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# Merrit Parkway



by Dylan Coonrad

### ***Coxe Hall Weathervane***

***Today's location for the Global Union, this building was initially a mining laboratory. Its original weathervane, dating back to 1910, contains a pick and shovel.***

### ***Lehigh's Origins***

***After an incredibly successful career, ASA Packer felt obligated to give back to the Lehigh Valley. He pledged \$500,000 to go towards education. Rumor has it that in the spring of 1865 the president of Lafayette College visited Packer and that Packer seriously considered contributing the money until he found out that Lafayette was Presbyterian.***

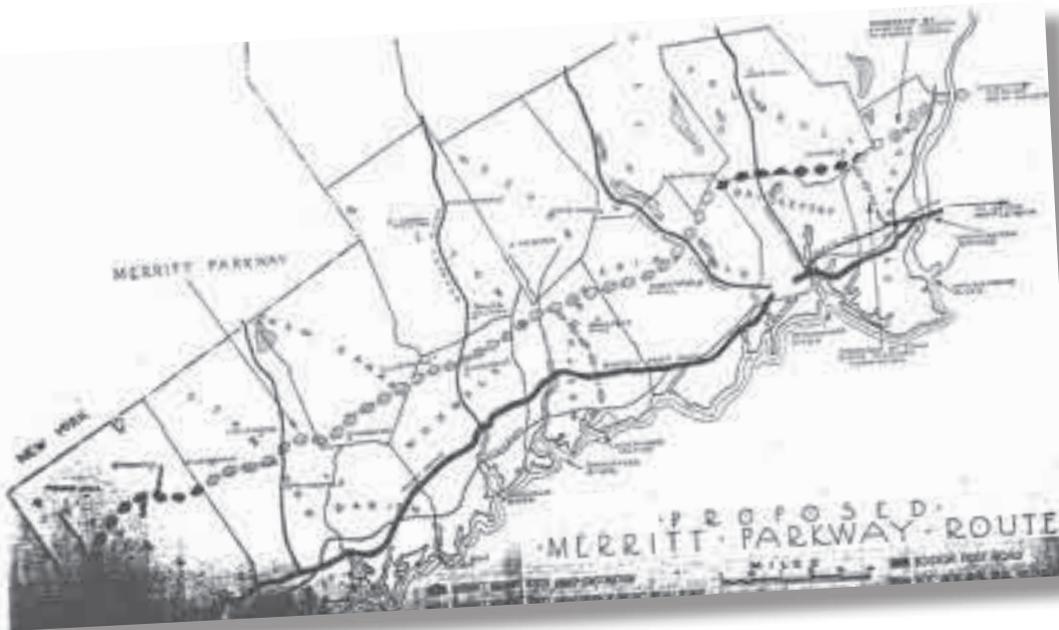
**T**he bustle of cars hides it. The distant thunder of machines sometimes eclipses it. But beneath the commotion of everyday life exists a forgotten wonder that once trickled through the nation's countryside.

In a society mired in notions of speed and riddled with thoughts of industry, its original intention is lost but not entirely forgotten. What once was a winding pathway through the mountains and valleys of the North American landscape has become an example of modern decadence. The Merritt Parkway served as the model for recreational driving in America and ushered in the age of the automobile. In a time of urban development and expansion, the Parkway wandered through the wilderness and meandered among mountainsides. It was supposed to be the future of roadways in America, where a city dweller could escape into a world of reverent, leisurely enjoyment. However, with the evolving ideas of transportation and increasing need for commercial growth, American roadways became more industrial in nature, hasty and impatient. The Parkway exists today as a congested traffic zone more than as a nationally recognized historical landmark. Its bridges and other elements represent the thoughts of a generation constantly striving to connect its people and its communities, the urban with the rural. They were built not merely to bridge spans of earth, but to increase awareness of the natural landscape. The design of the Merritt Parkway and of its architectural features defines an era in which men sought relief from

the urbanity that surrounded them, in hopes to encounter a wilderness that once existed in its place, but as the world changed, its significance was somewhere lost in translation.

Citizens flocked to the Connecticut countryside on the morning of June 29, 1938. The early sun brought a stifling heat, complimented by rays of light that pierced through the surrounding landscape. In the distance, a procession could be heard, fit with bells and whistles to the highest degree. The blinding light bouncing off the gleaming-white surface shrouded the pathway ahead in glowing curiosity. It was a joyous day, one that congressman Schuyler Merritt had envisioned for years. The aging politician patted his moist brow with a handkerchief he drew from his pocket, and in careful thought, recounted the efforts of many men and the long road they took to get there.

On April 30, 1850, Frederick Law Olmsted, a modest young farmer from rural Connecticut, joined his brother John and friend Charley Brace on the Henry Clay, a passenger boat bound for Liverpool, England. Three days after arriving overseas, Olmsted had his first encounter with the English countryside. The young farmer was overwhelmed: "The country—and such a country!—green, dripping, glistening, gorgeous! We stood dumb-stricken by its loveliness...."



