

GULPH CREEK STONE ARCH BRIDGE
Spanning Gulph Creek at Old Gulph Road
Upper Merion
Montgomery County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-309

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Location: Trinity Lane over Gulph Creek, Upper Merion Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania.

Significance: The stone-arch Gulph Creek Bridge, built in 1789, is one of the oldest surviving bridges in Pennsylvania.

Description: This bridge sits at the bottom of a narrow valley--referred to as a "gulf" by colonial settlers--whose hillsides are thickly forested. Just to the west the Schuylkill Expressway (Interstate 76) crosses the valley on a high bridge. At this point the shallow creek flows rapidly west to the Schuylkill River. Houses are located on both sides of the north end of the bridge, and on the upstream side of the south bank is an old mill. Foundations of other old structures exist upstream.

A date stone in the west parapet wall announces the Gulph Creek Bridge opened in "1789--In the 2nd Year of the Federal Union." The overall length is 100', with a single span of 22'. Its original 21' width carried a single lane of traffic up a slight grade from south to north. Except for the cut stone voussoirs, the bridge was made from local stone laid randomly.

The bridge's present appearance illustrates many of the changes which have taken place over the past 200 years. The most significant alteration came in 1912, when it was widened 15' to the west.¹ Also made from stone, the new addition created a pedestrian walk along the western wall and second lane for vehicle traffic. The sidewalk has since been removed, however.

Another obvious alteration took place after a car ran into the western wall in 1978. The collision, and the subsequent two years before the repair of the resulting damage, required the reconstruction of the wall and the arch ring below. The former was laid in semi-coursed cut stone; the latter was made from concrete. The west wall now reaches its highest point north of the center of arch (it is impossible to determine from the existing records whether this asymmetry existed before the accident).

Many of the most recent changes have centered on the arch. The stream's rapid flow scours the piers, requiring a number of repairs over the past twenty years. The barrel was sealed with

¹Philadelphia Public Ledger, July 2, 1912 (Historical Society of Montgomery County Scrapbook, C-5, 9, 17). Direction of extension unclear, but new datestone placed in west wall next to 1789 stone.)

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gunnite in 1990, after stones and concrete began falling into the stream. Finally, the arch has become significantly less visible over time as the stream level has gradually risen. Before World War II water ran below the neat line, which is more than seven feet from the top of the arch; today the water is less than three feet below the crown.

Other alterations remain undated. At some time the interior of the eastern wall was laid in random-range quarry-faced ashlar; this may have been done in 1884, since the wall contains a datestone from that year which commemorates major reconstruction. Buttresses on either side of the creek support the eastern wall, though it is unclear when, or even if, these were added. Flat-arch precast concrete slabs have replaced the original stone coping. Those on the western wall have a flat arch, while the ones on the east are flat; on each side there are now two wood flower boxes.

History: William Penn originally laid out the road which crosses Gulph Creek Bridge. This route, known for most of its length as Old Gulph Road, ran along a series of winding valleys as it made its way west from Philadelphia. Far less hilly than most alternatives on the west side of the Schuylkill River, it became one of the region's main routes. During the 18th century an inn called the "Bird-in-Hand" began operating at what became the northern end of the bridge; it later gave its name to the surrounding community. Among the most famous travellers on this route were the Continental Army, who marched along the valley in 1777 as they retreated to winter quarters in Valley Forge.²

Few details of the bridge's 1787 construction have survived. No information was found which described how the bridge was paid for; similar projects at this time often used lotteries. It has been suggested that the initials "J.L." on the 1787 datestone refer to architect John Lewis, who later designed the six-arch stone Collegeville Bridge over Perkiomen Creek.³

From its early settlement this area along Gulph Creek had included industrial development, a process which accelerated during the 19th century. The valley contained a number of forges which used local iron deposits, and as early as 1747 settlers built a grain mill approximately one-half mile east of the bridge. During the 1800s this structure, known as the "Old Gulf

² Dora Harvey Develin, *Historic Lower Merion and Blockley* (Bala, PA: n.p., 1922), 27.

³ *Norristown Times-Herald*, May 23, 1938 (Scrapbook A-8, 15, 103, Montgomery County Historical Society).

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Mill," became one of many woolen mills in the valley. The best indication of this growth came during the 1830s, when the area surrounding the bridge became known as "Gulf Mills."⁴

A datestone on the east wall says the bridge was "rebuilt" in 1884, but no records were found which describe what work was done. The 1912 widening was the most visible change in the 20th century, though as described above there have been many other repairs. Traffic on the bridge began to decrease after the 1950s, when the construction of the Schuylkill Expressway provided a faster route from the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Center City Philadelphia. A further decline occurred in the 1980s, when a new steel bridge was built to the west to carry Old Gulph Road (Pennsylvania Highway 320) on its trip west. The Gulph Creek bridge remains busy, however, since motorists exiting the westbound Schuylkill Expressway still use it to head west to 320.

Sources:

Bluebook #3, Local History Files, Upper Merion Township Public Library, 24.

Develin, Dora Harvey. Historic Lower Merion and Blockley (Bala, PA: n.p., 1922), 27.

Norristown Times-Herald, May 23, 1938. Scrapbook A-8, 15, 103, Montgomery County Historical Society.

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Philadelphia Public Ledger, July 2, 1912, Historical Society of Montgomery County Scrapbook, C-5, 9, 17.

"Tales of Early Days in Upper Merion Linked with Name of Bird-in-Hand," Norristown Times-Herald, May 21, 1945 (Scrapbook B-8, 2, 191).

"Upper Merion," Combination Atlas Map of Montgomery County (Philadelphia: J.D. Scott, 1877), 26-27.

Historian: William Wright, Summer 1994

⁴ "Upper Merion," Combination Atlas Map of Montgomery County (Philadelphia: J.D. Scott, 1877), 26-27; "Tales of Early Days in Upper Merion Linked with Name of Bird-in-Hand," Norristown Times-Herald, May 21, 1945 (Scrapbook B-8, 2, 191); Bluebook #3, Local History Files, Upper Merion Township Public Library, 24.