



HUMPBACK BRIDGE

Built to Last

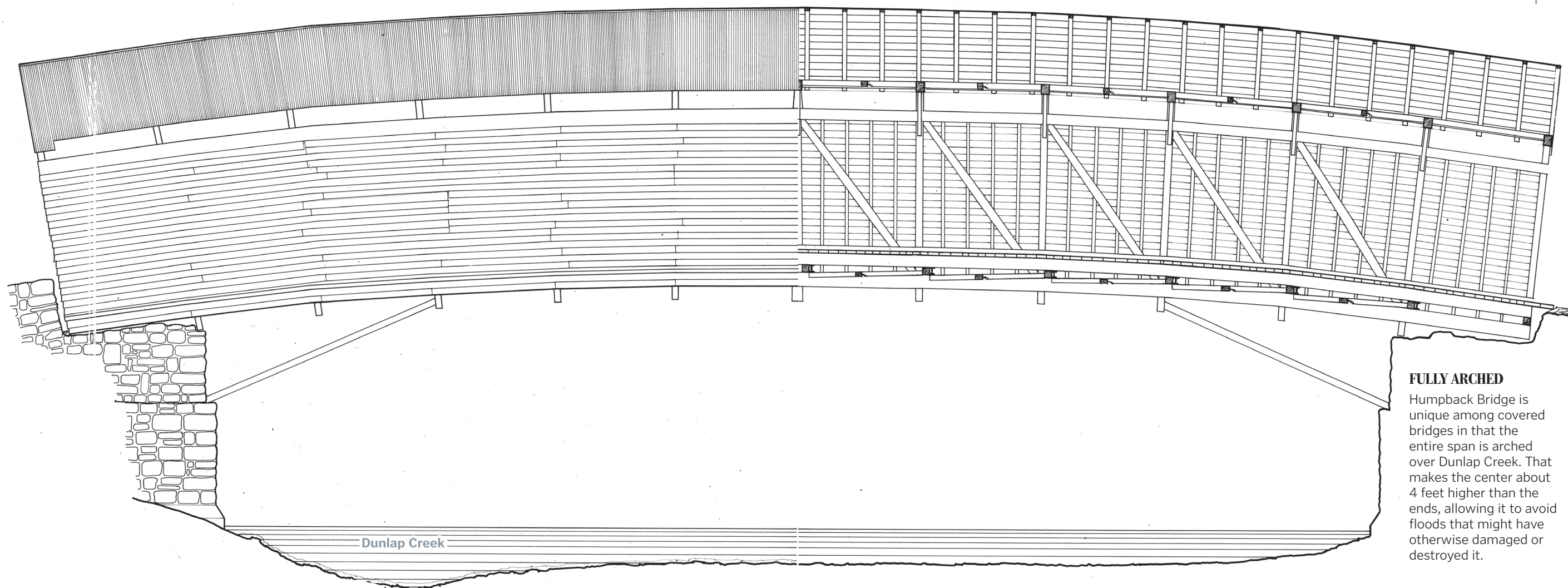
Unique design has helped Humpback Bridge span generations.

Humpback Bridge
ALLEGHANY CO. VIRGINIA

Story by GUS CROSS

★ *Humpback Bridge 1857*

BUILT TO LAST



FULLY ARCHED

Humpback Bridge is unique among covered bridges in that the entire span is arched over Dunlap Creek. That makes the center about 4 feet higher than the ends, allowing it to avoid floods that might have otherwise damaged or destroyed it.

STANDING IN THE SHALLOW WATERS OF DUNLAP CREEK, it might be hard to imagine that water levels ever rose high enough to challenge the humped covered bridge just west of Covington.

The timber structure, aptly christened Humpback Bridge, is one of about 850 covered bridges still standing in the United States. The bridge, built in 1857, has survived 161 years of flooding, fires and natural decay that destroyed all other covered bridges along the James River and Kanawha Turnpike. It also survived human interference.

“You have to keep in mind that that bridge was there during the Civil War,” said Paul Linkenhok-

er, president of the Alleghany Historical Society. “[Union soldiers] came through Alleghany County, through Covington, Low Moor and those places and burned some bridges, but they didn’t burn this bridge.”

ENGINEERED FOR SURVIVAL

In 1785, the James River Co. was incorporated out of a need for greater infrastructure and was tasked with developing several water crossings throughout Virginia, said National Park Service historians Lola Bennett and Roger Reed in the national historic landmark application they wrote for the bridge. In

1820, the company became state-owned and was authorized to build the 208-mile turnpike from the mouth of Dunlap Creek on the Jackson River, which feeds into the James River a few miles later, to the Kanawha River in present-day West Virginia, a region popular for producing salt.

To build this road, 48 timber bridges were constructed. The Humpback Bridge was not one of those original bridges; it was the fourth or fifth — records are unclear — iteration of the Lower Dunlap Creek Bridge, repeatedly destroyed by floods and poor structural design.

Two other covered bridges were built along Dun-

lap Creek within two miles of Humpback Bridge and were also rebuilt several times. After the turnpike project was turned over to local municipalities in 1860, however, they weren’t rebuilt when floods in 1877 and 1913 washed them away.

The bridge’s survival, for the most part, came down to its distinctive shape. Covered bridges were common at the time. Timber bridges were often covered to protect them from weather elements, which could lengthen their lifespan from a decade or so up to 30 or 40 years. But a cover could not protect a bridge from flood waters; it needed a stronger design.

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BUILT TO LAST

VISITORS LEAVE THEIR MARK

Though strictly a pedestrian crossing today, Humpback Bridge survived long enough to be used by both Civil War soldiers and automobiles. Visitors have covered the inside of the bridge in graffiti from paint, chalk and carvings.

