

Lower Elgin Road Bridge on Wilbarger Creek, Bastrop County, TX: a History



**Compiled by Ernie Nance and Debra Ferguson
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Front cover photo credit: Texas Department of Transportation

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Introduction

We began researching the history of the Lower Elgin Road bridge shortly after it sustained damage to the decking during the flood of May 2015. At the time, we were interested in locating funding to repair the decking to restore it to its pre-flood condition and knew that we would have to know the bridge story to be successful. At the outset, however, we didn't know much about the bridge history, other than that the bridge was old and that, as recently as 1997, it carried all road traffic that crossed Wilbarger Creek on Lower Elgin Road. Because of its age, we weren't sure that we would be able to find much information about the bridge when we first began this project. Ultimately, however, we were successful, but that success required overcoming several difficulties.

One of the first difficulties that we encountered was that some information we found was incorrect; for example, when we first began the research, Bridgehunters.com, a website dedicated to preserving information about bridges, listed the year of construction as 1910, rather than its actual construction date of 1888. The incorrect reporting of the year of construction slowed the research a bit, until we found information with the correct year.

Another difficulty that we encountered was that Bastrop County as it is now was very different in the days before the bridge was constructed. Most of the roads that exist now did not exist then, and the ones that did had different names. Lower Elgin Road is also currently known as County Road 55, but in the 1880s, it was known as Coats Road. Until we made the connection to the Coats family for whom the road was originally named, information about the bridge was difficult to find.

We realized shortly after starting the research project that our research was starting to focus on two questions: 'Who wanted this bridge?' and 'Why did they want it?' These questions brought us to another difficulty that we had to overcome: to answer these questions, we had to step outside of our modern world-view and look at Bastrop County as it was then. For example, the process of obtaining provisions is easy today; it requires getting into our cars, making a short drive to either Bastrop or Elgin, and buying whatever it is that we need from one of many stores in the area. We may not even

consciously notice crossing Wilbarger Creek or one of its tributaries that run through the area, but water crossings were challenging in the past. In the earlier times, the trip was made either by wagon or horseback; although the distance was roughly the same as today, the time required to cover that distance was substantially longer. In those days, as a shopping convenience, store owners provided wagon yards behind their businesses to enable farmers to camp overnight (Arbuckle and Davis 2012). We also have many choices in terms of places to shop today, but that was not the case in the 1880s. The original questions of who wanted the bridge and why did they want it were eventually expanded to include the question of “How did people used to — ?” The eventual inclusion of that question expanded the research considerably, and eventually yielded very interesting information.

Our early research focused on the area near the bridge because we took it for granted that the families nearest the bridge may be the greatest beneficiaries of its construction. Because it was built on land that was originally owned by William Coats, Mr. Coats and his family were an early research topic. Research on the Coats family cemetery, which still exists near the bridge, yielded a great deal of information, but in the beginning, we had no idea of how this information would ultimately tie into the bridge history.

An early break in our research came in the form of the Texas Historic Bridge Inventory form that we obtained from the Texas Department of Transportation. It provided the year of construction and bridge type, as well as other information. We knew that the information included on this form would ultimately be important, too, but it would take many more hours of searching for details to truly understand how and why it was important.

We now know that this little bridge, which has spanned Wilbarger Creek for 128 years, has had a bidirectional effect on the agricultural, economic, and business development of the area by providing an affordable and easy means of transportation to enable farmers to get their crops to market. The expansion of agriculture in the Utley, Cedar Creek, and Union Hill communities, facilitated by the bridge through easy market access for farmers, provided the farmers with increased income and, consequently, increased ability to purchase goods and services in Elgin. Increased business demands

provided entrepreneurial opportunities, leading to the development of additional business and banking establishments and to continued growth in the area.

As the information about the agricultural, business, and economic developments began coming together, we were often surprised at the direction that our research had led. At the outset, we had only hoped to be able to find background information about the bridge. As we dug deeper into the bridge background, the history of Bastrop County, and the developments of the area that began in the post-Civil War era, however, the research yielded results that far exceeded our minimal hopes. In the end, we realized that the deeper level of understanding the importance of this bridge is not found in the date of its construction, its design, or its location. Although all of these elements are important, the deeper importance of the bridge must be understood within the historical context of both the days before it was constructed and its subsequent effects on the business/economic development of Elgin and on the agricultural/economic development of the surrounding area.

