

IMAGES OF THE ROCK BRIDGE

By Richard Hubbard

Based on an exhibition sponsored by the Rockbridge Historical Society, Autumn 2014

IN OCTOBER 1777 Rockbridge County was established and named after “the Rock Bridge,” as Natural Bridge was first called.

Known for more than 200 years as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, this gigantic natural limestone arch spans a canyon 300 feet deep and 100 feet wide, high above Cedar Creek.

In the 1700s and 1800s, the Rock Bridge was as famous as Niagara Falls and considered equally important as a tourist location, for Europeans as well as for Americans. It has been the subject of countless paintings and photographs. In the early 1800s, European artists viewed it as representative of the untamed American wilderness.

Richard Hubbard attended the University of Wisconsin (B.A., English, and J.D.) and the University of Maryland (M.B.A., finance). He worked for twenty-eight years as a deputy attorney general with the Delaware Department of Justice, including eight years as the Delaware Securities Commissioner, retiring in 2012 and moving to Lexington in 2013. He recently completed a four-year term as treasurer and a director of the Rockbridge Historical Society.

Eric Wilson, executive director of the Rockbridge Historical Society, was instrumental in creating some of the exhibition text.

A special thanks to Special Collections, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University: Tom Camden, Seth Goodhart, Lisa McCown and Byron Faidley. Additional thanks to Leyburn Library employee Emily Cook. Without their assistance, this exhibit would not have been possible.

Historically, the Bridge has served as wildlife trail and corridor, part of a Native American trail known as the Great Path, a horse and wagon road for settlers and farmers known as the Great Wagon Road, and for decades part of the main north-south paved highway through the Shenandoah Valley, U.S. Route 11 (the Lee Highway), which still traverses the bridge.

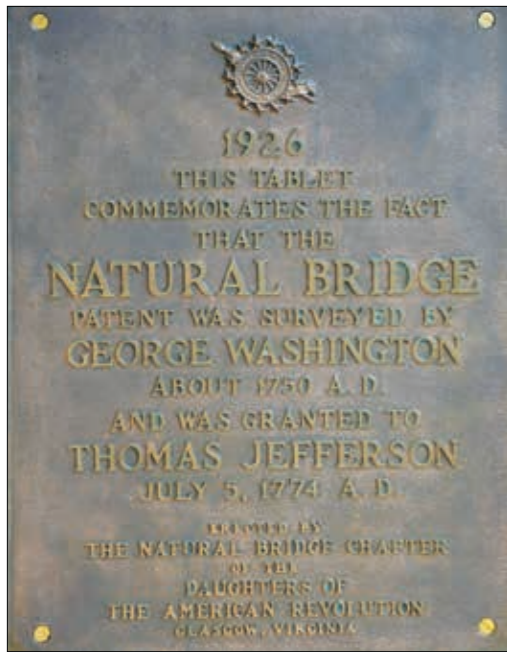
Its first owner was Thomas Jefferson, who called it “the most sublime of Nature’s works.” Jefferson first saw Natural Bridge in August 1767, and he purchased it along with 157 surrounding acres from King George III on July 5, 1774. In 1802 Jefferson surveyed the site, measuring the height of the bridge as 205 feet on the north side and 270 feet on the south. He wrote that it “will yet be a famous place, that will draw the attention of the world.”

George Washington is generally believed to have surveyed the Bridge in 1750 while surveying western Virginia for Lord Fairfax and to have carved his initials in the rock, which are still there today. However, there is no mention of this in his writings; thus there is cause for doubt. Also, Washington is said to have recommended to others that they see the Bridge, which suggests he had seen it himself.

In 1803 Jefferson had a two-room log cabin constructed near the location of the present hotel, with one room kept for visitors. He kept a log book in the cabin to record the visitors. Signers of the log book would come to include John Marshall, James Monroe, Henry Clay, Sam Houston, Daniel Boone, Andrew Jackson, and Martin Van Buren. Later visitors to the Bridge would include



Natural Bridge today.



President William McKinley, John James Audubon, President Calvin Coolidge, Will Rogers, Lowell Thomas and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The Natural Bridge area expanded to 1,600 acres, including nature trails along Cedar Creek, waterfalls, and a saltpeter mine that was used during the War of 1812 and the Civil War to make gunpowder.

