



Town Of Chatham
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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13 October 2009

Carl Chamberlin, Environmental Planner
Frank A. Tramontozzi, P.E., Chief Engineer
URS CORPORATION
260 Franklin Street, Suite 300
Boston, MA 02110

Re: Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge, Chatham
Section 106 Review – Bridge No. C-07-001 Bridge Street over
Mitchell River (MHD Project Number 603690)

Dear Sirs:

This letter is in response to your letter of August 26, 2009, notifying the Chatham Historical Commission that you are undertaking a Review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 with respect to the contemplated replacement/rebuilding of the existing Mitchell River wooden drawbridge in Chatham.

Following the receipt of your letter, our Commission members attended the public informational meeting which you convened in Chatham on September 3, 2009, to inform residents of the design process. At that meeting which was attended by over sixty people, including many residents of the area and abutters to the Bridge itself, it was apparent that the overwhelming response of those present is that the proposed redesign is historically inappropriate; not in keeping with the existing historic Bridge and the surrounding area; has the potential of creating an unsafe traffic condition along Bridge Street and for the many people, including children, who use the Bridge for fishing, walking and biking; and would eliminate what appears to be the last remaining wooden drawbridge in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I spoke for the Commission and voiced our own concerns and stated that we would be holding a meeting on October 6, 2009, to review the possibility that the Bridge could be determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

On October 6th, our Commission met to discuss and review the status of the Bridge and to consider the concerns raised by the public at your informational meeting. We also heard from representatives of a newly formed committee of local citizens and property owners (Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge), from the Town Harbormaster, from abutting property owners, from neighborhood groups, and from individuals and organizations throughout the United States who are involved with protecting and saving historic bridges.

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Attached to this letter are copies of all such correspondence for your consideration. All of those entities, as well as the Commission members, agreed that replacing this historic wooden draw and trestle bride with a steel and concrete bridge would adversely affect the historic significance of the site, and forever change the character of the surrounding area.

At the conclusion of our meeting, the Commission's seven members voted unanimously to confirm that the wooden drawbridge spanning the Mitchell River, which was originally built in the 1850's and has essentially continued in place to the present, is a structure of historical significance to the Town of Chatham. It further voted unanimously to advise you and the Massachusetts Historical Commission that we will be actively working to put together sufficient additional information for future submission so that the Bridge may be determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Commission also wishes that it be fully clear that while we are concerned about any possible delay in the project which would improve the existing condition of the Bridge, we respectfully request that a wooden drawbridge that is in keeping with what now exists be designed for this site.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter, and please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Donald Aikman, Chairman
Chatham Historical Commission

DA/sbp

Cc: B. Simon, SHPO Massachusetts Historical Commission
Ron Bergstrom, Chairman – Chatham Board of Selectmen
Jeff Colby, Town of Chatham DPW Superintendent
Stuart Smith, Town of Chatham Harbormaster
Stephen Soma, Massachusetts Highway Department

Att: James L. Cooper, Ph.D.
Kitty Henderson, Executive Director – Historic Bridge Foundation
Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Drawbridge
Old Village Association
The West Chatham Association, Inc.
Richard C. Hiscock
Anne Baxter, 190 Bridge Street, Chatham
James W. Igoe, President – Preservation Massachusetts

THE MITCHELL RIVER BRIDGE

I. HISTORY OF BRIDGE AND ITS ANTECEDENTS SINCE AROUND 1850

The Mitchell River Bridge was so named because it was the eastern boundary of the forty-acre farm of William Mitchell, who was resident of Chatham (Monomoyick) from about 1684. He married a daughter (or granddaughter) of the original settler of Chatham, William Nickerson.

Before roughly 1850, there was no bridge over the river, but apparently various people provided ferry service, or individuals used their own boats to cross it. There was also a landing nearby for the local stage (i.e., Stage Harbor), where people and cargoes off-loaded for further transit onto Bridge Street and beyond into the Old Village.

Bridge Street itself was laid out in 1854, and the bridge was built soon after by local carpenters and timber framers David Edwards and George Atwood at a cost of \$1,300. From all reports and drawings/paintings that we have, it was a wooden structure similar to what is there today, and it lasted until 1883, when it was closed briefly for repairs.