We are pleased to be able to tell the story of the bridge.

Ernie Nance

Debra Ferguson

April, 2016

Purpose of this Document

This document records historical information about the Lower Elgin Road bridge and includes details about its approval and construction, bridge type, and the community in which it was built. This document also includes supporting documentation in the form of photos and copies of relevant historical documents for the purpose of completeness.

Organization of this Document

Although the interconnectedness of many of the historical events associated with the importance of this bridge is often not obvious on the surface level, several events are connected specifically through this bridge. Fig. 1 shows a timeline of several of these events that are addressed within this document; events noted in red are shown to provide a sense of historical perspective.

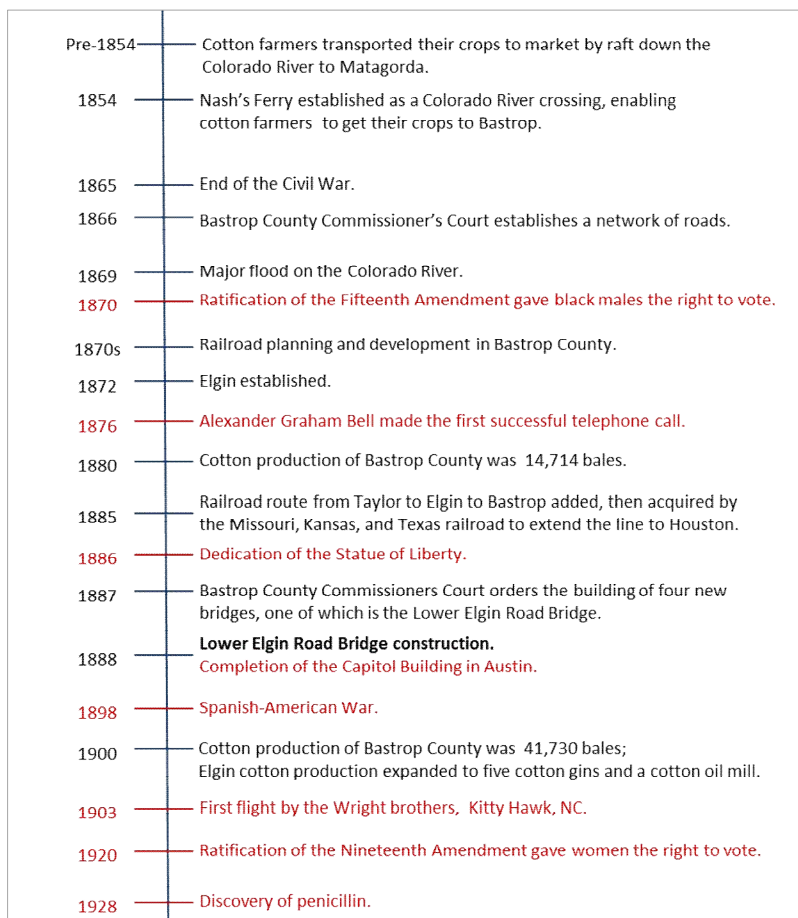


Fig. 1—Historical timeline.

Events listed in black are discussed in this document; events noted in red are shown for historical perspective.

This document begins with historical information about the Lower Elgin Road bridge, including information about the approval of its construction by the Bastrop County Commissioner's Court and time of use, its design, and the historical importance of the design. Next, the focus shifts backward in time to provide an overview of the post-Civil War situation in Bastrop County, then moves forward chronologically to describe simultaneous developments in Bastrop County to highlight the larger role that the bridge played in the agricultural, business, and financial development of the county over time. Information about the family of William Coats is also included because, in addition to owning the land on which the bridge was built, several family members were important to the economic development of Elgin; other family members also held political positions at the County level, then went on to hold State-level elected office. This document also includes photos and appendix sections that contain copies of some of the relevant documents that we obtained.

Historical Information about the Lower Elgin Road Bridge

The Lower Elgin Road bridge is a Pratt through-truss bridge that spans Wilbarger Creek in Bastrop County (Fig. 2). It was built in 1888 and is currently 128 years old. When requested, the Texas Department of Transportation provided a copy of the Texas Historic Bridge Inventory form for this bridge (Appendix A). In addition to specifying the construction date of 1888, the Texas Historic Bridge Inventory form states that this “bridge links the rural communities of Cedar Valley, Utley and Union Hill with Elgin, a railroad town to its north.” The form also includes information about the construction in the ‘Historical Significance’ section: “This is an early pin-connected bridge, possibly erected by Kansas City Bridge and Iron Co. in 1887,” then lists volume and page numbers for this information in the County archives. Although this information was included on the form that was completed in June 1987, it had been crossed out at some point; the information itself, however, proved to be largely accurate.