More recently, in addition to seeing the Bridge, tourists could visit the nearby caverns, stay at the iconic Natural Bridge Hotel, and take a night visit to the “Drama of Creation,” a lightshow that was begun in 1927 with a display of colored lights on the Bridge accompanied by classical music and readings from the Book of Genesis.

After its 2013 purchase by the Virginia Conservation Legacy Fund, the Bridge and surrounding 1,500 acres of forested land are to be deeded to the Commonwealth and are now protected as a state park.

In 1998 Natural Bridge was designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service. Whether as a geological marvel, an art subject, or a tourist destination, the Rock Bridge continues its imaginative hold on those who view it, here in Rockbridge County and well beyond.



By tradition, George Washington carved his initials onto the Bridge around 1750.

NATURAL BRIDGE IN ART

First Published Images of Natural Bridge: Turpin / Chastellux, 1787

Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782

By the Marquis de Chastellux (London: G. G. J. and J. Robertson, Pater Noster Row, 1787). Drawings by Baron de Turpin of the Royal Corps of Engineers, attached to Comte de Rochambeau.



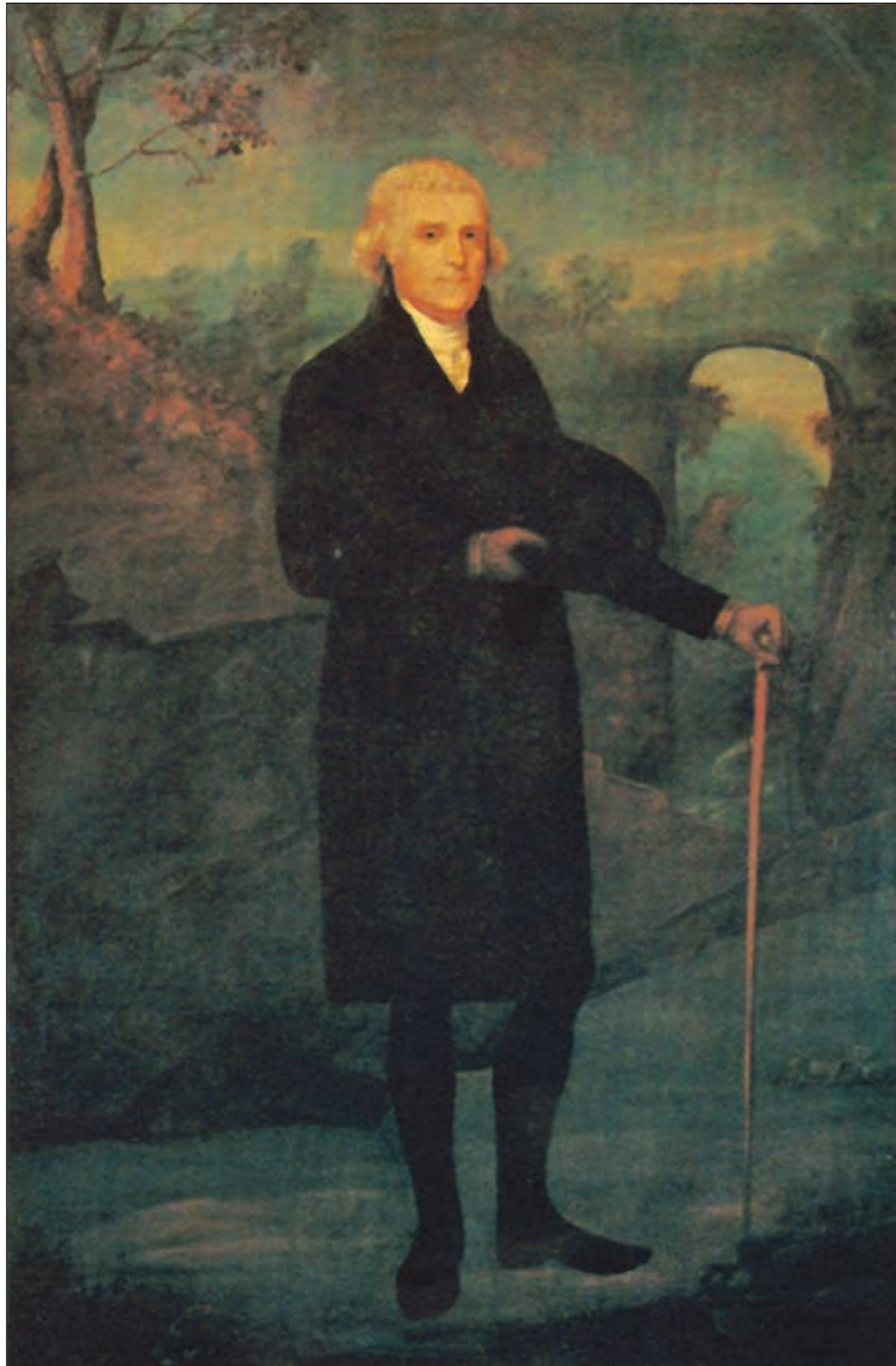
These two prints of Turpin’s engraved drawings are the earliest known published images of the Bridge. They first appeared one year earlier in *Chastellux’s Voyages en Nord Amerique* in 1786.

