

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

Historic Downtown Hartford

For NPS use only  
received NOV 15 1984  
date entered MAR 26 1985

Continuation sheet

Item number

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Stone Bridge  
500 Main Street

1833  
Photographs 8A, 8B  
Structure #21

Description

The Stone Bridge on Main Street was constructed in 1833 between Shelden and Arch streets on the east and Elm and Wells streets on the west, to span the Park River. (Photograph 8A) In 1955 the river was enclosed in a conduit, as part of a flood control project, and its place under the bridge has been taken by a highway built on top of the conduit. (Photograph 8B)

The bridge is constructed of brownstone, 100 feet in width with a span of 104 feet. The thickness of the piers at their bases is nine feet, and the thickness of the arch at the center is 3 feet 2 inches. At the time it was built the level of the roadway was 30 feet 9 inches above the bed of the river. The roadway of the stone bridge is six or seven feet higher than the roadway of the wooden bridge it replaced. Grade of Main Street at either end of the bridge was raised accordingly. What had been a hollow or valley in Main Street was brought up to level, markedly changing the relationship of adjoining buildings to grade.

A further change in relationships occurred when the highway was built. The highway is on top of the river, reducing the amount of open space under the arch to 12 feet 6 inches. What was almost a half-round arch initially has become a segmental arch.

The bridge was built with wrought-iron railings on top of the parapets flanking the roadway. The pattern of the railings is a series of circles in a field of horizontal and vertical bars, under a crowning row of points. The Hartford Public Library was built over the highway, east of the bridge, in 1954-1957. The plaza in front of the library abuts the eastern side of the bridge. As the eastern bridge parapet and railing would have divided the library plaza from the roadway of the bridge, they were removed. The parapet and railing on the west remain.

Significance

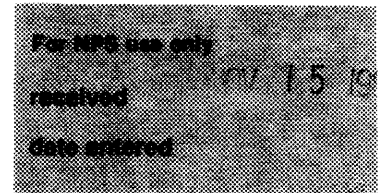
The Stone Bridge on Main Street was an important engineering feat at the time it was built. It changed the character of Main Street at the time, and has served the city well ever since. The graceful arch and fine masonry of the bridge constitute an ornament to the city.

There had been a wooden bridge over the Park River, earlier known as the Little River or Hog River, since the 17th century.<sup>1</sup> It had been shored up

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and increased in width from time to time, until in 1831 it was decided to replace it with a stone bridge at an estimated cost of \$16,000, which, in the event, proved to be \$30,000. The first stone of the foundation was laid June 18, 1833, and the keystone inserted in the arch November 21, 1833, by Elias Rathbun, the contractor. The bridge was the largest single-span bridge of its type in the United States at the time it was built.

The location had been one of the city's markets for some decades, comprised both of stores at either end of the bridge and of produce offered by farmers who brought in their wares to this location for sale. These arrangements were severely altered by the elevation in height of the roadway of the stone bridge. Moreover, because of the great span farmers distrusted the bridge, and would leave their teams on the south side before crossing the bridge to conduct their business in the downtown area of the city. Such fears have, over the years, proved to be unfounded.

The bridge was celebrated in writing and pictures of the day, notably by John Warner Barber, Connecticut's famous compiler of an 1836 illustrated history. Barber included a sketch of the bridge<sup>2</sup> that is much like, but not identical to, the well-known picture by "Clay del. & fec."<sup>3</sup> that is reproduced by Photograph 8A.

A century and a half later time has taken its toll on the bridge by covering its eastern side with the library plaza, and by filling some of the space under the arch with the conduit and highway. Nevertheless, the bridge remains in place and when viewed to the east appears much as it did in 1833, an important exercise in stone masonry executed in a graceful design.

1. This account of the bridge's early history is taken from J. Hammond Trumbull, ed., The Memorial History of Hartford County, Connecticut, 1633-1884, Boston: Edward L. Osgood, 1886, v. 1, pp. 268, 269.

2. John Warner Barber, Connecticut Historical Collections, New Haven and Hartford: J.W. Barber and A. Willard, 1836, Hartford Architecture Conservancy reprint, 1976, p. 32.

3. Delineavit and fecit, i.e., Clay both drew the picture and made the engraving.

Acreage: Less than one acre

UTM Reference: 18/693130/4625780

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Boundary Description and Justification

The boundary of the nominated property is shown by the attached 1893 map drawn by the Hartford City Engineer.

The boundary has not changed since the bridge was built. The plaza of Hartford Public Library now abuts the bridge on the east, but the original wall of the bridge is still in place, and may be seen from the roadway below. The east parapet and railing on it were taken down when the plaza was built to make the plaza and bridge sidewalk common space.