

# Cultural Resources

▶ Discovering New Jersey's Transportation Past

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# Digest

Governor Jon S. Corzine

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Commissioner Kris Kolluri, Esq.

## >location:

sparta township  
sussex county

## >resource types:

bridge

## >action:

recording  
relocation



The *Cultural Resources Digest*, published by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, summarizes information from professional studies in archaeology, history and historic architecture conducted during the development of transportation projects. Visit us at <http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/environment/>

## West Mountain Road Bridge: New Life for a Historic Wooden Trestle



*The timber bridge carrying West Mountain Road over what is today the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad was a wooden trestle built in 1882. Curiously, it was supported by one handsome stone abutment (right) and two timber piers (or "bents")* [Source: New Jersey Department of Transportation].

The year was 1882 and the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway had come to Sparta Township. Its new tracks on the west side of Lanes Pond were part of a larger system of rails that would allow Sussex County farmers and zinc miners to ship their products to New York and New England, and to receive anthracite coal from Pennsylvania. However, the tracks would disrupt local vehicular travel by crossing a number of local roads, and one of these was West Mountain Road. So at its own expense, the railroad company built a timber trestle to carry vehicles safely over the rails. Designed to carry vehicles no heavier than a loaded wagon, it would stand for more than 100 years.

After cars and trucks had replaced horse-drawn wagons as the bridge's primary users, and after the old wooden trestle had been rebuilt a number of times by replacing damaged or deteriorated timbers and planks, it reached the end of its useful life. Because timber bridges from that era are relatively rare, a photographic record was made before it was replaced. And instead of being carted to a landfill, salvageable parts were recycled to become a rustic pedestrian bridge in a park a dozen miles away in Stillwater Township, and the massive rough-hewn stones from the old 1882 abutment were used to build the supports in its new home. The bridge that replaced it was made of laminated wood to evoke the old bridge.



*This view is looking west across the bridge. Designed and built for horse-drawn traffic, the bridge had a wood plank deck. The metal guiderrails seen on the right were added after cars and trucks began using the bridge. It was closed to vehicles following an accident in 2002 but remained open for pedestrians [Source: New Jersey Department of Transportation].*

The West Mountain Road bridge crossed the track of the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway (later the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad) from 1882 until its replacement in 2006. The bridge provided a safe crossing for road traffic over the railway and later allowed vehicular access to a 20th-century resort community that developed along the shores of Lake Grinnell. Having been designed before automobile ownership proliferated, it had outlived its usefulness as a vehicular bridge by the dawn of the 21st century. However, the old bridge survives, now carrying pedestrians across Pond Brook in Stillwater Township, about a dozen miles from its original site.

Sparta Township was formally organized in 1845, though Robert Ogden first settled the area in 1778. The Ogden family established several of the early industries in Sparta, producing both fruit and iron. Agriculture and mining remained vital to Sparta's economy well into the 20th century, though by the end of the 19th century, fruit production had given way to dairying and iron mining to zinc mining.

### **Railroads Come to Sussex County**

The abundance of dairy and zinc in Sussex County, and coal to the west in Pennsylvania, made Sparta an attractive locale for railroad development. Railroad operations in Sussex County began in the 1850s and by the end of the century, four companies served the county. One of these was the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway, which began its life as the Warwick Valley Railroad in New York in 1862. In order

to connect to the rich anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania, in 1882 the Warwick Valley Railroad consolidated with the Lehigh and Hudson River Railroad Company to form the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway Company (L&HR). This railroad served as a bridge line from Maybrook, New York to Allentown, Pennsylvania, connecting New England to the Pennsylvania coal fields. It also allowed freight bound for New England to travel through Sussex County as a by-pass around the New York metropolitan area.

The L&HR ran through Sparta Township, with tracks located directly to the west of Lake Grinnell. These tracks, which were laid in the early 1880s, had a minor effect on the surrounding area's geography and transportation network. Prior to the advent of the L&HR in Sparta, Lake Grinnell had been known as Lanes Pond. However when Grinnell Burt, the President of the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway, purchased the pond for ice production, he renamed it after himself. *A Map of the Railroads of New Jersey*, published in 1887, indicates a station at Lake Grinnell. As the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway was predominately a freight line, it is likely that this station was constructed to capitalize on the transport of ice from Lake Grinnell to the New York City metropolitan area and beyond, or to refrigerate perishable dairy products during shipment.

The L&HR Railway tracks also disturbed the system of roads around Lake Grinnell that had been in place since the early 1800s. Often in places where the L&HR crossed existing roads, the railroad company constructed bridges over



the tracks to accommodate road traffic safely. One of these bridges was the structure over the tracks at West Mountain Road.