Photographs of the Mitchell River and the wooden bridge dating back to the late 19th century show a structure essentially the same as the current bridge, although somewhat narrower. A drawbridge can be seen in some of the photos, although it may not have been a single span.

Over the years, the bridge was continually worked on, rebuilt and occasionally shut down for repairs, but after it was closed for most of the time between 1915 and 1920, the Town voted to rebuild the wooden trestle in the style of the existing bridge, and \$9,000 was raised for that purpose.

Other repairs and changes were made in the 1930's and thereafter, but the wooden drawbridge continued to remain. Then, in 1975, the bridge was found to be unsafe, and the draw was bolted down and closed on a temporary basis. The Selectmen then sought to have the Coast Guard allow the bridge (over a navigable river) to be permanently closed and replaced with a concrete structure, but local residents led by Spaulding Dunbar and supported by Bob Walsh and Richard Hiscock formed a committee to save the Bridge. (Here is one of their bumper stickers!) The Coast Guard ruled that a drawbridge was legally required because it was a navigable river and because sailboats had the right of access and because Mill and Little Mill Ponds were "safe harbors" in the case of storms or hurricanes, and they ordered the Selectmen to reopen the bridge.

As a result, the town went to the State for funding, and a contract on the order of \$500,000-\$600,000 was entered into in 1980. However, the contractor went bankrupt, and this and other delays cause the bridge not to be completed until around 1983. The drawspan was moved from the east side to the west side, and when it opened it turned

out not to be fully vertical, but it still was the same wooden drawbridge that the town put in around 1858.

Just to the east of the bridge on the Stage Harbor side is an imposing 18th century house (now owned by the Baker family that gave us the Monomoy Theater) that in its lifetime has served as a coaching inn and as a lodging for fisherman and bird hunters, including Daniel Webster. The house and wooden drawbridge a part of a site that has been unchanged for over 200 years and is a constant reminder of Chatham in its earliest days.

II. PROPOSED REPLACEMENT OF THE BRIDGE

Since around the year 2000, the Town has known that the existing bridge would have to be rebuilt or replaced and has been in contact with the State so that it is on the list of towns which would receive funding for new bridges. Regular inspections have shown that the existing pilings are being infected with borers, that the cable mechanism is faulty, that the draw itself does not rise to the proper height, plus other assorted problems.

Earlier this year, the Harbormaster was visited by representatives of URS Corporation, who advised him that they had been selected to design and be the lead contractor for a new bridge at a cost of approximately \$12,000,000, all of which would be paid for by the federal government (80%) and the state (20%), and that they would be coming to Chatham to hold an informational meeting with the citizens later this year. The Harbormaster, at that time, informed URS of the special history of the Bridge and that the citizens would be extremely troubled about any replacement that would ignore the historical wooden drawbridge component and the aesthetical nature of the site itself which has been practically unaltered over 150 years.

On September 3rd, over 60 people in Chatham attended the informational meeting at the Community Center, at which time URS presented a design for a modern steel and concrete replacement for the existing Bridge. URS stated that such a bridge would last approximately 75 years, would have less regular maintenance, and would be much more efficient than what is there today. In the comment and question period that followed, those present overwhelmingly criticized the design as not in keeping with the historic wooden drawbridge; as being aesthetically incompatible with the special site, especially because of the massive concrete tower being used to lift the drawspan; as encouraging greater speed for automobiles and the real possibility of accidents to those people walking Bridge Street, including many young children, using the Bridge for fishing; and as not in keeping with the historic character or the Town of Chatham. In response to one questioner, the URS representative reluctantly seemed to admit that a wooden drawbridge "could" possibly be built in place of the existing Bridge. Other comments were made regarding the need to widen the existing span, raise the crown, and fix the existing bascule so that it is able to be raised to the required vertical height, which is presently not the case. The URS people then stated that they had listened to the comments and would seek to do a re-design of the new bridge and return to Chatham for a second informational meeting (now scheduled for November 19th).

III. THE BRIDGE IS THE LAST WOODEN DRAWBRIDGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

A review of the files of Massachusetts Historical Commission has disclosed that the Mitchell River Bridge is the only remaining wooden drawbridge in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and that the trunnion-cable-electrical lift mechanism is also the last of its kind in the State. Further ongoing research indicates that the only other known wooden drawbridge in the United States is the Glimmerglass Bridge in Brielle, New Jersey, although a very few others may possibly exist. In any event, the Mitchell River Bridge is a unique historical structure and a special piece of our history, and it should not be demolished or replaced without an absolute and compelling necessity.