***The proposed parkway would detour traffic to an alternate route to be constructed 20 miles inland from the Boston Post Road that would solve problems concerning congestion in local communities.***

***Source: Radde, Bruce. The Merritt Parkway, pg. 26.***

As skyscrapers slowly rose into the urban skyline, citizens yearned for salvation from the development that surrounded them. The technological advances made by the automobile industry brought the suburban countryside within reach. Cars became a necessity of modern life available to all social classes, a

Olmsted was most impressed with the romantic garden tradition of the English gentry and the newly developed civic spaces of Joseph Paxton. After returning home he wrote a short article on Paxton's Birkenhead Park for *The Horticulturist*, and in 1852 he published his impressions of English landscaping in a bulky travel book, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*. In 1858, Olmsted got a chance to deliver a taste of the English country to America when he was appointed lead architect of New York City's Central Park. For six years he worked to transform the swampy, craggy center of New York City into a picturesque vista reminiscent of the carefully wrought English landscapes he so adored. The park was designed to serve as a substitute to a visit to the country—a bit of nature delivered to your front door and accessible by winding carriage pathways.

The City Beautiful Movement spread across the nation in a wave of verdant expansion. Using Olmsted's Central Park as a model, American park designers at the turn of the twentieth century began looking to the country for inspiration. "Planners envisioned cities dotted with wholesome, morally uplifting parks connected by paved carriageways winding through narrow, pastoral strips of parkland." They were driven by an egalitarian desire to deliver the country to the masses confined within city boundaries. However, in the growing market for commercial development, parks no longer belonged between civic centers and residential high rises. Recreational areas found themselves pushed to the outskirts of city limits, secluded from the mess of steel and iron framework.

mode of transportation that flexed the arm of American innovation. European automobile development, on the other hand, was viewed as a luxury of the wealthy, strictly limited to high-class patrons for leisurely recreation and not a mandatory means of transportation. The scene on the streets of America was hardly as idyllic. Early automobiles pattered around street corners and skyscrapers eclipsed entire city blocks. A survey in 1895 tallied four cars in the United States; by 1900 there were eight thousand automobiles on American roads and by 1940 thirty-two million. This rapid increase allowed residential expansion beyond city limits. Road networks stretched far distances from urban centers. Driving became not only an expression of recreational enjoyment, but also of peaceful repose from the city atmosphere. Early circulation routes were intended to connect commuters with the park-like aesthetics of a lost generation. Streets and highways adopted characteristics that made them seem more like forest oases rather than paved expressways. It was the landscape architect, experienced in design and landscape appreciation, who was responsible for laying out these "parkways," leaving the engineer to calculate the optimal efficiency of highways.

Parkways were initially adapted from Olmsted's carriageway layouts of Central Park. These sinuous parkways drastically differed from the orthogonal roads of the city. Instead of being placed on the land, parkways moved through it, responding to the dips and dives between mountains and valleys. Carefully chosen trees peppered the landscape. Side rails accentuated and complimented the surroundings instead of barricading

commuter traffic from verdant forests. It was this aesthetic that appealed to the developers of the Merritt Parkway.

The meeting was years in the making. Highway commissioner John MacDonald knew it. He stood, looking out upon the crowd of disgruntled citizens, feeling the burden of the long road ahead of him. The scene was set for a radical change. Heavy trucks and loud vans crowded the Boston Post Road, leaving intolerant communities in a haze of smog and dissent. Countless years of ignorance brought him to this day, when progress was imminent and change was undeniable.

In an age marveled by technological innovation and economic maturity, the Boston Post Road began to see its age. As it was called under the Federal Highway Act of 1921, US Highway 1 served as the sole connecting artery between metropolitan centers like New York and Boston

tinguish their towns from nearby New York City pushed for the second option, but not without resentment. The decision immediately polarized the citizens of Fairfield County. On one hand, many of the county landowners opposed the parkway in fear of property reductions and the acquisitions needed to build the road. The looming threat of New Yorkers flooding the Connecticut countryside in pursuit of their version of the American dream intimidated the folk of Fairfield County. Others favored the addition of an alternate route to lessen traffic situations and ensure safer commuter transportation. The opposition movement gained steam among republican estate owners, who formed the Fairfield County Planning Association (FCPA) to voice their concerns in a unified political organization. Stamford congressman Schuyler Merritt championed the efforts of the citizens in favor of

## The looming threat of New Yorkers flooding the Connecticut countryside in pursuit of their suburban version of the American dream intimidated the simple-minded folk of Fairfield County.

and the upper New England regions since colonial times. It was designed to accommodate the pre-industrial climate, characterized by limited commercial travel and low-speed, traditional horse and buggy carriages. When applied to the newly developed means of transportation, the needs of this early lifestyle could not adapt to the demanding requirements for high-speed, automotive travel. The Boston Post Road was notorious for its congestion and poorly maintained condition. Oftentimes, the road ran directly through town centers along its route, combining local commuter traffic with long-distance circulation. Following World War I, truck traffic increased along the Atlantic coastline, bringing irrevocable damage to the road and its bordering communities. Citizens cried out for relief from the loud, unwelcomed congestion, and yearned to restore the sanctity that was once cherished.

