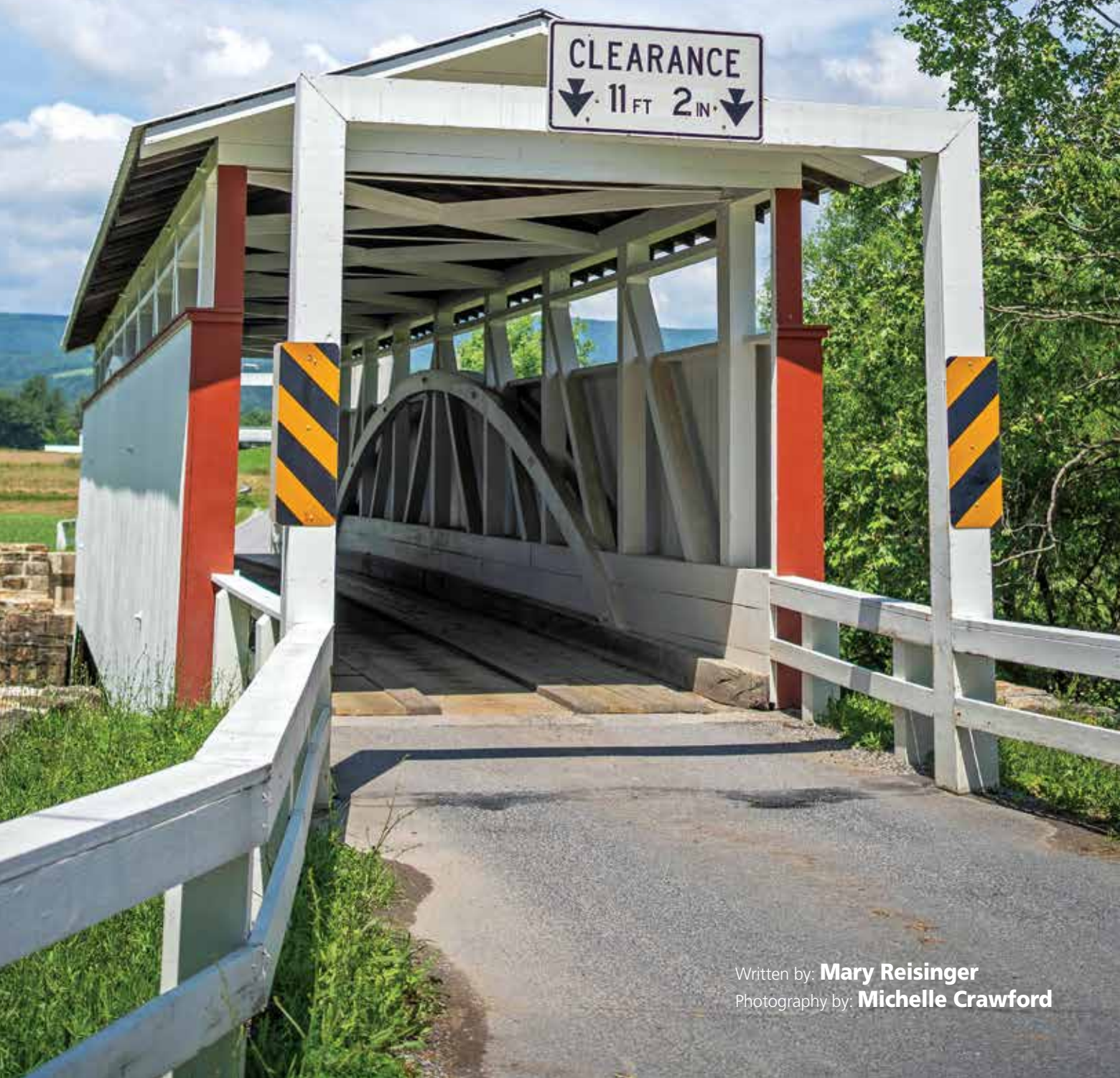


Covered Wooden Bridges

— A LEGACY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA —



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Photography by: **Michelle Crawford**



Covered wooden bridges remind of us a time in our national history when life was calmer and simpler. When people relied on the strength of their horses rather than the horsepower of their engines. When courting couples lingered within the bridge's shelter to steal a kiss.

Of course, in the nineteenth century heyday of covered bridge building, these structures were regarded as an important modern step toward improving travel and trade.

