

The Upstream Bridges

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Most visitors to Brandywine Park have occasion to cross the footbridge at the far upstream end of the park, taking for granted its existence and pondering little if at all its relationship to its two immediate neighbors, the B&O Railroad Bridge and the Augustine Cut-off Bridge. Yet all three are artifacts that can connect late-twentieth-century park users to people and practices that date back to the nineteenth century.

Before any bridges crossed the Brandywine where the Upstream Bridges now stand, there were factories. The Jessup & Moore Paper Company operated on the site now occupied by the Brandywine Park Condominiums. Prior to the 1845 purchase by Augustus E. Jessup and his son-in-law, Bloomfield H. Moore, the mills on that site produced snuff and then flour. When Jessup and Moore bought the factory, they converted it to the production of fine quality paper. By 1888, the firm of Jessup & Moore employed one hundred workers, produced 36,000 pounds of paper a day, and used electricity to light the mills.

The present suspension bridge that crosses the Brandywine is the second such pedestrian span built near the west end of the park. The first Swinging Bridge was constructed in 1879 on the site that is now occupied by the stone arches of the B&O Railroad Bridge. Subscriptions from both employers and workers at mills on both sides of the river, those associated with Jessup & Moore on the north bank and with the Riddle textile factory on the south bank, paid for the original footbridge. Until it was built, the nearest bridges across the Brandywine were downstream at Market Street and upstream at Rising Sun. The bridge made it possible for workers living in Forty Acres to get to work in the paper mill and for mill workers who lived near the mills on the north side of the river to cross over and catch the horse-drawn trolley that ran into the city along Delaware Avenue.

Just upstream from the original Swinging Bridge, between 1883 and 1885, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad built a metal truss bridge supported by stone piers. The first freight crossed the span in July 1886 and the first passenger service two months later. Immediately after opening the new tracks, the railroad built a passenger depot at Delaware Avenue and DuPont Street, the site currently occupied by the Acme parking lot. Passengers traveling through Wilmington were known to have alighted from their trains and descended from the passenger platforms to the Logan House for refreshment before continuing their journeys.

By 1908, locomotive and freight weights had increased to such an extent that the bridge could no longer carry the load and the company recognized that a second bridge needed to be built. In 1909, the railroad negotiated a trade with the city. Because the company did not want to make a drastic realignment in the route of its tracks, it set its sights on the land where the nearby Swinging Bridge stood. In exchange for that land, the railroad agreed to replace the old pedestrian bridge with a new one constructed downstream from the original, the current Swinging Bridge. The Board of Park Commissioners noted in their Annual Report of 1910 that the new suspension bridge "is wider than the old bridge and of much more substantial character." At the same time, the B&O built the current stone arched span situated between the original railroad bridge and the new suspension bridge.

The old railroad bridge was abandoned and sat unused until 1920. That year New Castle County took ownership of the span and converted it to vehicular traffic by placing a cement deck on the metal trusses. Known as the Augustine Bridge because of its proximity to Jessup and Moore's Augustine Mill, the automobile bridge initially connected only to a road that looped around the north edge of the park near the playing fields recently improved by Samuel Baynard. It was not until the 1930s that the thoroughfare was linked to Concord Pike and became the Augustine Cut-off Bridge.

The three bridges are embedded in the larger context of city history. The suspension bridge is a reminder of the days when workers had to live close enough to walk to work and that their jobs were in factories along the Brandywine when it was an industrial river before it was recreational. The metal truss bridge that is now the Augustine Cut-off Bridge calls to mind the expansion of the railroads in the 1880s as a network of routes fanned out across the country and reminds observers how reliant people were on railroads rather than automobiles for travel. In addition, the 1920 conversion to accommodate auto traffic reflects the increasing importance of automobiles in American society. The "new" B&O Railroad Bridge underscores the importance of Wilmington as a stop along the B&O line and the lengths to which the company would go to preserve its line connecting Philadelphia and Baltimore. The history of each and of the three together can deepen and enrich our understanding of and appreciation for the past.