By the time the railroad came through, West Mountain Road had existed for almost 80 years. Formally laid out in 1805, the road served as a secondary road connecting the main roads from Newton to Hamburg (present day N.J. Route 94) and from Gardiners Mills to Sparta (possibly present day Route 517). When the Lehigh and Hudson River Railway Company constructed an overhead bridge at West Mountain Road to carry the road over their newly-laid tracks, the company paid the full cost of construction and maintenance of the bridge.

Though the original design of the bridge in 1882 is not known definitively, by 1919—when the Interstate Commerce Commission’s Bureau of Valuation inventoried the structure—the West Mountain Road Bridge was a three span wooden stringer bridge. In 1911 the L&HR had improved its facilities order to accommodate increased freight traffic, and these upgrades included modifications to the tracks, sidings and bridges along the length of the line, including the West Mountain Road bridge. At the very least the timbers, railings and the deck were replaced or rebuilt at this time, presumably according to the 1882 design. The nature of wood being what it is, a number of stringers and substructure members were replaced in 1959 and again in 1991. In its last incarnation the bridge was 55 feet long, 14 feet wide and carried a single lane of traffic.

The Lehigh and Hudson River Railway Company filed for bankruptcy in 1972, was largely merged into the Conrail system in 1976 and today has been mostly abandoned. Portions of the former Lehigh and Hudson River Railway line are now used by the Norfolk Southern and the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railroad.

### A New Life for the Old Bridge

**B**y 1996 the bridge was ripe to be replaced. As one of the few timber bridges in the region, it was found to be eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, and measures to preserve it were explored. Ultimately the old bridge could no longer safely carry automotive traffic, but it was an excellent candidate for relocation as a pedestrian bridge. In late 2006 the bridge was photographically recorded to the standards of the Historic American Engineering Record at its original location at Lake Grinnell to preserve a record of its appearance. The bridge and the stone abutment were then removed, and the bridge modified for its new role: it was reduced in size, the deck was reinforced and sturdy handrails were added. Today the bridge crosses Pond Brook in Stillwater Township.

In honor of the old 1882 bridge, the plans for the new West Mountain Road Bridge called for a laminated wooden bridge, and the concrete abutments are textured to suggest the old stone blocks that supported its predecessor.

*In 2006 the bridge was slated for replacement. A new home for the bridge was found in Pond Brook Park in Stillwater Township, where, following modification and reconditioning, it today is part of a walkway [Source: New Jersey Department of Transportation].*



**Project:** West Mountain Road Bridge Replacement Project  
**Location:** Sparta Township, Sussex County  
**Date:** 2006-2007  
**Consultant:** Hunter Research, Inc., 120 West State Street, Trenton, NJ 08608

**For More Information...**

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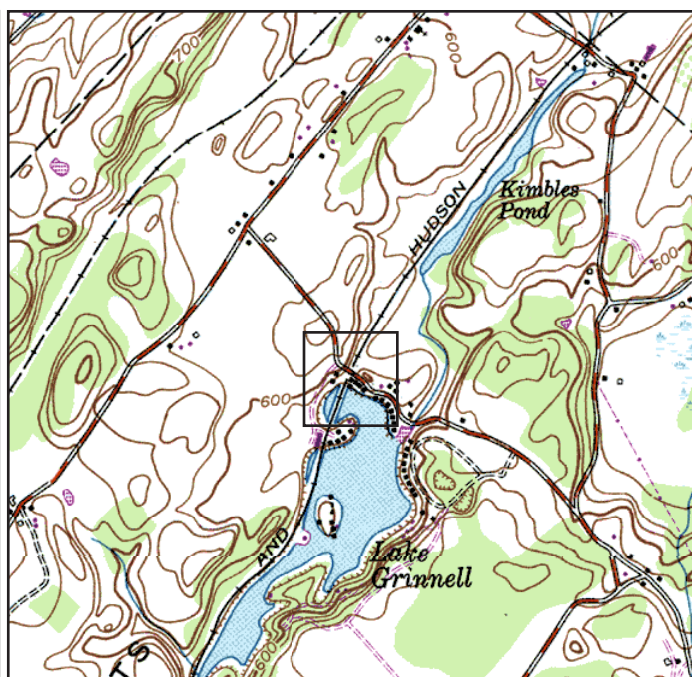
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*Additional information on transportation projects and historic preservation is available from the Division of Environmental Resources, New Jersey Department of Transportation (<http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/environment/overview.htm>), the Federal Highway Administration (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/archaeology/index.htm>), the New Jersey Historic Preservation Office (<http://www.state.nj.us/dep/hpo/2protection/njreview.htm>), and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (<http://www.achp.gov/work106.html>).*



Project vicinity map



Area of detail