In 1923, John MacDonald, the Connecticut state highway commissioner, proposed three solutions: a new truck route parallel to the Post Road that would bypass around problematic areas; a new parkway twenty miles inland to alleviate congestion; and further expanding and updating the existing road. Connecticut politicians, hoping to dis-

building the roadway and quelled the fears of the FCPA by guaranteeing the proposed parkway's respect for the existing topography of the land and its desire to invite favorable citizens:

A beautiful parkway is not wholly or primarily a means for quick transit, but it should be constructed so as to add beauty to the landscape, and therefore, help attract desirable residents... and add a desirable element to the population.

Its early stages were filled with the excitement of creating a roadway that accommodated modern transportation needs and showcased the landscape of the Connecticut countryside. Beneath it all was an underlying unity; an understanding held by all those involved that transcended typical American roadway construction and ventured into grounds never before considered. They would need this unity to guide them through a dark spot in American history, when abandoning the project seemed logical and completing it seemed implausible.

The Great Depression stormed across America, leaving devastation and despair in its trail. Economic turmoil disrupted the social hierarchy all around the nation.

Class boundaries faded, equalizing the public on economically meager grounds. Most Americans found comfort in the growing numbers that made up the middle class, reserving the lap of luxury for a select few. In a time when excessive indulgences were rare and costly, citizens turned to their families for guidance and support. As a way of reestablishing familial bonds, people resorted to more efficient and inexpensive forms of family entertainment, both to preserve a level of normalcy in an otherwise upturned lifestyle and to distract from the harsh reality that existed around them. Gasoline in the early 1930s sold for fewer

The Merritt Parkway was in its conceptual phases when the Depression hit. Despite the tightened financial restrictions imposed by the government and the penny-pinching highway commissioner John MacDonald, Merritt Parkway developers were intent on completing the project. It was more evident than ever that the success of the Parkway would provide the salvation the nation needed from economic hardships and industrial mayhem. It would not only boost morale, but also provide relief from dangerous transportation routes. In 1932, the Boston Post Road was plagued with 96 deaths and 2,533 injuries. The

sense, the Merritt Parkway is a product of the Depression as much as it is a response to it. What was originally intended to merely reduce traffic congestion became a symbol of American valor. High-level materials, designers, and technicians were unaffordable, leaving the efforts of many to be the burden of few.

In the outskirts of Connecticut, a group of men met in a small office. Cigar smoke made visible the excitement that permeated the stifling atmosphere. The project laid out in front of them was for a road, a simple solution to a nagging problem. They were commissioned to make it something more, something monu-

“We believe the Parkway will be designed and built not alone, or even primarily to afford rapid transit, but to be in itself an object of beauty and to tend to the rest and peace and satisfaction of those who inhabit the country and those who pass through it.”

--Congressman Schuyler Merritt  
Groundbreaking Ceremony, May 23, 1934

than twenty cents a gallon, making pleasure driving, especially on Sundays, a desirable and inexpensive family activity. For this reason, the Depression actually sparked an increased demand for automobile production. While the stock market and other commercial businesses sank into financial bankruptcy, the automobile industry rose to highlighted success. At the onset of the Depression, 280,307 cars were traveling Connecticut's roadways; by 1940, the number multiplied to 418,212. Tourists flocked to the country to relieve everyday hassles and to enjoy parts of the nation that seemed untouched by the hand of the Depression, unbothered by its brutal misfortune.

new roadway would accommodate modern modes of transportation and foster a safe driving environment.

Funds were needed, but rare. The National Park Service was enacted for the specific purpose of creating appealing recreational, conservation, and tourist areas in rural America. Strict policies were adopted by the NPS that limited traditional cut-and-fill construction and concentrated on the maximum preservation of the land, cultural features, and scenery. Pleas from citizens and Parkway developers were heard in Congress, resulting in a massive money infusion from the Works Progress Administration to support Depression Era development and to jumpstart employment rates. In this

mental in the scope of American design. Despite the harsh political and economic climate, the men remained united, determined to raise the broken spirits of millions. With a collective sigh, the air seemed to clear and the nerves began to settle. Pens scratched, and a few lines and letters later, the Merritt began to take shape.

