

OHIO HISTORIC BRIDGE ASSOCIATION
1982 VELMA AVENUE
COLUMBUS, OHIO 43211-2497

Ohio House State & Local Government Committee
The Honorable Marlene Anielski, Chairwoman
Proponent Testimony on House Bill 483

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President, Ohio Historic Bridge Association
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Chairwoman Anielski and members of the State and Local Government Committee:

My name is David Simmons, and I am here to speak in support of HB 483 to designate Ohio Covered Bridge Week. I have been an employee at the Ohio History Connection for more than four decades, first in the Historic Preservation Division and then on the staff of the popular history magazine *TIMELINE*. It was while working in historic preservation that I got very interested in historic bridges. I eventually became involved in the Southern Ohio Covered Bridge Association and over time became the group's tour leader. Tours were organized twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall, and I would lead caravans of cars through the rural Ohio countryside.

Ohio is a fertile ground for covered bridge tours. It has 142, the second highest number of covered bridges in the United States after Pennsylvania's 219. That sounds like a lot, but a Columbus woman appropriately named Miriam Wood began researching old commissioners' journals in the 1960s with the goal of identifying every covered bridge ever built in Ohio. She was still counting when she reached 4,000 but, while still living, she is no longer able to do that kind of research.

Wood was an ideal material for early American bridges. Wood was found in abundance and craftsman knowledgeable in its use were readily available. When wooden bridges are exposed to cycles of rain and sun, they tend to rot. So early builders discovered that if they went to the additional expense of putting a roof and siding on a bridge, it could last much longer. Today, there are numerous examples of covered wooden bridges that are more than a hundred years old. It's not known when the first bridge in America was covered but some believe that the first covered bridge identified in Ohio was in 1809 in Columbiana County. Today Ohio's oldest covered bridge is in Preble County, the Roberts Covered Bridge built in 1829 and Ohio's only remaining double-barreled covered bridge.

Over the years, covered bridges have been a huge stimulus to local economies. A National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges was founded in New England in the 1950s, and for a time, Ohio had two covered bridge groups. The point is that there is a widespread interest in visiting covered bridges, and the people who look for and photograph covered bridges spend money in local economies while they are there.

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No single individual is more important to preserving covered bridges than the county engineer. When I was working in historic preservation, I used to say that preservation starts with the right attitude. And the contrasting attitude of two county engineers serves as prime examples. In the 1970s when I started working in Columbus, Fairfield County had more covered bridges than any other county. One of them was unlike any other covered bridge in the world. But the county engineer in Fairfield County was someone who told me he couldn't justify spending money on covered bridges. He actually developed a plan to give away covered bridges, to essentially move them and get them out of his hair. Some went to neighboring counties, one as far away as Arizona. But none of Fairfield County's remaining bridges are now in county ownership.

In contrast, Ashtabula County, which also had a large number of covered bridges, had a county engineer who was enthralled with covered bridges and actively promoted their preservation. Doing his own engineering and often with his own forces, he restored them one by one. When he ran out of old bridges, he decided to start building new ones. Wooden bridges have a very practical aspect in Northeast Ohio where major snow and ice storms are common: they are unaffected by the same deicing chemicals that destroy steel bridges. In fact, salts are often used to preserve wooden bridges. In the end, covered bridges became the focus of a local festival and a huge economic stimulus in the county.

When I became president of Southern Ohio Covered Bridge Association in the 1990s, I worked to change the name of the organization to the Ohio Historic Bridge Association. We had discovered that Ohio has a very rich history in all types of bridge engineering. In fact, Ohio's Bicentennial Bridge was the Blaine Bridge, one of the stone S-bridges built in the 1820s on the nation's first federal-aid project, the National Road. It was in recognition of that broader heritage that we changed the name. Ohio's organization is the only bridge group in the entire nation that has taken this step. We therefore work with local officials to promote the preservation of stone, iron, suspension, and concrete bridges throughout the state. Along with ODOT and *Ohio Magazine*, we helped produce a promotional pamphlet on Ohio's historic bridges.

Passage of HB 483 will help recognize the importance of covered bridges to our state and is a major step forward in promoting their preservation. Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.