

# The Five Arch Bridge

Avon, New York



*By*

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September 1995

Revised June 2016

by Clara Mulligan

## Foreword

In this research paper on the Five Arch Bridge of Avon, much of the early history centers around information on the railroads that utilized this bridge. After researching local histories, reviewing newspapers of the time, and contacting local historians, railroad enthusiasts, and present railroad companies, little information was found on the actual construction of this local landmark. One of the reasons for this lack of information could possibly be that the construction of such a bridge at that time was an ordinary everyday occurrence. Scrolling through microfilm of local newspapers of the 1850s showed no mention of the bridge, only the construction of the railroad. In a 1951 speech celebrating the centennial of the Rochester and Genesee Valley Railroad, John W. Remington stated "Information concerning the early operation and problems of this young railroad are meager since all the early records were destroyed in a fire many years ago."



The Five Arch Bridge at Ashantee in Avon, New York is a stone masonry viaduct, built to carry rail traffic over the Conesus Outlet. The railroad, an important transportation link in the Genesee Valley in the mid 1800s, connected Avon, Geneseo, and Mt. Morris with Rochester.

This stone railroad bridge with five arches is built of hand-dressed Stafford limestone, which was taken from a quarry along Conesus Creek just north of the Littleville Road intersection off of Route 39. It was constructed sometime between 1856, when the Rochester and Genesee Valley Railroad reached Avon from the north, and 1859 when the first train reached Geneseo from Avon.

The Genesee Valley Railroad was incorporated on June 2, 1856 for the purpose of purchasing the land and completing the rail line between Avon and Mt. Morris. The Rochester and Genesee Valley Railroad had built a line from Rochester to Avon, but ran into financial difficulty and could not complete its proposed southern line to Mt. Morris after spending \$100,000 on partially grading the roadbed south of Avon.

On October 1856, The Genesee Valley Railroad made a contract with George W. and George B. Phelps for completion of the railroad by the first of September 1857. Immediately work was begun, but due to

the financial crisis of 1857, the railroad company was unable to provide the contractor with the means to continue the work. Operations were suspended and then resumed in 1858.

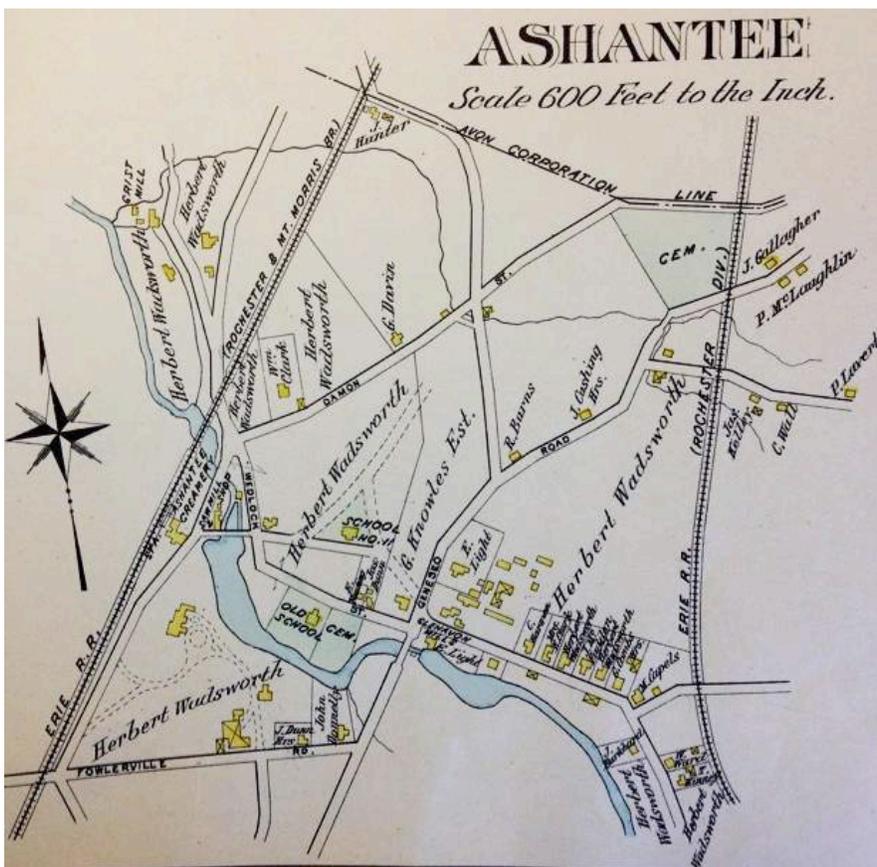
The first train entered Geneseo on January 1, 1859 and the last phase of the line south to Mt. Morris was completed in April 1859. The Genesee Valley Railroad experienced a short period of success, but due to exhausted capital, the line faced reorganization by the end of its first year of operation. Judgment of foreclosure and sale of the Genesee Valley Railroad was ordered at a special court term at Rochester on December 26, 1859.