After political scandal and public disapproval, Commissioner MacDonald's authority on the project was stripped on April 30, 1938. Warren Creamer, A. Earl Wood, John Smith, and Leslie Sumner took over managerial command and supervision. Design control was handed over to two men: Weld Thayer Chase and George Dunkelberger. Dunkel-

berger, a draftsman from Hartford, Connecticut, was commissioned to design all sixty-nine of the Parkway's bridges and overpasses, a daunting task for an inexperienced tradesman. However, where Dunkelberger found himself lacking in classical training, Chase excelled. An experienced landscape architect, Chase understood the goals of the Parkway's planners and applied his background in aesthetics to the Connecticut landscape in every foot of the Merritt's design. The cutting of MacDonald's tight reins was hardly a tragic loss. Unburdened by the conservative pressures to create a strict, engineered roadway, Chase and Dunkelberger allowed their architecturally trained minds to flourish. The resulting roadway pulled back the curtain that protected the Connecticut landscape and exposed the countryside in unprecedented wonder.

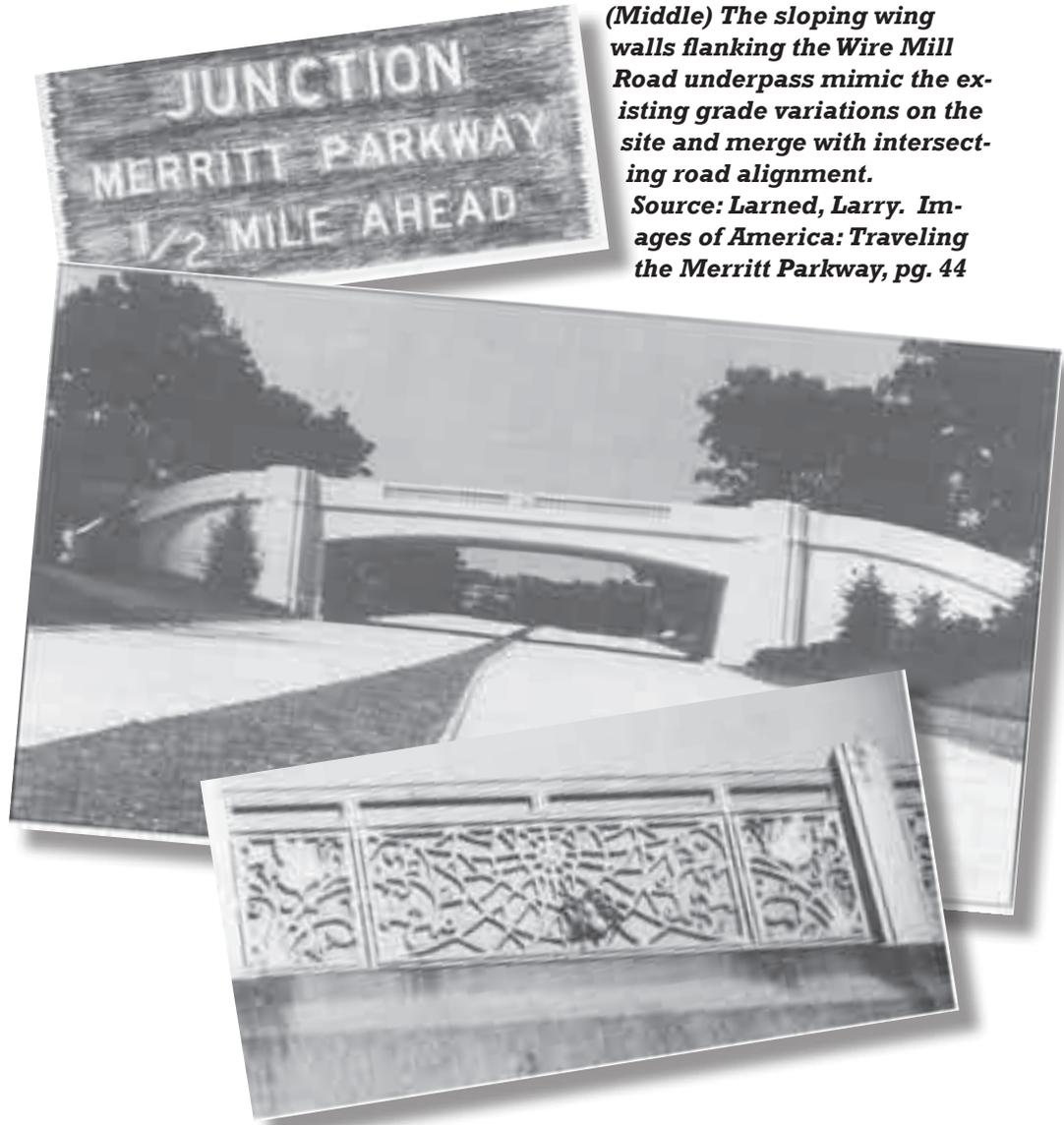
In accordance with the desires of the FCPA and Chase's own theory of landscape architecture, the Merritt Parkway was designed to seamlessly navigate mountain passes and river valleys. It was a response to the preexisting natural system, carefully adjusting to the rise and fall of the land: where a rock outcropping extended from a jagged cliff, the path ran under; where a lake danced with the sparkle from the morning sun, the path went around; where the wind silently blew at the grass in an endless field, the path travelled beside. Nature seemed to spontaneously manifest a roadway, while leaving its beauty mysteriously untouched. Hill crests and gentle curves framed sweeping picturesque vistas along the road's extension, achieving a level of unpredictable elegance matched only