III. REQUIREMENTS OF THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION ACT OF 1966

Under existing law (the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966), if federal funding or federal permits are used or required for any project in which a building or structure of historic significance could be adversely affected, a review of the project (called a "106 review") is required by the state historical commission (in this case, MHC) and the local historical commission (Chatham Historical Commission) to determine if the adverse harm to the historic building or structure (or site) can be eliminated, mitigated or lessened by alternative actions. While MHC/CHC do not have a veto power over the proposed activity, the Act requires a series of consultations between the parties to find feasible alternatives to damaging or harming historical properties, so that the intent and effect of a 106 Review often means that ways are found to preserve the historic structure.

URS has already notified CHC that they are undertaking a 106 Review in this matter, and CHC has been requested to advise URS (along with the Massachusetts Highway Department) of its position. CHC will be meeting on October 6th to review the situation and determine its position. At that time, it is anticipated that CHC may advise URS that the Bridge appears to be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, in which case CHC can be expected to so notify MHC and ask for their consideration of such a nomination. Eligibility for the National Register is an important consideration, but not the only consideration, for a 106 Review.

There is also a parallel State review process in Massachusetts under MGL Ch. 9, Sections 26-27C which "mirrors" the federal 106 Review and which usually takes place alongside the 106 Review if state funding and state permits are required, as is the case here.

IV. REASONS FOR AND AGAINST RETENTION OF A WOODEN FOOTBRIDGE OVER THE MITCHELL RIVER

In Favor of a Wooden Footbridge

- It is part of Chatham's history, as well as the history of the State and the nation.
- The Bridge may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.
- It is part of a historic site that is relatively untouched since 1800,

and the site would be harmed if a concrete and steel bridge were placed there.

- According to experts in the field, the cost of a wooden drawbridge may likely be much less than a concrete and steel structure.
- A concrete and steel structure, at the end of the Bridge Street straight-away, would clearly encourage cars to increase their speed.
- The existing wooden structure itself causes cars to slow down and is safer for those walking the Bridge and fishing on its sides, especially younger children.
- The townspeople clearly appear to want to retain a wooden drawbridge

In Favor of a Modern Concrete and Steel Structure

- It would have greater longevity (estimate of 75 years vs. 25-30 years) and less likelihood of significant repairs than a wooden bridge.
- Possible greater load factor than a wooden bridge, but it should be noted that the present Bridge has not been "posted" (it continues to accommodate all-sized loads), so this needs to be clarified.
- Possibility that the draw can be raised to a greater height than that of a wooden bridge, but this is not clear (and the present boat traffic may only need the draw to be raised to its presently certified vertical height).

VI. FORMATION OF THE FRIENDS OF THE MITCHELL RIVER WOODEN DRAWBRIDGE AND THE ACTIVITIES OF OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Friends of the Mitchell River Wooden Footbridge is a group of Chatham citizens, property owners, and others who have now formed a committee for the purpose of communicating the legitimate concerns of many of the people that it would be completely wrong to eliminate the historical wooden drawbridge that has been there, in one form or another, for over 150 years, as well as replacing it with a concrete and steel structure that is totally out of keeping with the existing site. The Committee has worked actively with the Chatham Historical Society and others to obtain the historical records and files regarding the Bridge, and it has also consulted with national experts in wooden bridge reconstruction and historic bridges as to the most appropriate ways to retain a wooden drawbridge at this site.

The Old Village Association, which has a special interest in maintaining a working drawbridge over the Mitchell River because of its many residents who have boats requiring proper access to Stage Harbor and Nantucket Sound, will also be expressing its deep concern over the existing design.

The Pease Brothers, who own and operate the boatyard at the foot of Eliphamets Lane, and have a special need for a drawbridge that will accommodate their large boats and high masts, have stated their views that they would strongly prefer that a wooden drawbridge be retained so long as the bridge can be rebuilt with a wider span and higher crown (cap).