The first documented covered bridge in the United States was built in Philadelphia to provide a much-needed route for commerce over the Schuylkill River. Floating bridges (ferries) came first. For much of the 1700s, attempts to build "permanent" stone or wooden bridges were abandoned due to lack of resources. Finally, a covered wooden truss bridge with stone supports was completed in 1805 and named the Permanent Bridge. In 1850, it was replaced with a wooden bridge designed to carry railroad as well as pedestrian and carriage traffic; several other bridges have since been constructed on this spot.

During the next hundred years, especially 1825-1875, approximately 14,000 covered wooden bridges were built in the country. Today, fewer than 1,000 remain, but the

Ryot Covered Bridge *(above and facing page)*

Probably constructed in the 1860s or later, this Burr Truss covered bridge was burned by arsonists in 2002, but it was rebuilt and re-opened in 2004. The bridge, named for the nearby town of Ryot, PA, is 83½ feet long; drivers can use it to cross Dunnings Creek between Routes 96 and 56.

state with the largest number is the state where it began—Pennsylvania—and it is easy to see quite a few examples within the mountain region.

Covered wooden bridges were not invented in America. They were built in Europe and Asia hundreds of years earlier, mostly during the Middle Ages. The oldest covered wooden bridge still standing is thought to be the Kapellbrücke, or Chapel Bridge, in Lucerne, Switzerland, which dates from 1333.