Top: “Point A”; bottom, “Point B.”
Courtesy Wolf Law Library, William & Mary Law School, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Caleb Boyle, ca. 1801*Thomas Jefferson at the Natural Bridge of Virginia*

Kirby Collection, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania

This version reproduced from from *So Beautiful an Arch*: Exhibition catalogue,
Washington and Lee University, Pamela Hemenway Simpson, curator, 1982

**Edward Hicks, ca. 1825–30***Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch*

Oil on canvas, 23½ x 30¾ in.

Collection of Reynolda House Museum of American Art,
Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina



Edward Hicks (1780–1849) was a sign painter from Pennsylvania. Untrained as an artist, he painted the *Peaceable Kingdom* theme in numerous paintings as an expression of his Quaker faith. The image is inspired by Isaiah 11:6: “. . . and a little child shall lead them.”

There are at least six known *Peaceable Kingdom of the Branch* paintings that include Natural Bridge. Hicks probably saw the image of the Bridge on a print rather than visiting the Bridge firsthand.

W. H. Bartlett's 1839 Engraving

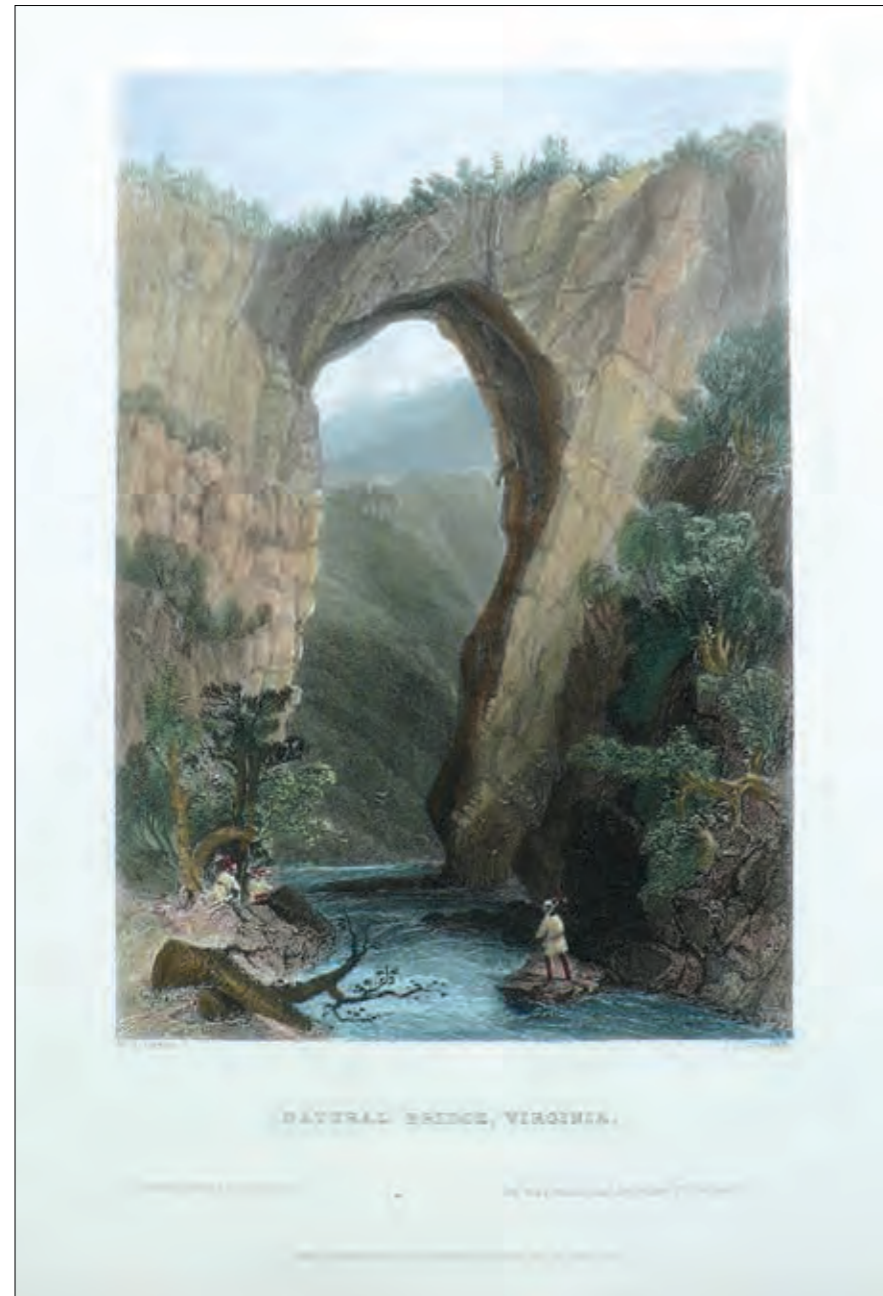
Natural Bridge, Virginia / Pont Natural de Virginie /

Die Naturliche Brucke In Virginen

Engraving, 7½ x 5 in.

W. H. Bartlett — J. C. Armytage

London, Published for the Proprietors by George Virtue, 26 Ivy Lane, 1839.



The Bartlett engraving was a popular image of the Bridge in the mid-1800s. It was originally published in Nathaniel Park Willis's *American Scenery* in London in 1840. William Henry Bartlett (1809–54) was a well-known English landscape illustrator, and James Charles Armytage was an engraver who frequently worked with him.