VII. WHERE THE BRIDGE IS WITH RESPECT TO OTHER TRANSPORTATION PROJECTS ON CAPE COD

All major transportation projects on Cape Cod which receive federal funding are ranked in order of importance and placed in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) which has already approved the proposed replacement of the existing Bridge (but not the design, which is subject to review and approval by MHD, the designer, and the town). The TIP decision is then subject to review and approval by the Massachusetts Planning Organization (MPO), which met on Monday, September 28th. The MPO is made up of representatives of various governmental bodies and organizations and includes the Cape Cod Regional Transport Authority, which is headed up by Ron Bergstrom. A letter was sent from the Friends of the Mitchell River Bridge to the MPO advising them of the strong disapproval of local citizens of the proposed steel and concrete span and its present design, and at the meeting on September 28th, Norm Pacun, on behalf of the Friends, and Don Aikman of the CHC, spoke with the MPO representatives and addressed its concerns. Priscilla LeClerc of the Cape Cod Commission, who is the coordinator for the TIP and the MPO, confirmed that both the Bridge and the town of Chatham were "very quaint" and that our concerns deserved attention. The representative of Mass. Highway Department stated that our letter would be given directly to the MHD project group. Ms. LeClerc also stated that she planned to attend the next informational design meeting in Chatham on November 19th.

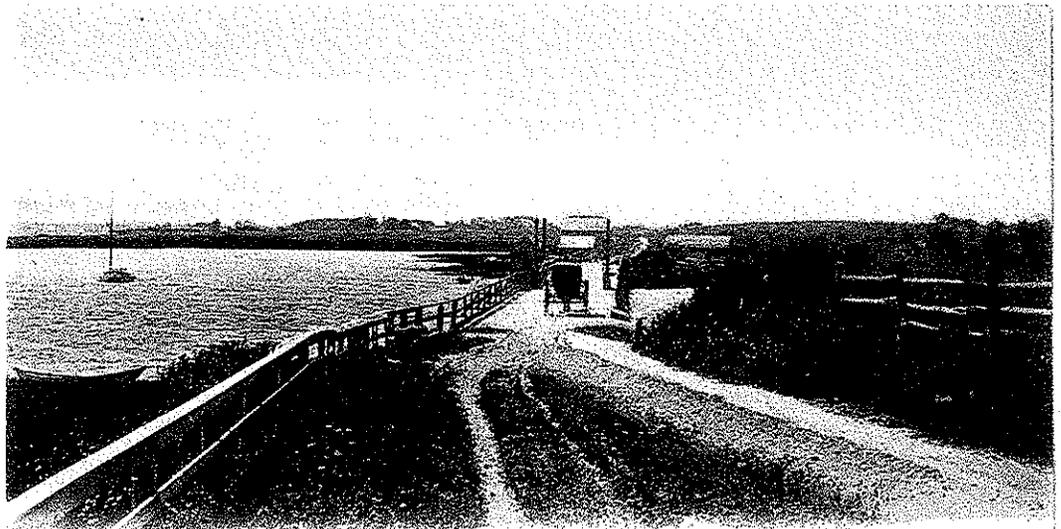
VIII. POSITION OF OTHER PUBLIC OFFICIALS

A. The Town Harbormaster, Stuart Smith, has been extremely helpful in providing information and direction to important records regarding the Bridge. He and Jeff Colby, the Highway Department head, have primary authority over the operation and use of the Bridge. The Harbormaster is generally in favor of retaining a wooden drawbridge and has expressed his aesthetic and other concerns over the proposed replacement structure. However, the Harbormaster believes it is necessary to have the existing Bridge repaired and/or replaced soon, while it is still in a safe and usable condition, and before further deterioration might cause the Bridge further problems, and that the Town be able to take advantage of the federal and state funds which are being made available.

B. The Federal Highway Administration is responsible for approximately 80% of the cost of the replacement, and they will need to approve any wooden drawbridge replacement. A Timber Bridge Program is in existence at the federal level, but it is presently unclear if it has sufficient funding to deal with this replacement, and this will have to be clarified.



STAGE HARBOR AND MITCHELL RIVER BRIDGE, CHATHAM, CAPE COD MASS.



Copyright 1908 by the Photograph Co

The Bridge at Stage Harbor, Chatham, Mass.

Dear J. Having the time of my young
life. Over film bridge the 10 miles E