The Lower Elgin Road bridge remained in continuous, daily use from its construction in 1888 until a new bridge was built in 1997. After the construction of the new bridge, the Lower Elgin Road bridge was still open for pedestrian use until the flood of May 2015. The May flood damaged the decking and, for safety reasons, the bridge was closed to pedestrian traffic by the county. The decking sustained additional damage from the flood of October 2015. As of April 2016, the damaged decking has not been repaired, and no plans have been formulated for the repairs.

On April 7, 1887, Bastrop County Commissioner's Court (BCCC) ordered the construction of four new bridges. One of these four bridges is the Lower Elgin Road bridge, which is specified in the minutes as "On Willbarger Creek at the old bridge site."

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company for the construction of said Bridges [sic] and to sign the same on behalf of Bastrop County.” Appendix B includes copies of the original, handwritten minutes of the Commissioner’s Court.

The Pratt Through-Truss Bridge Design

The Lower Elgin Road bridge is an example of a specific bridge design: a Pratt through-truss bridge. This was considered to be a “modern” bridge at the time that it was built in 1888. This section provides more details about this type of bridge.

On April 4, 1844, Thomas and Caleb Pratt, a father and son engineering team, were granted US Patent #3523 for their Pratt through-truss bridge design (Historic Bridges Encyclopedia). A simplified explanation of the design focuses on the arrangement of vertical and diagonal components. “The internal diagonals are under tension during balanced loading and vertical elements under compression” (Wikipedia), which provides both stability and durability; this design can be used for spans of up to 250 ft. Appendix C includes a copy of the patent issued to Thomas Pratt and Caleb Pratt for this bridge design. Despite their differences, a review of several of the ‘newer’ truss bridge designs show similarities to the Pratt design (Fig. 3).

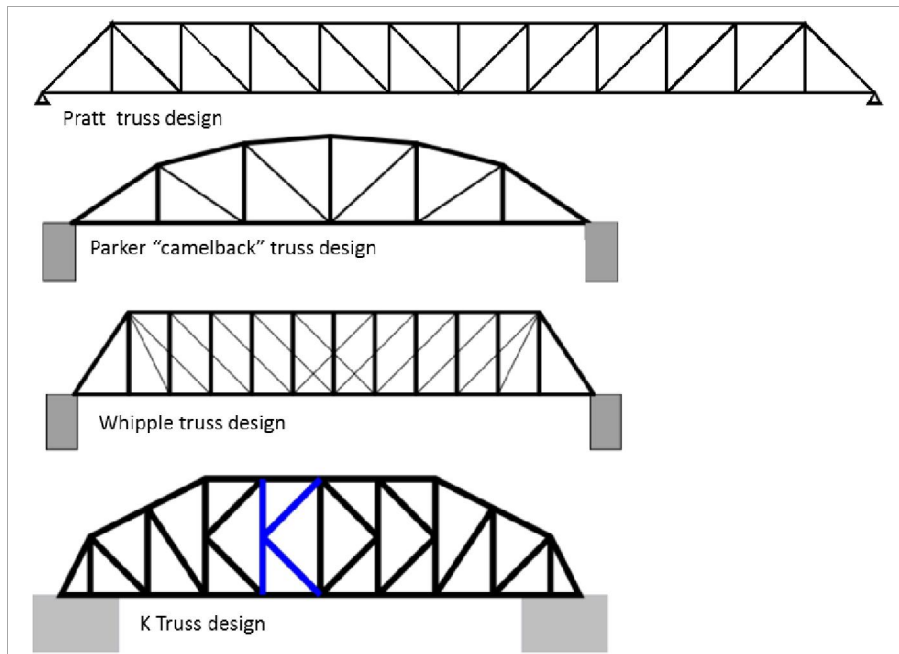


Fig. 3—Truss bridge designs. Many of the newer truss designs are based on the original Pratt truss design. Figure based on Wikipedia drawings