

Rhode Island Statewide Historic Bridge Survey and Management Plan

In 1992 AHS Senior Historian Bruce Clouette, Ph.D., undertook, with Matthew W. Roth, a state-wide historic bridge survey for RIDOT that produced inventory forms for 124 historic arch and truss bridges. Bridge types ranged from small 19th-century rustic stone arches to 1880s iron trusses to the 870-long open-spandrel reinforced-concrete Ashton Viaduct, completed in 1945. The project required field inspection and photography for the bridges, as well as research in local archives, RIDOT's collection of bridge photographs and drawings, and the published reports of the State Board of Public Roads and the Department of Public Works, RIDOT's predecessor agencies. Each bridge was described in detail, and its significance for the history of engineering and state and local history was assessed.



Of special importance was identifying existing and potential historic districts that could be affected by projects involving the bridges. Many of the historic bridges, such as the Clarence Hussey Memorial Bridge in Wickford, were in listed historic districts. Other bridges were identified that, while not themselves historic, lie within historic districts that could be affected by replacement or alteration of the bridge.



In addition to the inventory forms, the project produced a thematic National Register of Historic Places thematic nomination form that was used to make Determinations of Eligibility for the bridges. The nomination form developed in detail the numerous historic contexts—engineering history, transportation, government, community planning—within which the bridges were evaluated. The project also produced a Preservation Plan for National Register-listed or eligible bridges. The plan identified alternatives to replacement that needed to be addressed in environmental documents for bridge projects, such as load-limit posting, bypass, new parallel span, widening, and selective rehabilitation. The alternatives were then assessed, in general terms, on a bridge-by-bridge basis. The plan continues to inform the consultation between RIDOT and the State Historic Preservation Office. A comparative study of state historic bridge inventories by the Transportation Research Board found the RIDOT survey to be one of only four “fully developed” plan (Clouette also worked on two of the other three).

In 2014 RIDOT contracted with AHS to conduct an update of the survey plan, which involved a study of over 400 additional bridges which had reached the 50-year old threshold.

The final product of the original project was a 72-page illustrated public-education booklet of the historic highway bridges of Rhode Island.