

City Bridges

The sample contains 8 city bridges, 3 of which are recommended for National Register designation because of their excellent craftsmanship and status as community landmarks. In terms of general design and engineering, the most notable is the well-preserved, 3-arch, First Street Bridge (B-35-2) in Merrill. Constructed in 1904, it features the longest series of spans of any stone-arch, highway structure in the state. Also significant are the Bridge Road Bridge (P-45-702) in Cedarburg and the Third Street Bridge (P-67-717) in Menomonee Falls. Although both these structures have been altered, they are valuable examples of the mason's art in locales once known for their quarrying and stonework.

4. WisDOT Designation: B-35-2

Historic Name: First Street Bridge

Location: First Street over Prairie River, City of Merrill, Lincoln County

Construction Date: 1904

Architect/Engineer: Charles V. Sheldon

Contractor: Fred Hesterman

Architectural/Engineering Significance: The structure is a rubble-granite, pedestrian-and-vehicular bridge with 3, identical, segmental arches rising from near the waterline about 13 feet over spans of 37 feet (see Figures 51, 52, 53, and 64). The bridge features the longest series of spans of any stone-arch, highway structure in the state. Each arch displays a decorative pattern of alternating, single

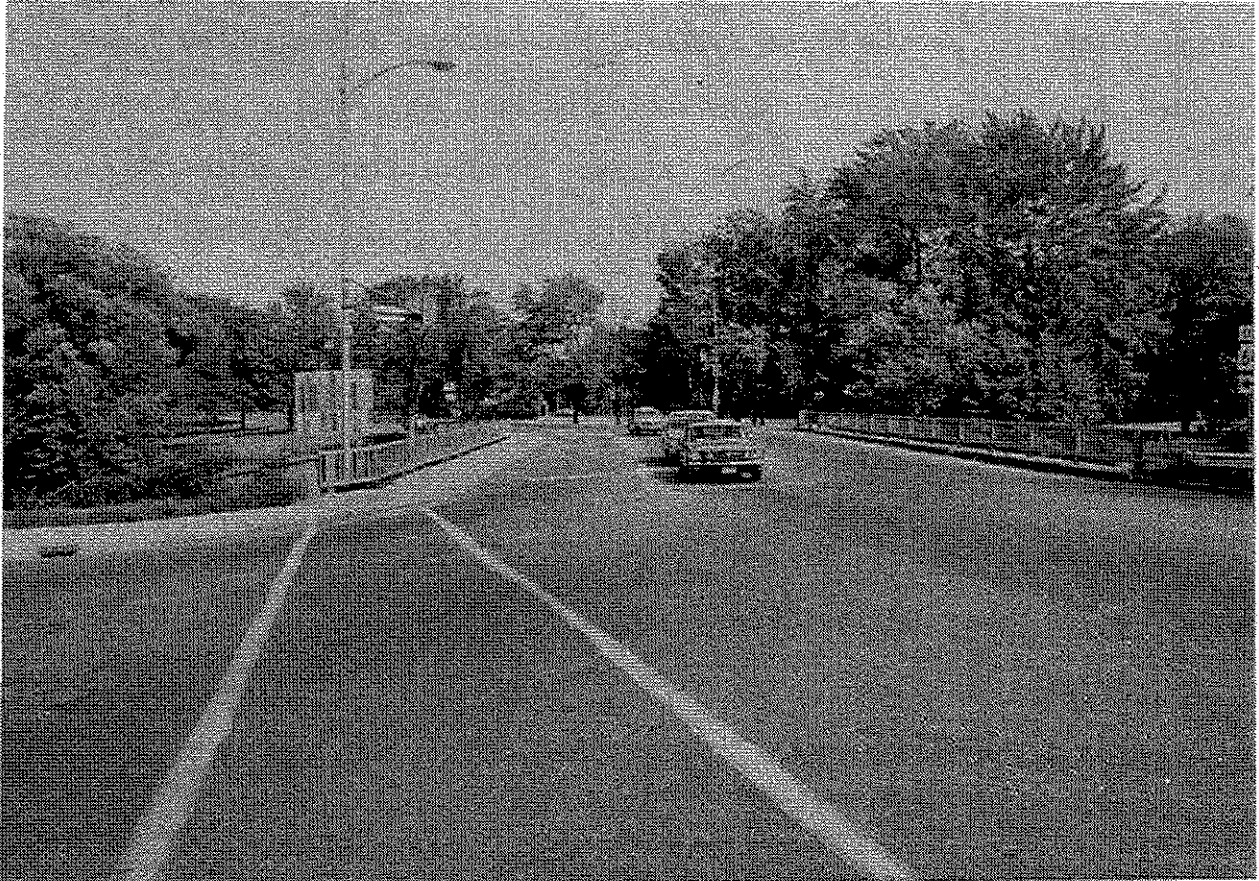


FIGURE 64: First Street Bridge (B-35-2); looking east at approach. (Source: Jeffrey A. Hess, 1985.)

