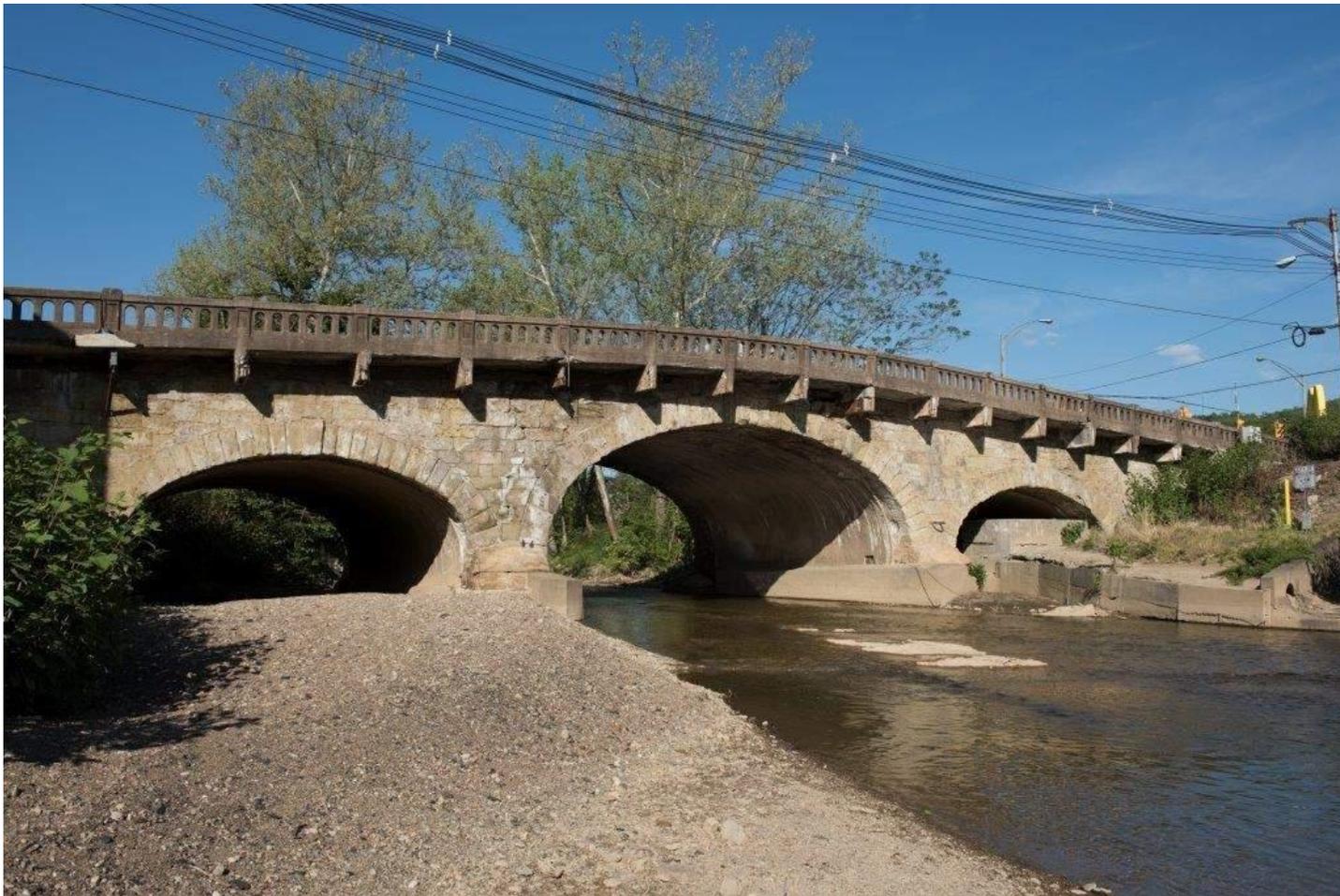


WV's oldest bridge celebrates 200th birthday

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The unique elliptical arches of the Elm Grove Stone Arch Bridge, seen in this 2015 photo, may have played a role in keeping the span viable after two centuries of daily use.



Ohio County Library photo

In this 1888 photo, bridge-builder Moses Shepherd's mansion can be seen in field behind the Elm Grove Stone Arch Bridge, built 61 years earlier.