Americans did innovate and improve on the truss designs they borrowed from Italy and elsewhere. Theodore Burr patented his widely-used truss design in 1804 with a second design patent in 1812. Two decades later, builder/engineer Squire Whipple published correct calculations for determining load that could be carried by wooden trusses. This led to bridge designs that were stronger while using fewer



materials. By the end of the 1800s, covered wooden bridges were built in nearly every state.

People have speculated that bridges were enclosed for purposes such as calming animals crossing over turbulent water; however, the primary reason these bridges were covered with a roof and at least partial sides was to extend their useful life. An uncovered wooden bridge exposed to rain, snow, ice, and sun could be expected to last ten to twenty years. With protection and proper maintenance, a covered bridge might last hundreds of years.

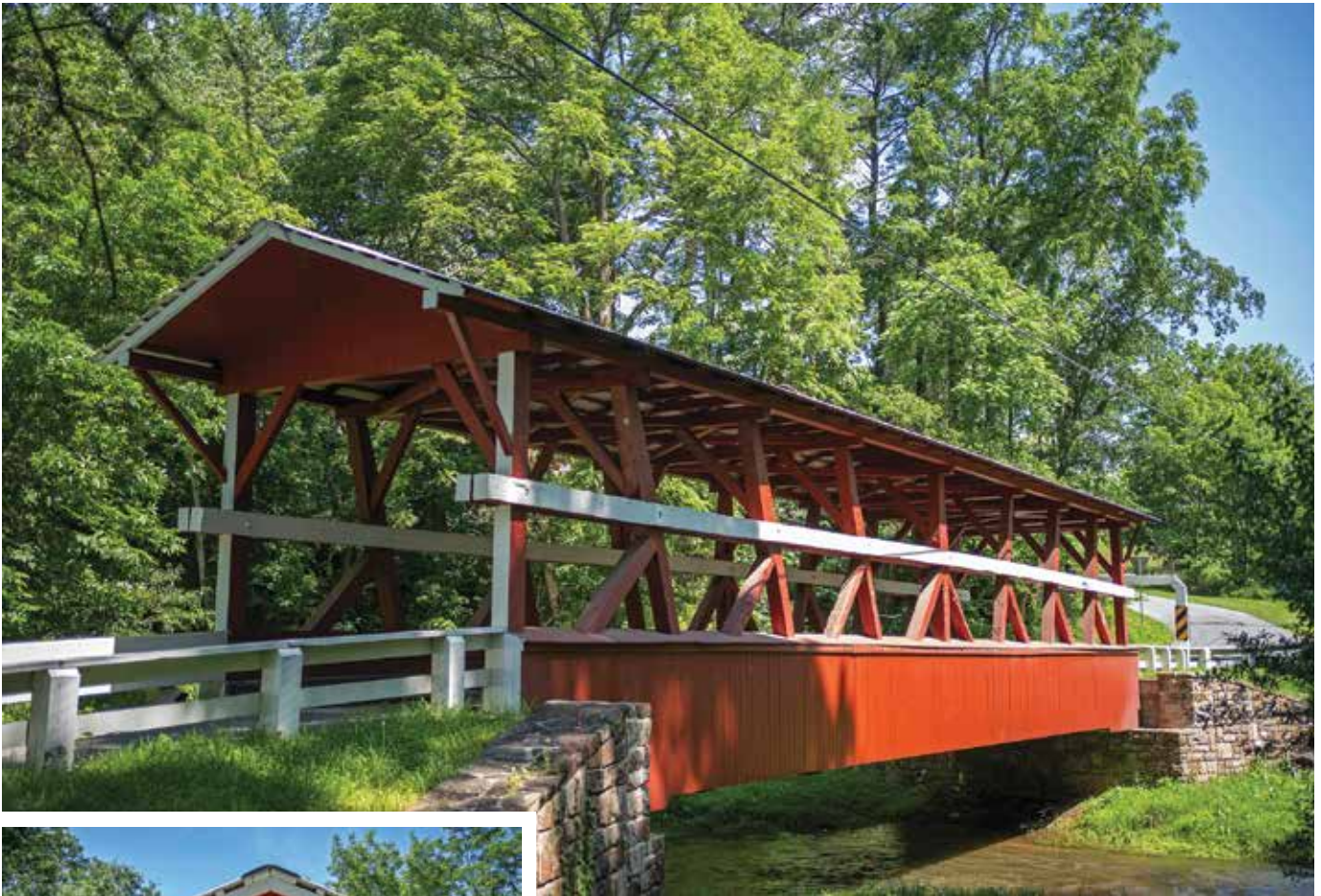
Part of that maintenance was the red paint seen on so many covered bridges. It wasn't just a design choice. The iron oxide used to make the red color, and the linseed oil it was mixed with, were inexpensive and readily available ingredients. The paint protected the wood from insects and moisture, just as the "cover" protected the wooden bridge.