and double ring stones with tapered keystones about 30 inches in height. Pyramidal cutwaters adorn the upstream (north) faces of the piers. The foundations of the piers and abutments are concrete set on pilings.⁷⁶

The bridge's length is about 130 feet; its width about 54 feet. Originally, the bridge featured low, stone railings and a concrete-slab deck surfaced with brick and traversed by street-car tracks. In 1951, the tracks and brick pavers were removed so that the deck could be re-concreted, slightly widened, and surfaced with bituminous material. At the same time, the stone railings were replaced with metal railings.⁷⁷ These alterations did not significantly affect architectural integrity. With its well-proportioned arches, pleasing symmetrical design, and well-crafted masonry, the bridge is the state's finest example of a stone-arch, municipal, river crossing.

Historical Significance: On June 2, 1902, the Merrill Advocate reported that "the [wood-truss] bridge on First Street which crosses Prairie River settled last Friday morning in such a manner that the street cars were unable to pass over it." After seeing to temporary repairs, the city commissioned a local engineer, Francis E. Mathews, to prepare plans for a new structure. Mathews produced a stone-arch design with two, identical, 3-centered, arches with a pyramidal cutwater on the river pier (see Figure 65). In December 1902, the city council contracted with Fred Hesterman, a local builder, to construct the bridge for \$9,200.⁷⁸ But there was no further action



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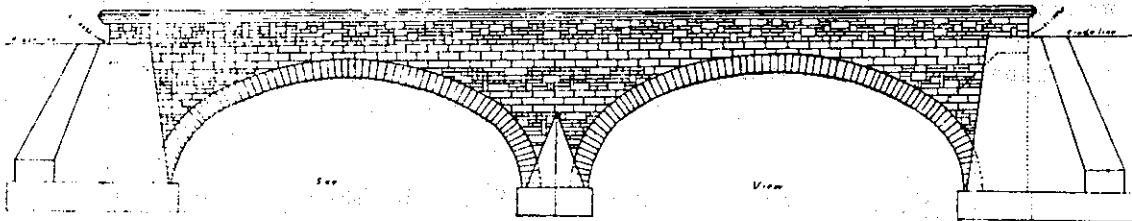
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Stone Bridge

Merrill Wis

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FIGURE 65: The original plan for the First Street Bridge called for two arches of three-centered configuration. (Source: Merrill Advocate Souvenir Edition, September 23, 1903.)

for a full year.

Surviving city records do not explain the delay, but it may have resulted from a factional dispute within the city council. When the City of Merrill incorporated in 1884, it combined rival villages on either side of the Prairie River. In 1900, the old rivalry between "eastiders" and "westiders" flared into almost open warfare over the selection of a site for a new city hall, which was eventually claimed by the east side.⁷⁹ Bitterness over the battle apparently affected almost all civic questions for the next few years. In an editorial on the conflict, the Advocate of December 1, 1903, chastised local politicians by declaring: "Today a public woodshed could not be built without contention."

The newspaper's criticism may have spurred the city council into action, for in January 1904, it once again took up the question of building the First Street Bridge. At this time, the council reconfirmed its contract with Hesterman, but changed the original bridge design from 2 large arches to 3 smaller ones, presumably to simplify the structure's engineering. New plans were prepared by Charles V. Sheldon, who served as city engineer. Stone for the structure was apparently supplied by granite quarries near the city. By the end of February, concrete foundations had been poured, and seven months later the bridge was accepted by the city.⁸⁰ Literally and figuratively, the successful completion of the bridge project helped heal a rift between the east and west sides of the city. As the Advocate of August 2, 1904 proudly noted: "The work [is]

[is] beautiful in symmetry and grace, a delight to every citizen of Merrill." In addition to its status as a major community landmark, the First Street Bridge is historically significant as a symbol of municipal unity.