***(Top) Signs on the Merritt employed rustic elements in their wood construction, shingled edges, and atypical typeface.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 12, 51***

***(Middle) The sloping wing walls flanking the Wire Mill Road underpass mimic the existing grade variations on the site and merge with intersecting road alignment.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 44***



***The insect motifs of the Merwins Lane overpass express Dunkelberger's own appreciation for the land, while adding a decorative elegance that is experienced by slow-moving traffic.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 85-86***

by the possibility of what lies around the bend.

The roadway transcended the needs of basic commuter transportation; it became an exhibition of natural beauty. Instead of merely distancing the surrounding landscape with a verdant wall of trees, forests and rivers complimented the meandering pavement. An intimate relationship was forged between the landscape and the driver that would not have been possible on a strict, multi-lane highway. The motorist experienced the land as he was directed through its winding path instead of observing it from the window of a high-speed car. Passengers became tourists to an attraction that industrialists took for granted. Chase understood the need to connect humans with the natural landscape and made several precautions to ensure the parkway preserved the existing topography. Cut and fills were continually avoided in order to maintain

natural grade changes in the road.

Any heavy demolition was done with crude blasting techniques that produced irregular and organic effects so as to match existing abnormalities. Chase also discovered a way to accommodate the stringent budget restrictions

that limited the amount of purchased trees and shrubs that would be planted along the Parkway. Greenery cleared from the site was conserved and replanted to replicate the natural landscape of the region. An experienced botanist, Chase mastered the native species of flora in the area and relied on the existing foliage—as opposed to exotic imports—to accent the land. Pink

mountain laurels, dogwoods, red cedar, and various other oaks and maples bordered the road, but never in rows or in obviously man-made patterns. Chase's work was most successful when it was least noticed, when it subtly blended with the natural environment. As Supervisor Earl Wood put it, "the main objective of the landscaping program [was] to assist nature in healing the scars of construction."

Considering both the carved landscape on fluctuating grade levels and the technological limits of early automobiles, the Merritt Parkway was initially designed to accommodate speeds of up to forty-five miles per hour. In addition to creating a safe driving environment, low-speed travel placed an increased focus on the detailing of roadside features. Chase and the other parkway designers integrated all parts of the roadway's elements

to establish a cohesive design scheme. When necessary to prevent accidental mishaps, guardrails bordered the route in rustic interpretations of the traditionally steel-based norm. Railings were low and constructed of a native dark oak, pressure-treated to ensure long-lasting durability.

The treat-

ment of these unnatural additions lowered the visual impact of their presence and, in fact, accentuated the neighboring environment. The median strip was set at a regulated width of twenty-two feet, four inches to keep oncoming traffic at a safe distance. In order to preserve sight lines of traffic, vegetation had to be controlled. Oftentimes, expansive areas of grass were accented with a



***Signs on the Merritt employed rustic elements in their wood construction, shingled edges, and atypical typeface.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 12, 51***

sprinkling of trees to alleviate the repetition of monochromatic green and to recreate the preexisting landscape. Road signs also adopted rustic aesthetics, displaying warnings and alerts in a nontraditional typeface on a treated wood surface with distressed, shingled edges. Billboard advertisements were absent along the Merritt, thereby creating a distinct separation between it and its industrial counterparts. Driving at twilight relied entirely on the moon's silver glow for guidance. Instead of unnatural electric lighting, an innovative system of reflective panels was installed along the median strip to highlight bends in the road. Commuters took front row seats in a theater that showcased natural beauty, a proscenium that framed sweeping vistas of an organic set.

A man sat alone in front of a drafting table in a bustling workspace. In the few years prior, the indulgences of a life he once knew suddenly became the dreams of a man lost in his own existential reality. Lamenting his failed business seemed unnecessary when all over the country, people like himself felt the same cruel intentions of the Depression-era economy. He was more fortunate than others, however, in that he was employed by the Connecticut Highway Department; but working as a draftsman did not come with the same allure as did the position of a professional architect. Little did he know, he was about to get the call of a lifetime, a commission that would immortalize his life in ways he could not imagine. At the corner of his desk, the phone rang.