Despite these efforts, fire and flood took their toll, and as the Industrial Age ushered in the use of steel and iron, wooden bridges were often replaced with metal spans.



Bowser/Osterburg Covered Bridge (top and inset)

Though bypassed by a concrete and steel bridge in 1973, this 97-foot 1890 Burr Truss bridge with horizontal bracing of the top truss level still crosses Bob's Creek, near Osterburg, PA. Traversing the bridge is not permitted. The inset photo, taken from the opposite side of the bridge, shows its interior supports.



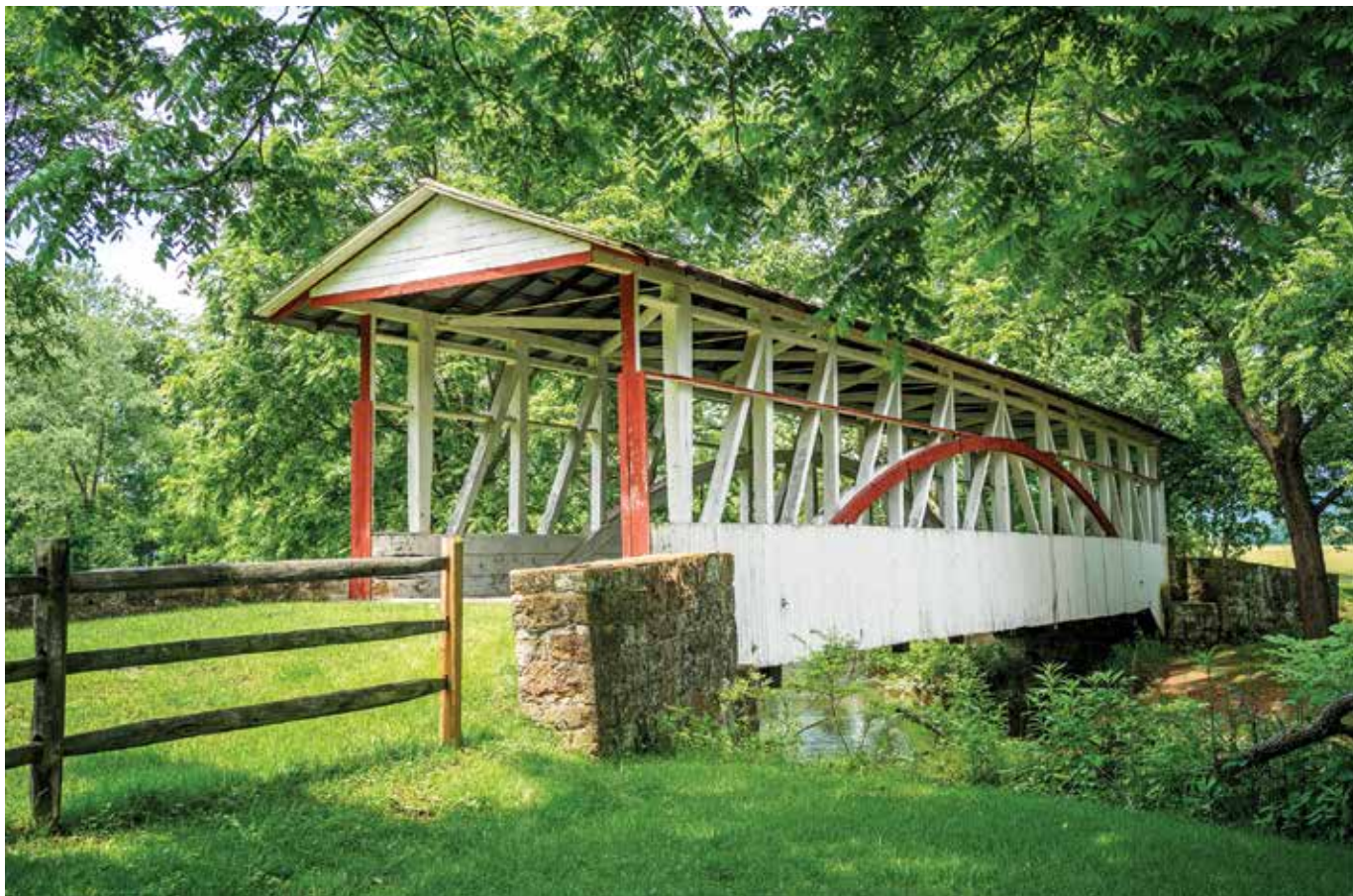
Colvin Covered Bridge *(top and inset)*

This late 1800s structure near Schellsburg, PA, is also one of only two remaining bridges using the Kingpost Truss (in this case Multiple Kingpost Trusses allow for a longer span) rather than the far more common Burr Truss. The drivable 70-foot bridge, which was refurbished in the 1990s, crosses Shawnee Creek just before the dam that creates Shawnee State Park's lake.

Some of the old bridges were saved by individuals and communities who valued them. New Hampshire builder Milton Graton developed a passion for these survivors of earlier American culture. He and his son Arnold became experts at repairing, restoring, and rebuilding covered wooden bridges. In an unusual twist, in 1969, they built a covered wooden bridge to replace an 1877 iron bridge in Vermont. They used traditional techniques, including pulling the bridge into place with oxen.

Local communities have often worked to preserve bridges that were local landmarks. In Bucks County, Pennsylvania, after some historic covered bridges were lost through arson, flood, neglect or demolition, a community group formed to save the South Perkasie Covered Bridge; it was moved in 1958 to Lenape Park, where it remains today. Similarly, citizens of Lancaster demanded an authentically constructed covered bridge be built to replace Hunsecker Bridge when it was damaged beyond repair by Hurricane Agnes.

Fortunately, we can still visit many historic covered wooden bridges, including those featured in *The Bridges of Madison County* in Iowa; the tallest in the world (Felton Bridge near Santa Cruz, California);