In 1792, revered bridge builder Timothy Palmer designed the trussed arch, an arch bridge that featured two trusses built onto the arch. The arch did most of the work while the truss reinforced it. His design likely inspired the design of the Humpback Bridge; however, its entire truss system is arched, taking most of the force itself instead of displacing it onto the abutments as a true arch bridge would.

The arched shape causes the center of the bridge to be just over 4 feet higher than at the abutments, elevating it above potential flood waters. The combination of the stronger truss and elevated center helped the bridge survive devastating floods, such as the one Alleghany and Botetourt counties saw in 2016.

The bridge's design kept it intact past 1929, when U.S. 60 was diverted away from the bridge after a steel truss bridge was built just a few hundred feet north. Until that point, the bridge frequently saw use by automobiles traveling along U.S. 60, also known as Midland Trail. After the new bridge was constructed, Humpback Bridge was only to be used by pedestrians.

Years went by and the bridge's exterior began to fall into disrepair as it saw decreased use — at one point it was used solely by a farmer who stored his hay in it.

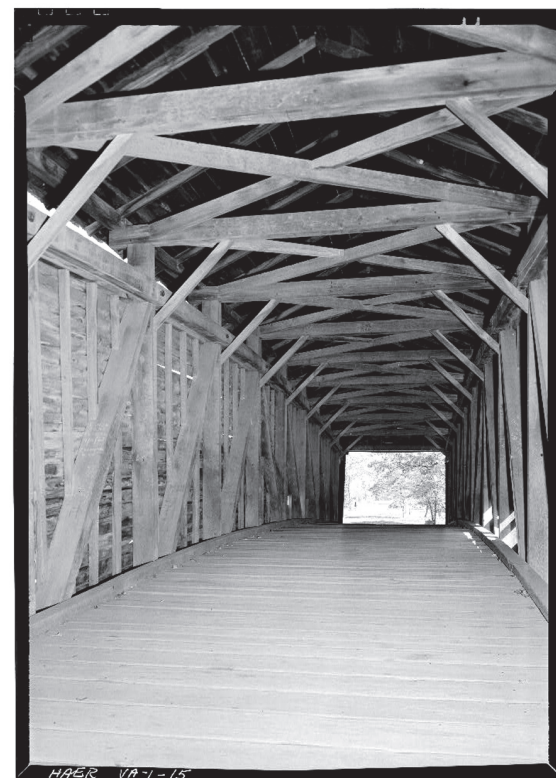
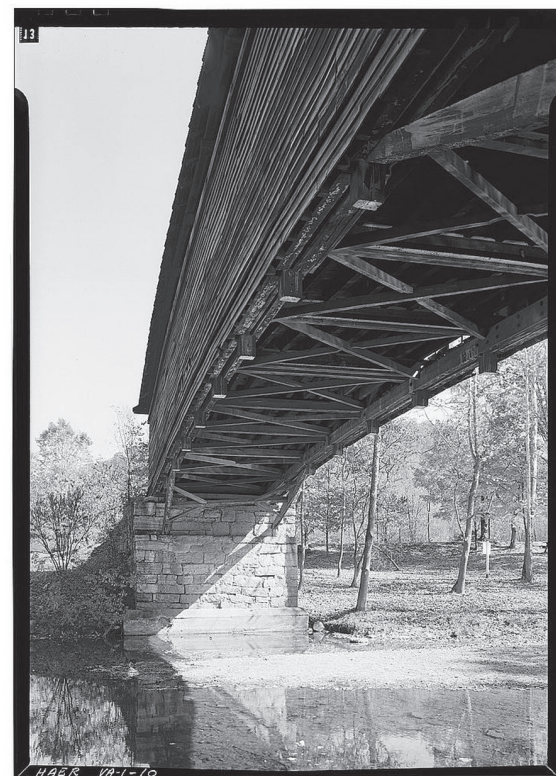
"The structure itself, the beams, the weight bearing structure remained intact," Linkenhoker said.

THE MAKING OF A LANDMARK

By the 1940s, local residents wanted to preserve the bridge, and in 1953, a fundraiser was led by the Covington Business and Professional Women's Club to preserve it as the center of a wayside park.

"That is an indicator for the level of importance it has for the community," said Susan Hammond, Lexington residency administrator for the Virginia Department of Transportation. VDOT, along with the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, works to maintain the bridge and the wayside park surrounding it.

The campaign raised enough money to buy



the surrounding land for a park, and in 1954, the newly restored bridge and park were dedicated as the Humpback Bridge Wayside. The bridge was featured on the Virginia Department of Highways'



(now VDOT) 1955 official state highway map cover and received a historical marker from the women's club in 1958.

The U.S. Department of the Interior designated the bridge a national historic landmark Oct. 16, 2012.

NO LONGER A ROAD, A DESTINATION

Since it became a wayside, Humpback Bridge has been the site of countless weddings, picnics, church services and family gatherings.

"Growing up as a child, we would get a picnic lunch and go there after church," said Teresa Hammond, executive director of the Alleghany Highlands Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. "Lots of families go there now and do it."

Its frequent use keeps the bridge's condition on the community's mind as a never-ending effort is made to keep it intact, including community clean-ups of graffiti every few years.

"It is something our community wants to remain here for years to come," Hammond said.

It stands today not only as a gathering point for the community but also as a structure to take pride in.



"I challenge you to find one exactly like it," Linkenhoker said.

The only other covered bridge found so far with an arched multiple kingpost truss, the Ponn Humpback Covered Bridge in Vinton County, Ohio, was destroyed by a fire in June 2013. ①