One revolutionary design consideration employed in laying out the Merritt Parkway was the amount of access roads intersecting the highway at grade level. Part of the Boston Post Road's timely demise resulted from the congestion caused by four-way intersections and the incompatible mixture of local commuter traffic and long-distance travelers. In order to alleviate such problems, a series of bridges was designed to carry roads above and below the Parkway's intended route. What seems like a common practice today was a major evolution in the realm of highway development. Commissioned to design all of the Parkway's proposed bridges was George Dunkelberger, a native of nearby New Jersey. Dunkelberger's work was dictated by the same principles that Chase applied to the landscaping of the roadway. To both Chase and Dunkelberger, the natural environment and the formal implications it posed were inseparable from the conditions under which each of the bridges was to be designed. When landscaping the sixty-nine bridges of the Parkway, Chase planted low, spreading shrubs around

the abutments to blend them in with the natural environment without masking their delicate intricacies. The goal was to create a balanced harmony between the sensitively sculpted landscape and the man-made bridging elements of the industrial temperament. Experiential dynamism and artistic intrigue were of utmost importance when considering bridge designs in order to attract drivers' attention and to develop a carefully orchestrated series of architectural events. A cohesive, yet unique design scheme was developed that offered countless possibilities to a man with an endless imagination.

For many, the Merritt Parkway serves as a bridge museum, an eclectic exhibition of different architectural styles, including Art Deco, Neoclassical, Gothic, Rustic, and Art Moderne. No two bridges are alike. Each structure was specifically designed to compliment its surroundings, as a continuation of the landscape's formal elements and natural features. As Dunkelberger intended:

In low, flat country, the design should typify the character of the landscape, perhaps by horizontal lines; in rolling country by the addition of a few verticals; and on rough terrain, a combination of the two with neither predominating, I am sure, would result in a pleasing structure.

Given the omnipresent budgetary constraints and the desire to connect the bridges under a uniform aesthetic principle, finding a material as adaptable as it was economical became a top priority. For Parkway developers, concrete was an obvious choice. Reinforced concrete was a common medium in Depression-era construction because it was inexpensive and required low-skill labor. But to the public, concrete was an embarrassing alternative to the impressive qualities of stone. Dunkelberger quelled complaints by utilizing the plasticity of concrete in a myriad of designs, ranging from the whimsical to the dramatic. He carved, sculpted, and tinted the material in ways that made each bridge subtly unique. The use of concrete allowed countless arrangements of visual ornamentation while adding less than one percent to the project's overall cost. Other inexpensive materials were used to create visually active facades that enhanced the natural surrounding. Paint, quartz, and even brown and green beer bottles discarded during construction were reused as decorative accents. The juxtaposition of the forms and textures of concrete and the environment in which it was set achieved a high level of character and dynamism.

In addition to these aesthetic considerations, Dunkelberger's designs were dictated by engineering factors and capabilities. Where Dunkelberger primarily dealt with the visual reading of the architectural tone, Leslie Sumner focused on the structural integrity of the Parkway's bridges. The design team's decision to rely on reinforced concrete for bridge construction offered numerous possibilities for Dunkelberger's artistic concerns, while satisfying Sumner's need for an inexpensive material that provided reliable structural support. Sumner anticipated the future advances in the automobile industry and designed the bridges to withstand heavier loads at faster speeds. Foundation conditions in Fairfield County were ideal for supporting extreme weight. Underlying bedrock at convenient depths offered sturdy groundwork for bridges that catered to heavy traffic. At sites featuring unusually large spans, Sumner employed the use of concrete-encased "I" beams and cast-iron arches. The bridge at the Lake Avenue overpass leaves the metal support beams exposed, creating a visual contrast to the typical concrete bridge facades. Lengthy spans were generally avoided, however, using a cost-cutting solution that reflected the economic realities of Depression-era construction. Where the Parkway ran beneath intersecting roads, the median strip was reduced from the usual twenty-two feet to a mere sixteen inches, thereby minimizing the bridge's span and cost.

These "pinched bridges" were criticized for creating uncomfortable driving distances, but they were necessary to keep construction costs reasonable. Sumner also developed an innovative solution to prevent rain from staining concrete surfaces. Because of the material's vulnerability to accumulate mineral deposits, pitched surfaces and drip molding were subtly cast into balustrades and railing faces that inhibited deterioration without sacrificing aesthetic continuity.