Dr. Knisley Covered Bridge

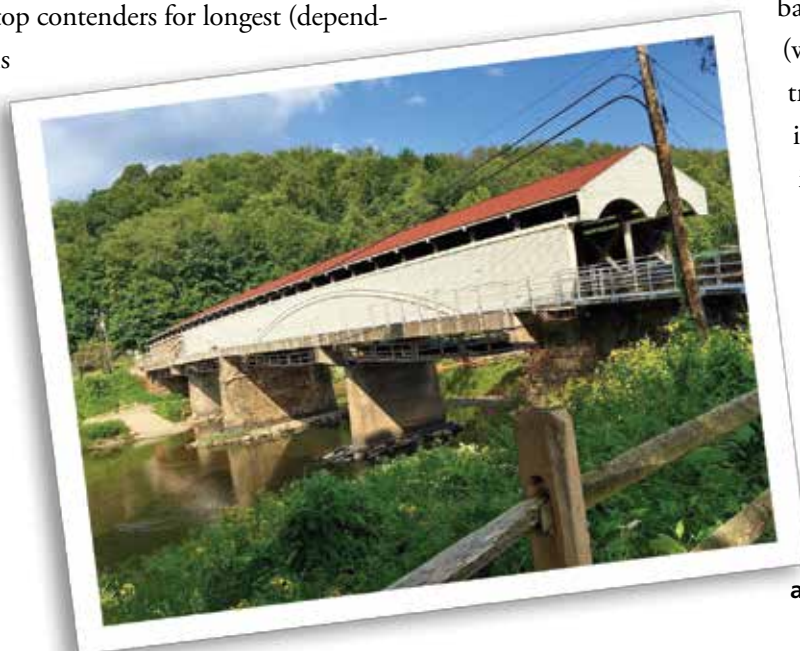
Named for a prominent local doctor, the Knisley (or Dr. Knisely) Bridge was approved by local officials in 1867. It is an 86-foot Burr Truss bridge constructed to cross Dunnings Creek on what was then the main road between Bedford and Johnstown, PA. It is privately owned, but it provides a scenic view well-suited to photography.

perhaps the oldest surviving in America (Hyde Hall Bridge in New York); and two top contenders for longest (depending on how measuring is done) still standing in America: the Cornish-Windsor Bridge joining New Hampshire and Vermont, and the Medora Bridge in Indiana.

In this region, there are some covered wooden bridges of note. West Virginia's oldest and

longest covered bridge, the Philippi Bridge, was the scene of what many consider the first land battle of the Civil War in 1861. The design competition for this bridge was won by Lemuel Chenoweth, who impressed the judges by placing the ends of his model on two chairs and standing on the bridge to prove its strength. When the "double-

barrelled" Philippi Bridge (with two separate lanes for traffic) was damaged by fire in 1989, it was restored and is still a functioning part of the road system. In fact, it is the only historic covered wooden bridge in use as part of a federal highway.



The Philippi Covered Bridge, built in 1852 and 285½ feet long, is West Virginia's oldest and longest covered bridge.



Snooks Covered Bridge

This 1883 Burr Truss bridge was named for Jacob Snooks who once lived in the area. It was refurbished in the 1990s, and the 80-foot span can still be used to drive over Dunnings Creek, just off Rt. 56, north of Fishertown, PA, on Township Rt. 554.

Mountain Maryland's covered bridges have vanished. At least two covered bridges used by the B&O Railroad were burned by Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. Others were lost to the ravages of time or replaced with more modern structures. Maryland still has six covered bridges, but the westernmost of these are in Frederick County.