Penny Magazine

The Natural Bridge of Virginia, June 16, 1832

The Penny Magazine was an illustrated British magazine aimed at the working class, published every Saturday from March 1832 to October 1845. Sold for only a penny and illustrated with wood engravings, it was an expensive enterprise that could be supported only by very large circulation. Though initially very successful, with a circulation of 200,000 in the first year, it proved too dry to appeal to the working-class audience it needed to be financially viable.



Frederic Edwin Church, 1852

Oil on canvas, 28 x 23 in.

Collection of the University of Virginia Art Museum, Charlottesville, Virginia



Frederic E. Church (1826–1900) was one of the best known of the Hudson River School of landscape painters. His teacher was Thomas Cole, but Church extended the Hudson River approach to more exotic landscapes in America and internationally. Church traveled to Virginia in 1851 and studied the Bridge, even taking rock samples with him to get the colors right.

**Beyer Lithograph, 1858**

Lithograph, 16½ x 24 in.

In *Album of Virginia* by Edward Beyer, Richmond, Virginia:

Library of Virginia, 1980 (reprint of 1858 edition)



Edward Beyer (1820–65) was a German artist who came to America in 1848. He spent two years in Virginia painting its rural landscape, spas and mountain scenery. In 1856 he returned to Germany to produce lithographs for *Album of Virginia*, which was published in 1858.

David Johnson, 1860

Oil on Canvas, 30 x 24 in.



