

## 30 Cornish, NH - Windsor, VT Covered Bridge

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Although the Cornish-Windsor Covered Bridge can no longer claim the honor of longest covered bridge in the United States (*a 2008 bridge built in Ohio now holds that distinction*), it certainly retains its place in New England history, as well as its 1970 designation as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers and on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Cornish-Windsor Bridge spans 450 feet, 5 inches across the Connecticut River, between the east end of Bridge Street in Windsor, Vermont and NH Route 12A in Cornish, New Hampshire. With a roadway width of 19 feet, 6 inches and vertical clearance above the roadway at 12 feet, 9 inches, the covered bridge continues to carry two-way traffic, with a legal weight limit of ten tons.

Three previous bridges, built in 1796, 1824, and 1849, at the same location, collapsed due to the flooding on the Connecticut River. Following the 1849 bridge collapse, James F. Tasker of Cornish and Bela J. Fletcher of Claremont set to work on building the first covered version of the bridge, based on a design patented by architect Ithiel Town in 1820. A significant advantage to Town's design was that it could be assembled off-site by carpenters of modest skill. Town charged builders \$1 per linear foot for use of his design -- and \$2 per foot for pirated projects discovered by his agents.

The exact purpose of a cover over the bridge varies from protecting the wood deck beams from rot and freeze to providing a safety mechanism for animals to cross. At a cost of \$9,000 to build, the Cornish-Windsor Bridge opened to horse and carriage traffic in the fall of 1866, representing the first major step in the evolution of American wooden bridges. With load-bearing joints fastened together by wooden pegs, Town's design used a lattice pattern that allowed the load of the bridge to be distributed more evenly. The Cornish-Windsor Bridge continues to stand as a model of the economy and resilience of early American design.

On the exterior, the trusses (and sidewalls) of the bridge are hung vertically and painted grey. Eighteen small square windows with hoods are evenly spaced and cut into each side wall of the bridge. The windows in one wall are spaced diagonally opposite those in the other wall. Vertical matched boards, which are painted white for increased visibility, protect the ends of the trusses immediately inside the portals. The white gable ends are sheathed with horizontal clapboards. The portal openings are framed with semi-elliptical arches.

While the current structure is void of any modern day structural enhancements, the original physical appearance of the bridge differed somewhat. The original wood-shingled roof was replaced with the metal sheeting in 1924. The matched boards applied to the bridge and painted in 1954-55 most likely replaced flush plain boards, and the stone abutment on the east end has been faced with concrete in 1921 after it started to settle.

Built for a private bridge company, it remained a private toll bridge until 1935, at which time the New Hampshire General Court authorized the Department of Transportation to purchase the bridge and continue operations with a toll charge. The toll fee was eventually discontinued on June 1, 1943.

With renovations in 1954 and 1977 following flood and ice damage, the bridge closed to traffic on July 2, 1987 due to deterioration. Two years and \$4,450,000 later, the bridge reopened to traffic.

The Cornish-Windsor Bridge has the numbers (New Hampshire) 29-10-09 and (Vermont) 45-14-14 in the *World Guide to Covered Bridges*, published by the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges. It is open year round and continues to be a popular tourist destination for photos, especially during the foliage season.

**SOURCES:**

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<http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/bridges/p39.html>

<http://www.asce.org/People-and-Projects/Projects/Landmarks/Cornish---Windsor-Covered-Bridge/>

<http://www.nps.gov/history/hdp/samples/HAER/Cornish-Windsor%20Engr%20Report%20-%20Final%20-%20LL.pdf>

The Vermont Covered Bridge Museum, <http://www.bennington.com/chamber/bridges/museum.html>