

Spanning the Gap

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

A Toll Bridge with Character

Each workday, as I travel to park headquarters from my home in New Jersey, I cross an old, two-lane iron bridge. Forty feet above the Delaware, the wooden planks rumble as cars pass over them. On the Pennsylvania side is the tollhouse where Joe, one of the toll-takers, waits to collect my bridge ticket and exchange a cheery greeting.

"Did you see that bald eagle? It flew right over my head. What a view!" he exclaims. "Thank you and have a good day," he adds.

There are no automated token machines for this bridge. It is the last privately-owned toll bridge on the Delaware River and one of the last few in the country. It is owned by the Dingmans Choice and Delaware Bridge Co., which has about 50 stockholders from all over the country who come together for an annual meeting in the area every fall.

According to old pamphlets, there were either two or three previous bridges at this site. Another ranger and I discussed the conflicting information and our curiosity led us to contact Mrs. Elsie Bensley, Bridge Manager. Mrs. Bensley is a gracious and dedicated individual who loves her work. She enjoys talking about the history of the bridge and the Dingmans Ferry area, and has often talked to visiting school groups. She was featured in a CBS-TV news documentary and also was involved with the filming of a movie entitled *Dottie*, in which there is a fight scene in a car crossing the bridge. Mrs. Bensley told us some wonderful stories and recommended the



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Crossing eastbound from Pennsylvania to New Jersey.



Learning canoe skills in 1985
(NPS Photo by Warren Bielenberg)



An view downstream in the 1980s with New Jersey on the far shore.

historical account written by William F. Henn in his book, *The Story of the River Road*, Mr. Henn researched newspaper articles and had input from Alfred S. Dingman, the great-great-grandson of the first settler in the area. The following information was gleaned from that book.

In 1735, Andrew Dingman, a Dutch pioneer from Kinderhook, NY, made his "Choice" of a spot along the river and operated a ferry that connected the Old Mine Road in New Jersey to the Bethany Turnpike (now PA Route 739) in Pike County. The ferry thrived for over a century as pioneers utilized this important river crossing. A house was built near the present-day bridge in 1803 by Judge Daniel W. Dingman, who was said to hold court in his bare feet. This house is on the state and national historic registers.

In 1836, the first bridge was built by the Dingmans. Under the terms of the charter, churchgoers, schoolchildren, and funeral processions were given free passage, a condition that is in effect today (with proper documentation from a pastor or school.)

The first bridge lasted until 1847 when high waters washed away the Milford Bridge upstream and swept the debris into Dingmans Bridge. The ferry was brought back into service for three years until a second bridge was built. This bridge may have been a covered bridge because there are written accounts of snow being hauled to the bridge so sleighs could cross in winter. This bridge was destroyed four or five years later in a severe windstorm. A third bridge was constructed in 1856, but, being of poor quality, it fell apart by 1862. The ferry was operated once again by the Dingmans until the property was sold in 1875 to John W. Kilsby, Sr., whose family operated the ferry until the turn of the century when the current bridge was constructed using some materials recycled from a railroad bridge on the Susquehanna River. This bridge has survived major floods in 1903 and 1955.



An aerial view westward with Pennsylvania on the far shore, taken in 1987. Today's Dingmans Ferry Access area has not yet been developed.



Dingmans Bridge surviving the flood of January 1996. (NPS photo by Tom Solon)



The toll station in 2004.



Collecting tolls, the old fashioned way, 2004.

The village of Dingmans Choice, which became so identified with the ferry, had its name changed by the Post Office to *Dingmans Ferry* in 1868.

Crossing on the ferry took some time. The ferryman on the western bank had to be summoned by a bell on the eastern shore. Dr. J.N. Miller, a physician from New Jersey, overcame long delays by pulling himself across in a basket suspended from the overhead ferry cable.

Records from an early log book show tolls of 40 cents for a horseless carriage, 25 cents for a two-horse wagon, 10 cents for a horse and rider, 5 cents for a bicycle, and 2 cents for a footman. Today's fees are not much higher. Bicyclists may cross for free, but pedestrians are not allowed due to the narrow lanes. Weight restrictions preclude large RVs and trucks from using it also. Although the bridge is within the recreation area, government employees pay the toll unless responding to an emergency with lights and sirens.

Because the Bridge Company is responsible for its own repairs, it employs an engineering firm certified for bridge inspection to regularly and thoroughly inspect the bridge from the tops of the trusses to the underwater foundations. Each year, the bridge company closes the bridge for a few weeks to conduct any repairs needed to maintain the structural integrity of the bridge and to replace or flip the salt-treated Canadian fir planks. These floor boards are held in place with anchor plates and collar nails which explains why the bridge rumbles with the traffic. As you travel through the recreation area, perhaps you'll have the opportunity to traverse this historic little bridge and enjoy a beautiful view of the river it spans.

On my way home I stop and hand a ticket to Pete who asks, "How's that little girl of yours? I haven't seen her for a while. Have a good weekend!" Yes, this is definitely a toll bridge with character, run by people with heart.



Dingmans House at the bridge around 1900.



Dingmans House 1967.



Dingmans House 1985. The yard in the foreground is now a staging area for canoe rentals.



Dingmans Ferry Bridge 2004.