It is fair to say that Sumner's work marks no revolutionary development in bridge construction. What makes the Merritt Parkway's structures unique is the way in which Dunkelberger decorated them to disguise the monotony of their engineering sameness. Each bridge is an essay reflecting the architect's interpretation of the particular site and the way it reacts with the natural environment. A suitable example of this can be found at the Wire Mill Road overpass in Stanford. To demonstrate the relationship between the bridge and its location, Dunkelberger flanked the overpass with curved wing walls. These sloping extensions seamlessly merge with the grade of the site and intimately identify with the setting in which it connects. The geometrically carved façade mimics the land's dramatic shadow effects in the sculpted details of the balustrade and abutment towers. At the site of the Morehouse Highway Bridge, the downhill gradient is accentuated by a series of step-like levels that appear to

march downward across the span. The railing and foundation pylons are fashioned to imply an assembly composed of intricately detailed blocks, showcasing the possibility of concrete as a sculptural material rather than as an austere surface. Dunkelberger manipulated the inherently massive nature of concrete by implying its construction of a different arrangement, one that alludes to the visually stacked quality of stone or the artistically organized composition of brick.

Another instance that redefined the use of concrete is expressed in the illusion of articulated voussoirs on the James Farm Road overpass. Impressed lines on the façade imitate Renaissance imagery, complemented by an adapted classical vocabulary evident in the gentle fluting on the mediating Doric column. A concrete-sculpted set of Nike wings is perched atop the capital, adding a sense of quirky enjoyment unparalleled by other interstate highways of the time. To commemorate the forty-fifth birthday of the Connecticut Highway Department, Dunkelberger decorated the periphery pylons with the CHD emblem, both as a tribute to its success and as an acknowledgement to the financial backer. He often relied on historical, local, and sometimes whimsical imagery like this to dress concrete facades and cast-iron railings.

The Comstock Hill Road overpass features a bridge façade decorated in remembrance of a local historic event. In an effort to connect the

***The bas reliefs of the Comstock Hill Road overpass are made by a process of pouring concrete into plaster of Paris molds. Febo and Edward Ferrari sculpted busts of a Pilgrim and Native American on the abutment towers to allude to New England's colonial era.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 68-69***

people and the environment with the native New England area, detailing on the bridge harkens back to the region's colonial past. Sculpted bust reliefs of a Pilgrim and a Native American are engraved into the two abutment towers supporting the single-span structure. For sculptural details like these, Dunkelberger hired Febo and Edward Ferrari, an experienced father-son sculpting duo. Despite the tight budgetary shackles that bound the project, innovative solutions were developed so as to never sacrifice form and dynamic expression. The Ferraris used a system of waste molds sculpted of plaster of Paris that satisfied government wallets, but required intimate attention by the sculptors themselves. The process involved letting the cement settle in the mold for a month-long period, after which delicate care was taken in removing the plaster mold from the dried concrete while ensuring intricate details were preserved and unharmed. The same technique was used on the Burr Street underpass, where each pylon depicts a scene that commemorates the workers who built the Parkway in dramatic fashion. Teams of surveyors, planners, and supervisors are immortalized in the bas reliefs, creating an eternal bond between the Merritt and those who built it.

Another site that fuses the delicate craft of the Ferraris and the bountiful imagination of Dunkelberger is at Merwins Lane. Primarily designed to connect an overpassing bridle path, its intricate details are intended to be appreciated by a slowly passing audience. From below, the bridge seems unimposing and bare, but a second glance reveals a whimsical theme inspired

by an unusual source. Dunkelberger enhanced the bridge's sculptural quality by relying on insect motifs in its detailing, a reflection of his own admiration for nature and the critters with which we share the land. Shelves on the abutments showcase concrete-sculpted butterflies, designed by Dunkelberger and sculpted by the Ferraris. Their talent for creating subtle dramatic effects is demonstrated in the cast-iron railing, which depicts small insects and butterflies trapped in stylized metal spider webs. In this case, a fantastical design motif is taken to the extreme but is still able to maintain a level of admirable elegance without being excessively gaudy.

Despite the multitude of concrete's inventive incarnations, the public sulked in stubborn disapproval until their thirst for stone was satiated. Because of its expense, a stone bridge was out of the question. The cost of one masonry-constructed project would consume the budget allotted for three concrete bridges. Nonetheless, Dunkelberger settled the dissenting voices by cladding three of the Parkway's bridges in stone veneer. The Guinea Bridge in Greenwich frames a dramatic view of rolling rustic countryside. Large granite voussoirs lining the low, shallow arch support an infill of uncut fieldstones that hang on the rigid-frame substructure. The varying texture and size of the rubble masonry develop a vocabulary closely identified with images of rustic footbridges, native to the Connecticut landscape.