David Johnson (1827–1908) was a second-generation Hudson River School artist, known for his meticulous landscapes and for helping to originate the style now known as “Luminism.” He painted two major oils of Natural Bridge, both shown here, along with some smaller images done later. The larger image (below) is a reproduction

print on stretched canvas. The smaller image (above), from a more distant perspective, is a copy of the original, which is in the collection of the Reynolda House, Inc., Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

**Michael Miley, c. 1866–70**

Known as “General Lee’s photographer,” Michael Miley was Lexington’s most prominent photographer in the latter part of the 1800s. He had his own studio in town at the intersection of Main and Nelson Streets and over the course of nearly 70 years developed an archive of more than 7,000 photographs.

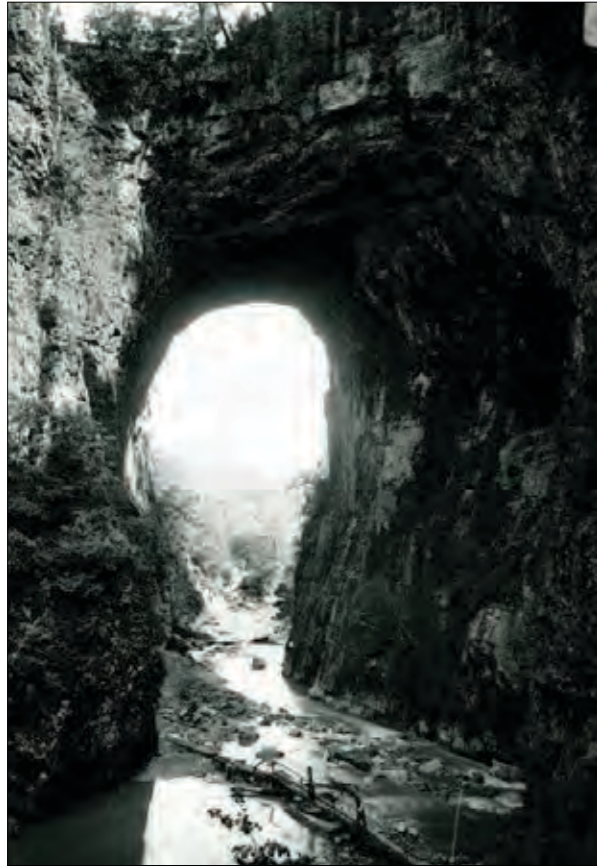
Born in 1841 on a farm in Rockingham County, Miley moved at an early age with his family to Rockbridge County. He enlisted during the Civil War and spent the last two years of it as a prisoner at Fort Delaware. Returning to Lexington after the war, he started his photography career in Staunton as an assistant to John Burdett and then moved to Lexington, working for an itinerant photographer named Adam Plecker.

By 1866 he had his own studio and began to document life in Rockbridge County. His most famous photographs were of General Lee, including one of Lee’s funeral procession. He died in 1918 in relative poverty. Today, many of his photographs are maintained in the custody of Special Collections in Washington and Lee University’s Leyburn Library.



Michael Miley, undated. Courtesy of Special Collections, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University.





Above, left and right: Michael Miley, undated.
 Right: Miley, wooden walkway, c. 1880s-'90s.
 Courtesy of Special Collections, Leyburn
 Library, Washington and Lee University.

