



Farmville - Prince Edward Historical Society

P.O. Box 546

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Bob Flippen shares Vail's photos of High Bridge viaduct construction, September 20, 7 p.m., Farmville Train Station

"One day (High Bridge Park Manager) Eric (Hougland) sent me an email saying that he was contacted by someone that these glass...photos...of High Bridge were available on eBay," Bob Flippen recounted. "And Eric knew that I'm really into eBay so I went and searched, but I was just thinking that it was gonna be the same old Timothy O'Sullivan reprints from 1865 after the war that you see all the time on eBay...After I had to raise my lower mandible off the floor, these were actual four inch by five inch glass negatives of the steel viaduct under construction in 1913 and 14-unknown views."

The original bridged, supported by a series of brick piers some of which are now gone, went out of service in 1914, replaced by the scenic steel structure locals have long gazed at from a distance over the rural landscape.

As it turns out, Willis W. Vail, the resident engineer of the project, took photographs of the replacement bridge in its construction process.

Jo Smith, a local historian on the subject, has long been fascinated with the bridge and has written the booklet *A History of High Bridge*. She had located the engineering article (which she had passed onto Flippen) some years ago and recognized the photos.

"...I was just overwhelmed," she said. "I knew exactly when he had sent me a couple...where they had come from and, of course, he did too at that point. Because I had shared that article with him way back when I first started my research-located that engineering news..."

One thing she is particularly interested in among the collection is the one that depicts the mules and scoops used in building the abutment.

"Because I have in my booklet the names of people who were involved in that," she says. "Some were...just teenagers that were local farmers and they used their mules and their scoops to help build that abutment, so that one was really something that interests me. And the cleared land that was down there he shared with me one this week that...if you're on the what I call the western end...the Farmville end of the bridge, you can actually see the Smith's house and one of the tobacco barns on the place."

That house, she believes, was built about 1912.

It also shows open land below the bridge, now forested with trees stretching to the sky.

"Just to think that these negatives had been somewhere all these years--I mean we're looking almost like a hundred years--these negatives were somewhere else. And to have them show up on eBay is just a miracle that they were located," Ms. Smith says.

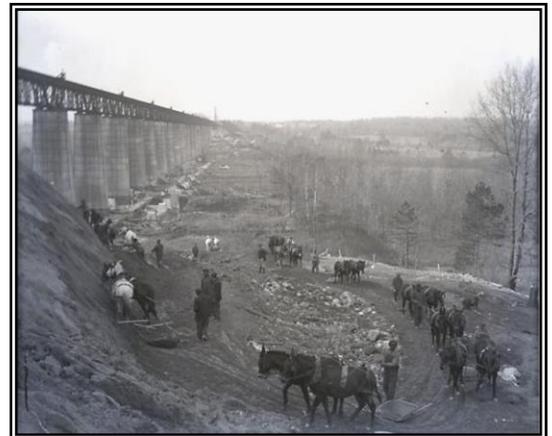
"What have I learned? Oh, my gosh. How massive a project it was," Flippen said. "The earth removal alone to build the approaches for the new bridge, they had train car dump loads--and you see pictures of them in these--that the pedestals that you see where the steel sits upon is just the tip of an iceberg showing. The average pedestal is over 20 feet tall. The ones by the river and by the bridge abutments are 32 feet tall and, once they were cast, the dirt was piled up all around it."

There were 13 months of preparation work before the steel was placed. The half mile of the steel bridge or 2,400 feet started the first week of April 1914, with completion in the first week of June. Traffic was diverted from the old to the new bridge on June 22, 1914.

The photos detail a steam engine used on site, the manufacture of pylons, and that a steam-powered dredge was used in the Appomattox River to collect sand for concrete produced on site. The dredge was named the "Titanic," perhaps a tribute to the real Titanic that sank when it hit an iceberg in the Atlantic Ocean in 1912.

"And in these glass negatives is probably the only known picture of both bridges standing side by side with the tracks still intact," Flippen said.

Almost as soon as the new bridge was built, the steel from the old bridge was taken down--the end of an era, and the beginning of another.



In all, Flippen has secured about 70-75 of the glass negatives-although he speculates there were (going by the negative numbers) about 120. And while he has much of the collection, others are now detached from the whole, thanks to other eBay buyers.