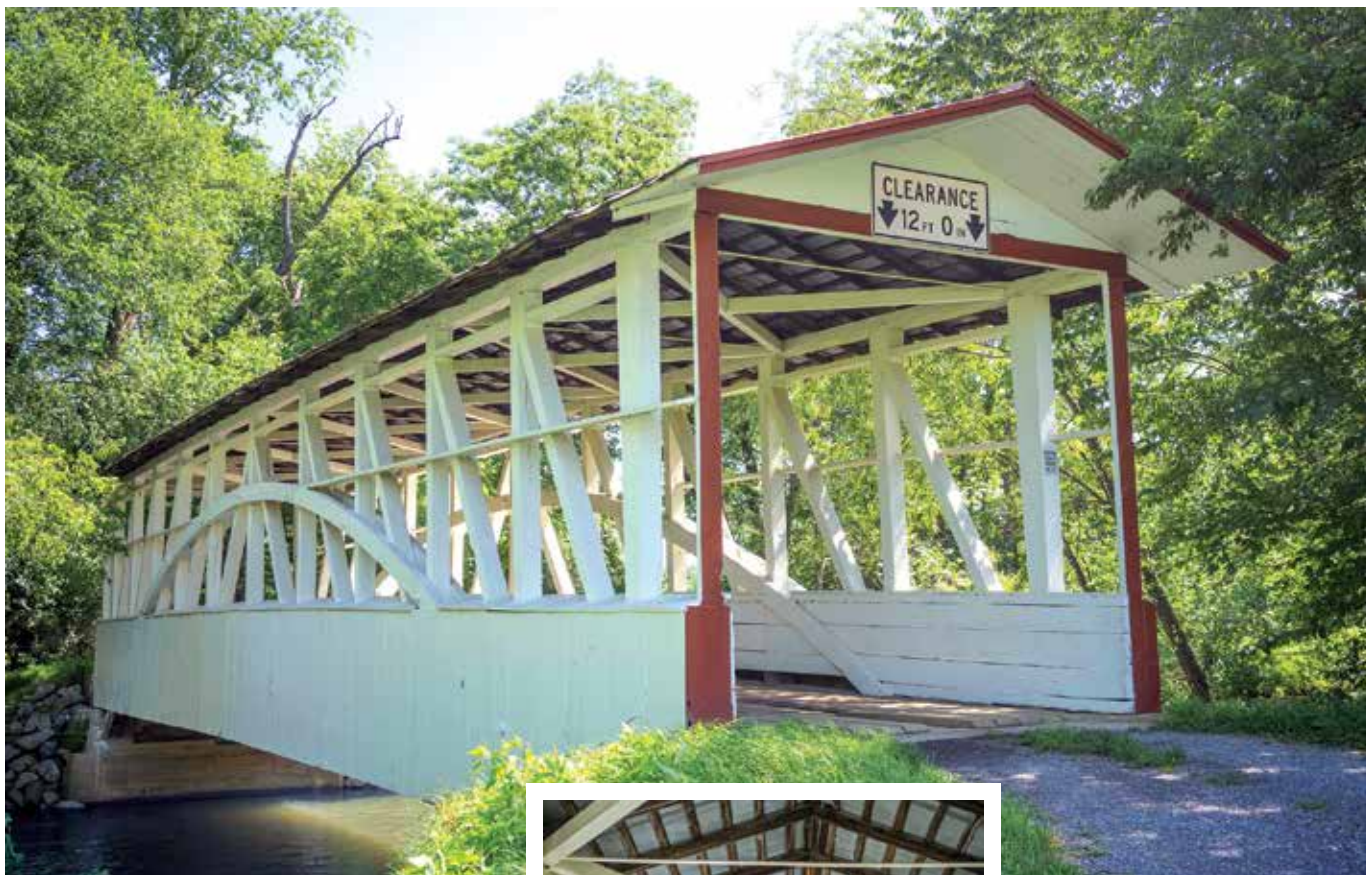
Covered wooden bridges can be seen around Pennsylvania, with the highest number in Lancaster County. Several bridges near Gettysburg, including Sach's Bridge, were used by soldiers during the Civil War. Washington and Greene Counties, near Pittsburgh, organize a covered bridge festival on the third weekend of September each year.

Closer to our area, the Bedford County Visitors Bureau has made it easy to visit a cluster of Pennsylvania's



Herline Covered Bridge

At 136 feet, this bridge over the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River on Watson Road two miles south of the Jean Bonnet Tavern, is the longest remaining historic covered bridge in Bedford County. It was built in the early 1900s as a replacement for the 1870s Kinton Bridge. When the Herline Bridge was damaged by flooding in 1983, it was closed until the late 1990s, when it was restored and reopened to traffic.



covered bridges any time by offering a brochure detailing the locations of 14 covered wooden bridges and giving directions for a driving tour of 9 of these bridges that can be done in less than two hours. Some of the bridges are drivable, while others can be viewed from the road. The brochure provides information on ownership, age, length, height, and the style of truss (nearly all Burr trusses) used in construction of each bridge.

This Bedford County tour is scenic, and there are additional attractions nearby. The Jean Bonnet Tavern, built as a fortified trading post in 1763 and used as an inn and tavern by later owner Jean Bonnet, still offers rooms and meals, as well as a gift shop and goat paddock on the property. Shawnee State Park, ten miles west of Bedford, is a place to camp, swim, boat, and hike. Old Bedford Village, a living history museum comprised of authentic buildings from the region and some replicated structures, open to visitors from Memorial Day weekend to the end of October,



Turner Covered Bridge

This bridge, probably built in 1892, is nearly 90 feet long. Like the Herline Covered Bridge, it crosses the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River, but it cannot be used for traffic. It is on Faupel Road, a gravel road not recommended for cars with low clearance.

and the first two Saturday evenings in December, demonstrates what life was like in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Covered bridges give us insights into the ingenuity and drive of early American settlers, as well as a glimpse of a bygone era. It's worthwhile to seek them out while they are still here.

For more information about covered bridges and other attractions in Bedford County: Bedford County Visitors Bureau • 1-800-765-3331 • visitbedfordcounty.com