On February 10, 1860, William Kidd, who owned a railroad equipment manufacturing company in Rochester, New York became trustee for all the property when he purchased the railroad for \$87,500. The railroad was renamed the Avon, Geneseo, and Mt. Morris Railroad.

1869 was a good year for the railroad. It had two engines, eight passenger cars, three baggage and mail cars and carried 43,574 passengers and 3,400 tons of freight over the Five Arch Bridge. In 1873 the

railroad was leased to the Erie Railway Company.

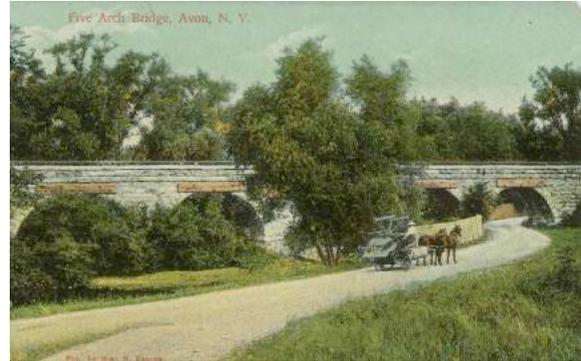
In the 1880s, the hamlet of Ashantee had a population of 200 people. The prosperous home of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Wadsworth plus numerous businesses were located near the Conesus Creek. The Ashantee Creamery was built near the railroad tracks and Peter Zifka's blacksmith shop was located north of the creamery. W.P. Haskins owned the saw and cider mill just above the Five Arch Bridge. In



1902 Century Atlas map of Ashantee, N.Y. Source: Livingston County Historian

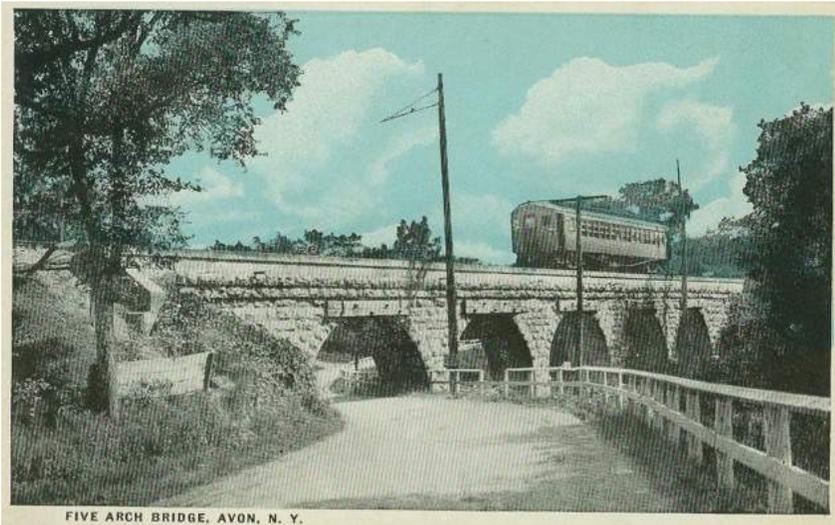
1899, Herbert Wadsworth had 50 men working to extend Center Street (present State Rt. 39) from the Little Conesus Outlet to the stone bridge. The road was built to go under the northernmost arch of the bridge.

