first established in the mid-80s, said Ginger Whitehead, executive director of the Ashtabula County Covered Bridge Festival. The Covered Bridge Festival offices receive calls about the tour all year long, Whitehead said.

The most high-profile stop on the tour is the Smolen-Gulf Covered Bridge, since it is the longest covered bridge in the United States, Whitehead said.

Whitehead was at the bridge last weekend, which would have been the weekend of the Covered Bridge Festival.

"I talked to people from all over the country who said 'well the

festival may not have been allowed to go on, but this is our tradition and we're doing it," Whitehead said.

People who visited the Smolen-Gulf Covered Bridge on the weekend of the festival told Whitehead that there were cars at every bridge they'd visited, she said.

A wide variety of people participate in the driving tour, Whitehead said.

The tourists who do the driving tour have been slightly older in past years, but this year, the county has seen more family groups participating in the tour, said Executive Director Stephanie Siegel.

"I think that has a little bit to do with some of the homeschooling, and then people wanting to get out and about and moving," Siegel said.

The Ashtabula County Convention and Visitors Bureau has seen a large number of people coming to the county to visit the area, Siegel said.

"It's been extremely popular this year," she said. The ACCVB has distributed 98,000 visitors guides, and the main driver behind that number is the Covered Bridge Driving Tour map included in the

guide, Siegel said.

The time it takes to complete the tour varies.

"It truly does depend on how people experience it," Siegel said. "Some people like to stop, get out, walk around the area, take pictures."

The ACCVB recommends budgeting at least two days to do both halves of the tour, Siegel said.

In addition to people coming to visit the popular bridges like the Smolen and Harpersfield, the ACCVB has seen a number of people who are coming back to the area to see other bridges, Siegel said.

There have been a number of groups of cars that have participated in the driving tour recently, Siegel said.

"It's just become incredibly popular," Siegel said. She congratulated the people who have worked on the Covered Bridge Festival. Knowledge of the festival has continued to bring people to the county. "All that hard work they put in, it's paying off still," Siegel said.

Whitehead thanked everyone who has come out to the covered bridges even without the festival this year.

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