Currier & Ives, c. 1870



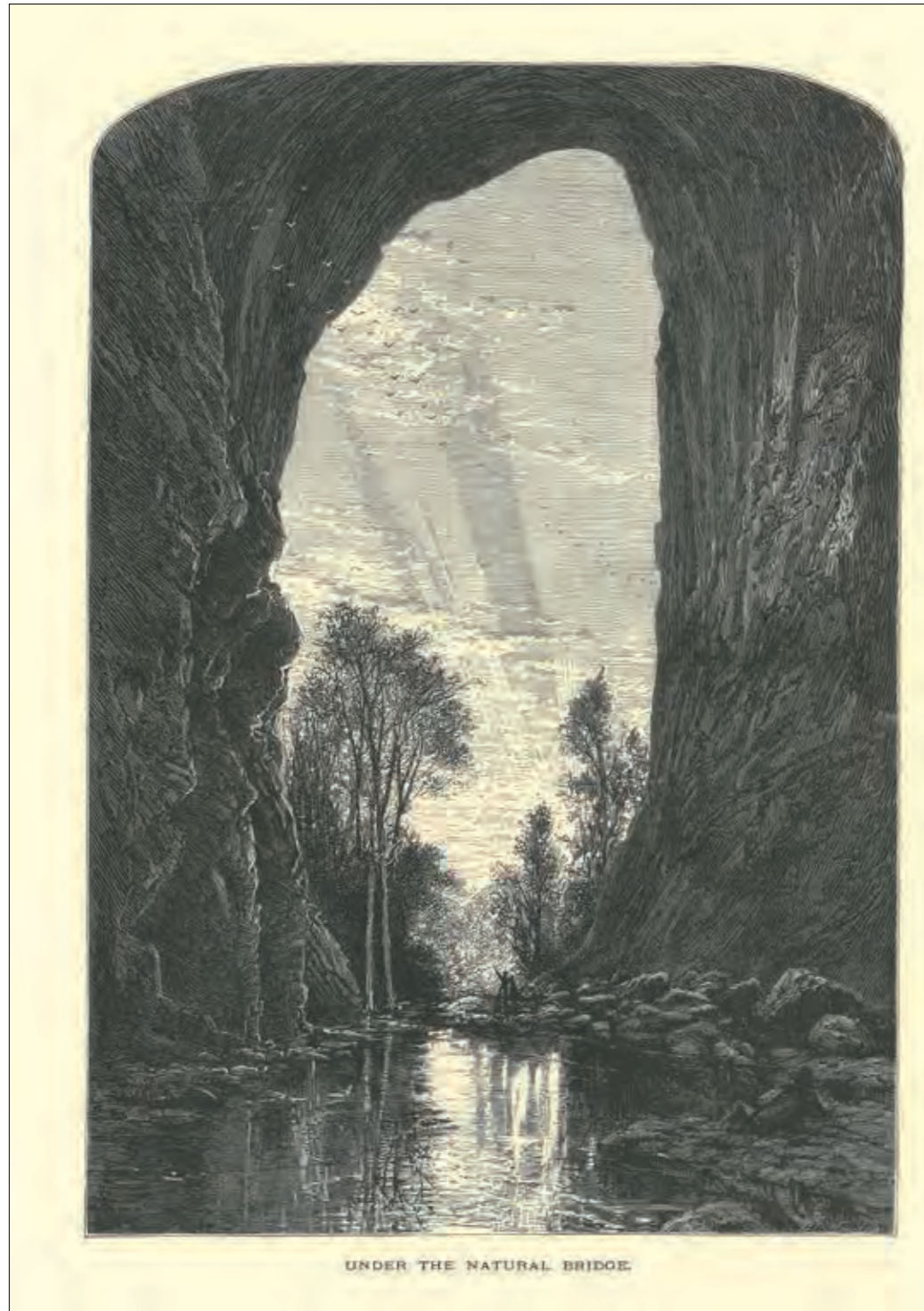
DID YOU KNOW?

The Bridge was used as a shot tower during the
 Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

Harry Fenn, 1872*Under the Natural Bridge*

Published in *Picturesque America*, edited by William Cullen Bryant,
New York: D. Appleton, 1872.

Picturesque America was published as a semi-monthly serial in 1872. Each section focused on a specific geographical area.

**C. H. James, ca. 1882**

Stereoscopic photograph

James, a Philadelphia photographer, used an extremely large format camera housing a Zeiss lens with a negative plate measuring 24 in. by 36 in., which accounts for the extraordinary clarity of detail in this photograph, which is reproduced here through the courtesy of the New York Public Library.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Thomas Jefferson bought the Bridge and 157 surrounding acres from King George for 20 shillings exactly two years before the Declaration of Independence.

W. P. Snyder, 1888

Wood engraving, 9¼ x 13½ in.