Vail was quite detailed in his work. Each of the glass negative sleeves specify a negative number, date the picture was taken, time of day, weather, lens aperture for the camera and a brief description of the photo.

Meticulous, like an engineer.

"I think it's a wonderful thing we've got in somebody's possession in this area," Ms. Smith said. "Not to have 'em distributed somewhere where it wouldn't be as meaningful."

Houglund offered, "...What a find, I guess, to be able to have some insight into how the construction happened on the bridge. Some of those photos of the work camp with the tar paper shacks and things...I think it's just a tremendous resource to have an idea how it all happened. I mean, we haven't been able to find very much documentation about the construction of it so to have that visual story is pretty meaningful."

Houglund noted that they are working with Prince Edward County to have an exhibit about the time of the opening of the bridge that would be displayed in the Visitor's Center in Farmville. They could show some of the photos as part of the exhibit.

"But even the glass negatives and the sleeves that they're in are a part of history," Houglund said.

Flippen believes that there is a mysticism involved around High Bridge. He noted that it carries two major themes of American history - railroad transportation and American Civil War. It's somewhat mystical because of its seclusion.

-- Gleaned from *The Farmville Herald* "Old Photos Span The Past Chronicle High Bridge Construction" Rob Chapman Friday, September 2, 2011.

This Day in September in Prince Edward County History

- 9-1-1775** Williamsburg newspaper carries first advertisement for new college for men to open sometime that fall in Prince Edward
- 9-1-1902** 30 cars of processed tobacco leave for Norway
- 9-1-1891** Farmville Silver Band organized
- 9-2-1964** County's public school system reopens as an integrated system, after being closed for five years
- 9-3-1831** Union Seminary founder John Holt Rice dies
- 9-3-1906** The first brick of the Methodist church was laid in northwest corner
- 9-4-1919** Farmville turns out to welcome its returning World War I veterans
- 9-5-1898** Union Theological Seminary moves to Richmond
- 9-5-1935** Hurricane-spawned tornado damages trees and buildings at Hampden-Sydney and Kingsville
- 9-6-1893** Noted Negro, Goliath Armistead died
- 9-6-1933** Virginia Dark-Fired Tobacco Warehousemen's Association organized at Planters Warehouse
- 9-6-1933** Farmville Council approves sale of "near beer" (3.2% alcohol)
- 9-7-1897** Norfolk & Western Railroad fined by Mayor Burton for excessive speed in town
- 9-9-1885** Opera House contracted to be built by Burton and Davis
- 9-11-1934** Farmville's ABC store opened
- 9-13-1944** Honor Roll of World War II veterans unveiled on Courthouse lawn
- 9-15-1907** Prof. August Schemmel, opens Farmville's Conservatory of Music
- 9-17-1862** Prominent county lawyer J. T. Thornton is mortally wounded in battle at Sharpsburg, Maryland
- 9-20-1809** Missouri governor and Confederate Major General Sterling Price born near Hampden-Sydney
- 9-22-1865** High Bridge reopens to regular traffic five months after being burned during the retreat
- 9-22-1914** County voters approve (640-205) request for statewide Prohibition
- 9-23-1890** After a bitterly contested election, Republican Party seats black educator J. M. Langston as this district's U.S. Congressman
- 9-23-1923** Birth of county's famed soldier and educator, Lt. Gen. Samuel V. Wilson
- 9-24-1776** Buffalo Presbyterian Church Session adopts "Petition for Religious Liberty" which was eventually sent to Virginia House of Delegates
- 9-24-1890** Tobacconist, J.W. Dunnington, born
- 9-25-1869** Rev. Daniel Witt baptizes over forty people in Miller's mill pond
- 9-25-1922** Charles Edward Burrell published *A History of Prince Edward County, Virginia from its Formation in 1753, to the Present*
- 9-25-1912** Fire Prevention Bureau meets and Farmville businesses pass inspection
- 9-28-1728** First known land grant to settler in Prince Edward area goes to Richard Jarvis, Jr., for property along the Bush River
- 9-28-1917** *Birth of a Nation* plays at the Normal School auditorium
- 9-28-1955** The old armory on Main Street was sold at auction for \$45,000
- 9-30-1933** County voters approve bond issue to build present courthouse