Early images of the bridge showing horses pulling a reaper binder approaching the bridge on the Avon-Geneseo route indicate that the heavy wood beams bolted over each of the five arches were part of the early construction. A state inspection of the bridge in 1887 reported that it was fractured and clamps were holding it in position. A new structure was



Source: *Postcard, AP&HS*

recommended to be built soon. In 1890, an inspection by the State Railroad Commissioners found the viaduct in bad condition. Up to June 30, 1901 the total cost of the bridges on the line from Avon to Mt. Morris was \$6,304.



Electric trolley crossing over the road to Geneseo. Source: *Postcard, AP&HS*

In 1907 the Erie Railroad replaced steam trains with a single-phase electric railroad between Rochester and Mt. Morris, travelling over the Five Arch Bridge. The electric trolley ran thirteen trips daily between Rochester and Mt. Morris. In the 1930s passenger service dropped in demand and electrification was no longer

necessary and on November 29, 1934 gas-electric cars were substituted. The track was abandoned and torn up in 1940 after competitive modes of transportation took over in the Genesee Valley. Due to the increase of private automobiles, many serious accidents occurred at the Five Arch Bridge as drivers failed to properly navigate the road curves and narrow pass under the arch. By November, 1932 the route of Avon-Geneseo Road was changed so it no longer went under the arch and avoided the bridge entirely.

George Stewart, an Avon attorney, purchased the bridge from the railroad on March 30, 1965. On October 28, 1971 Mr. Stewart gave the property to the Village of Avon, asking for only \$900 to cover the cost of two appraisal fees.

From 1966 until 1979, Edward Dooley, a retired Erie railroad employee, along with his friend Jim Couchman, maintained the bridge and surrounding land. A ceremony was held on July 25, 1975 to unveil a small historical monument honoring the years of dedicated service provided by Mr. Dooley and Mr. Couchman.



In 1985, an engineering study by Bero Associates of Rochester viewed the structure as in fair shape, but it was suffering from water penetrating through the railroad bed. The report noted that rainwater was dissolving the mortar holding the stones together, thus weakening the structure. The recommendation to restore the structure suggested removing the trees, brush and debris and installing a roof to create a water disposal system as well as repairing the mortar joints.

By 1990, the high waters of Conesus Creek had cut into the bank on the south side of the creek, causing large chunks of concrete from the bridge to slide down the bank. The bases of several arches had been severely eroded. In 1990, the village sought funds to make repairs on the bridge, but was informed in a letter by Assemblyman John Hasper that its application for a 1990-1991 legislative initiative grant had been turned down. The village promised that the bridge would be fixed with or without the grant. In 1991, the Livingston Construction Company repaired a deteriorating abutment of the bridge. Forms were constructed around the abutment and concrete was poured into the forms.

In June 1994, the Village of Avon followed the Bero Associates' recommendations to prevent water from seeping into the limestone structure. Under the direction of Avon Preservation & Historical Society's president, Dwight Brown, volunteers cleared the top of the bridge of trees and brush. A heavy-duty sheet of plastic was fastened to the top of the bridge and covered with gravel and sand, ensuring it was invisible, thereby preserving the historical character of the structure.

In October 1995, the concrete abutment on the south end of the bridge was removed to prevent people from climbing to the top. The present problems noted by the Avon Preservation & Historical Society include the problem of loose masonry on the outside surface of the bridge, and replacing the washed out mortar. This group will be landscaping the area around the bridge to improve the appearance of the Five Arch Bridge Park.



Over the years many people have visited this local landmark. A Rochesterian's recollection of "Sunday Drives in the Thirties" notes the Five Arch Bridge as a frequent destination. The Avon Preservation and Historical Society hopes to preserve the Five Arch Bridge for the enjoyment of future generations.

Addendum: The historical marker, above, was dedicated on October 6, 1996, honoring the rich railroad history of Avon. The Five Arch Bridge was listed on the National Register of Historical Places in 2012, officially recognizing the significance of this handsome structure.

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