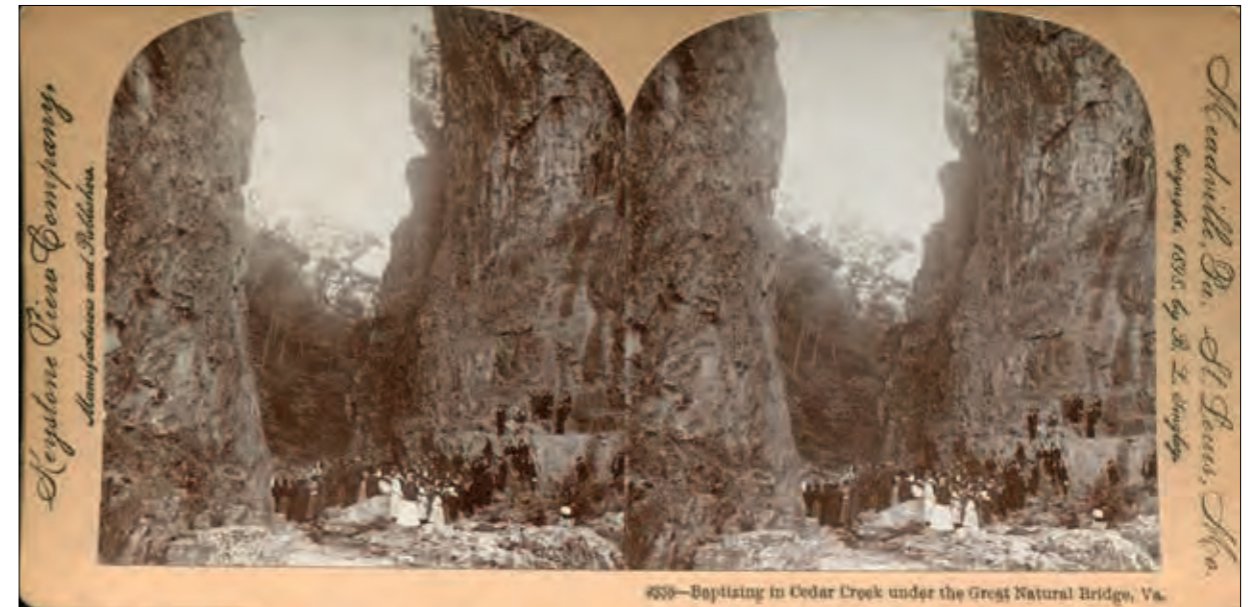
Published in *Harper's Weekly*, September 8, 1888, Vol. XXXII, No. 1655, page 669.

THE NATURAL BRIDGE, VIRGINIA.—Drawn by W. P. Snyder.—[See Page 61.]

Stereoscopic Image of African-American Baptism at Natural Bridge, 1898

Baptizing in Cedar Creek under the Great Natural Bridge, Va.

B. L. Singley, Keystone View Company, Meadville, Pennsylvania



“From the cliffs it is no uncommon sight of a Sunday to look down upon a baptizing. The deep pool which the creek forms almost under the bridge is a favorite choice for immersion, both of white and colored. Usually a little tent of sheets is put up. From one of the churches, file down those who have experienced a ‘change of heart,’ and are come to have their sins washed away. The colored baptisms are more impressive, because these people seem more deeply impressed.”

— Parsons, Katherine Loomis, “The Natural Bridge of Virginia,”
New England Magazine, An Illustrated Monthly,
(March–August 1891), pp. 590–605 (at 602).

Katherine Loomis Parsons was the daughter of Colonel Henry Parsons, who owned Natural Bridge in the 1880s and was president of the Natural Bridge Forest Company, which purchased Natural Bridge from Parsons in 1884.
See pp. 12–13 below.

DID YOU KNOW?