Courtesy photo

The 200-year-old bridge, now a part of U.S. 40, carries an average of 16,400 vehicles a day over Little Wheeling Creek.

Built 200 years ago to carry Conestoga wagons and stagecoaches across Little Wheeling Creek on the National Road, America's first federally funded highway, West Virginia's oldest bridge still is an active component of the national highway system, carrying more than 16,000 vehicles a day across the Ohio County stream.

The Elm Grove Stone Arch Bridge, also known as the Monument Place Bridge and the Shepherd Bridge, was completed in 1817, the year before the National Road crossed the Appalachians and connected the Potomac River at Cumberland, Maryland, with the Ohio River at Wheeling. Today, it carries U.S. 40 traffic through the Wheeling suburb of Elm Grove.

The 208-foot-long, three-span stone arch bridge was designed and built by Moses Shepherd, grandson of Shepherdstown founder Thomas Shepherd and the son of Col. David Shepherd, commandant of Wheeling's Fort Henry during the Revolutionary War. Moses Shepherd was a 19-year-old private serving in a Pennsylvania militia unit garrisoned at the fort that successfully thwarted an attack by about 200 Wyandot and Delaware Indians, along with a smaller contingent of British troops and American loyalists in 1782 in one of the final skirmishes of the Revolutionary War.

After the war, Moses Shepherd developed a plantation at Elm Grove that included a gristmill, sawmill, distillery, general store and a mansion completed in 1798 that remains in use as the Osiris Shrine Temple.

“It was Shepherd’s growing influence, and especially his friendship with then U.S. House Speaker Henry Clay, that is said to have brought about the construction of the Elm Grove Stone Arch Bridge,” according to the nomination form for including the bridge in the National Register of Historic Places. With apparent help from Clay, Shepherd was awarded a contract to build the Elm Grove bridge as well as a similar stone bridge, no longer in existence, at Triadelphia on the Pennsylvania border.

Due to the insistence of his wife, Lydia, that the soon-to-be-built National Road pass directly by their mansion, Shepherd arranged to have the original alignment of the road “altered so that the road deviated to cross Little Wheeling Creek (at Triadelphia) and then re-cross the stream in front of Shepherd Hall before resuming northwest to the Ohio River at Wheeling,” according to the nomination form.

In 1820, to show his appreciation and recognize his efforts in championing the National Road, Moses Shepherd commissioned an elaborate monument to Clay be erected on the grounds of Shepherd Hall. This monument was unveiled in Clay’s presence that year, giving Shepherd Hall its common name of Monument Place, hence the “Monument Place Bridge” as the Elm Grove bridge is sometimes known.”

When the National Road was completed to Wheeling in 1818, freight that once took six to eight weeks to arrive in the Ohio River city from Baltimore arrived within two weeks and Wheeling rapidly became a major gateway to the west. Completion of the Wheeling Suspension Bridge over the Ohio in 1849 drew thousands of westbound settlers who followed the National Road to its new western terminus in Vandalia, Illinois, and beyond, and created a second boom period for the Ohio River city.

Soon after the road crossed his bridge, passed his home and opened to traffic, Shepherd added a roadside tavern to his growing list of Elm Grove commercial properties.

Shepherd’s use of a unique elliptical shape in constructing the stone bridge’s arches may have helped give it the strength needed to endure two centuries of constant use, according to the nomination form.

The span’s original parapets were removed in 1931 to accommodate sidewalks and concrete guardrails, and in 1958 the stone sides of the bridge were coated with cement, according to the West Virginia Encyclopedia.

Today, the span has a National Bridge Inventory structural evaluation rating of 3, meaning that it requires “high priority correctional action.” Weight restrictions have been in place for several years limiting traffic to 16 tons or less for single-unit trucks and 32 tons or less for tractor-trailers.

Public hearings were held in Wheeling in 2012 to identify options for rehabilitating the bridge, but no major work has taken place since then.

“Renovation and restoration work is planned for the first part of 2019,” said West Virginia Department of Transportation spokesman Brent Walker. “Despite its age and its weight restrictions, it’s still performing for us. It deserves to be renovated and restored.”

According to Bridgehunter.com, the oldest highway bridge still in use in the United States is Pennsylvania’s Franklin Avenue Bridge, a stone arch bridge built in 1697 that carries U.S. 13 traffic over Pennypack Creek in Philadelphia.