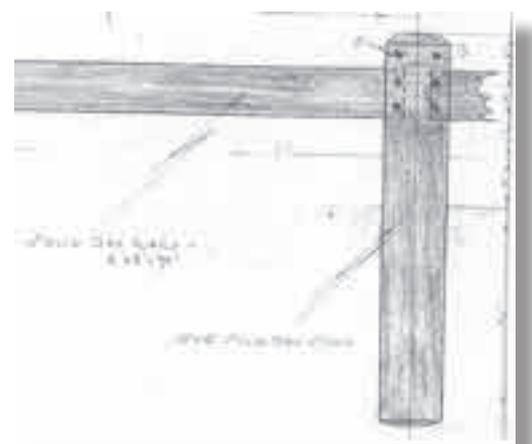
The Rippowam River Bridge evokes similar imagery. Originally clad to appease a disgruntled

sculptor whose studio faced the site, the stone façade blends flawlessly with the surrounding forest and river bed.<sup>18</sup> Once again, the stone is superficially applied to give the illusion of masonry construction. At the Newton Avenue underpass, the façade was treated in a different manner. Instead of cladding the structure with masonry, Dunkelberger gave the appearance of stone by roughening the concrete surface prior to its setting and later applying chemicals to obtain a rock-like finish. The concrete was manipulated to produce graceful effects in a highly economical way.

Beneath the shade of a flourishing elm tree, the spade of a shovel carefully loosened the soil below. Sunlight filtering through the vibrant leaves added warmth to the air of excitement felt by the bustling crowd. They gathered alongside the road, and after six long years of anticipation, finally felt a calming

***Guardrails on the Merritt adopted rustic aesthetics that did not impose unnatural forms in the existing environment.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 17, 82***



sense of satisfaction. Laid out ahead of them was a path of undeniable beauty, one that shone through the shadow of a tragedy unlike any this country had never seen. The time capsule being buried in front of them would remind the visitors of tomorrow of what this roadway meant to the people of the day, and about the perseverance of a few men who inspired a generation...

On September 2, 1940, six years after Congressman Schuyler Merritt broke first ground, the Merritt Parkway opened to unanimous praise. It has since been declared Connecticut's greatest Depression-era public works project. Two thousand workers and \$22.7 million

city dwellers that heard of the fabled existence of a road unlike any the country had ever witnessed. It captured the minds and imaginations of everyone who explored its wandering path, creating a world of immeasurable wonder where nature sang, bridges spoke, and reality took a much-needed rest.

Its demise, however, came just as quickly as its success. The post World War II climate thrived on speed, efficiency, and industry. Roadways became straight expressways that catered to the declining patience of the commuting population. Engineers took over the reins of a horse once artistically guided by the gentle hands of the architect.



***The Lake Avenue underpass left metal support members exposed, a rarity among the typically concrete-faced bridge facades on the Merritt.***

***Source: Larned, Larry. Images of America: Traveling the Merritt Parkway, pg. 31***

brought to reality what was supposed to be the future of American highways, where grace and beauty effortlessly blended with the products of industrial invention. The Merritt quickly became a popular tourist attraction for

Fast-track transportation preceded the need to design aesthetically pleasing parkways. In 1956, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials published the first national standards under which all

highways were to be constructed, leaving little room for artistic expression. In this sense, the Merritt Parkway stood as the sole survivor of a lost generation.

The years after World War II were characterized by a massive population migration from the cities to the bordering suburbs. The flood of relocated families clogged the Merritt Parkway's scenic views and disrupted its serenity. Modifications had to be made to accommodate the increased traffic that replaced rustic-inspired features with modern age substitutes: The once sparkling white pavement was covered with a coat of black asphalt, wooden guardrails were replaced by steel imitations, and road signs were updated with unnatural reflective surfaces. Landscape maintenance was entirely ignored, causing bridges to be hidden under layers of overgrown weeds. Failure to prevent damage done by road salt resulted in the serious deterioration of many bridges. Abutments had to be completely redesigned to restore structural integrity, and the use of unintended sealants ate away at Dunkelberger's carefully carved details and surface textures. The Parkway was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in April of 1991, which prevented any major alterations that would affect its reading as a historically recognized landmark. However, Parkway conservationists are constantly being confronted with the proposal to add lanes, which would necessitate the complete destruction of the bordering landscape.

When a nation marred by the face of tragedy cried out for relief, salvation came from the most unlikely source. A road nestled deep within the Connecticut wilderness guided the country through harsh times by touring it through the mountains and valleys it had forgotten. The Merritt Parkway stretched far from the urban jungle of industry and reached beyond the scope of reality to inspire the hearts of many. Where rapids churned in river banks, hope grew stronger. Where meadows swayed with the passing wind, faith was restored. Where falling rocks echoed down a distant hillside, dreams came true. With the changing priorities of modern transportation, roadways cut ties with their natural setting. Commuters retired from the days of recreational driving and only traveled to experience the moment of arrival, disregarding the route that brought them there. The land and the bridges that revitalized a nation now suffer from threats that endanger its memory as an unprecedented pathway into the heart of the natural world. Efforts must be taken to preserve the road that changed America, to remind the country of a prize it once cherished. Before long, the

Merritt Parkway will fall into obscurity, consumed by the very world it celebrates, remembered only as a fabled tale of a lost generation.