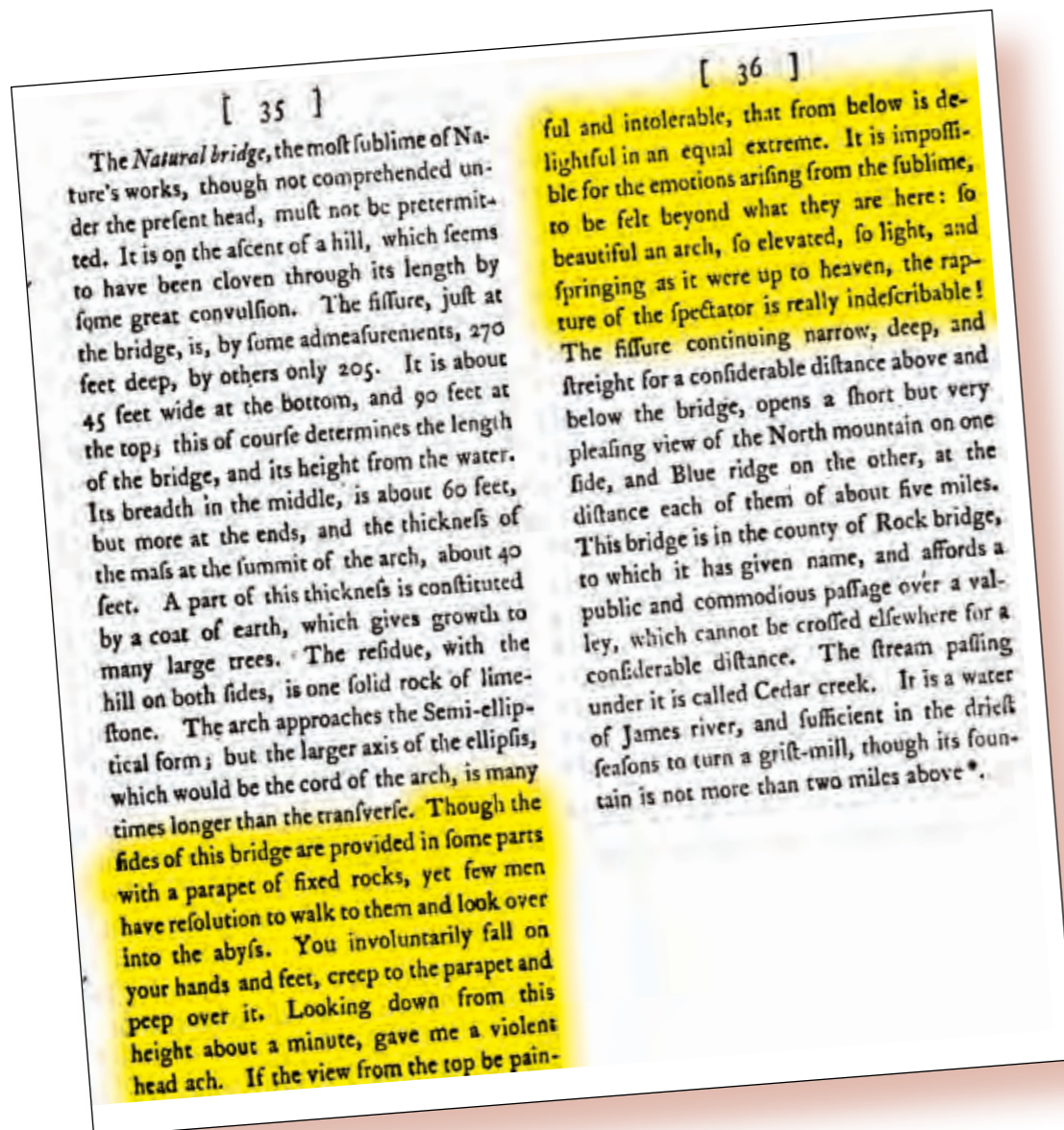
Jefferson hired an African American freeman named Patrick Henry to manage his properties at Natural Bridge.

NATURAL BRIDGE IN HISTORY

Jefferson's Description of the Bridge, 1787

... Though the sides of this bridge are provided in some parts with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntarily fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet and peep over it. Looking down from this height about a minute, gave me a violent head ach. If the view from the top be painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme. It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch, so elevated, so light, and springing as it were up to heaven, the rapture of the spectator is really indescribable!

— Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787)



Jefferson's Unpleasant 1817 Trip to Natural Bridge

Described by His Granddaughter Cornelia Jefferson Randolph
Extract of August 17, 1817 Letter from Cornelia J. Randolph to
Virginia J. Randolph

August 17 1817

My Dear Virginia

We are return'd from the natural bridge more anxious to see it again than we were at first, because in the first place it far surpass'd our expectations, & in the second we saw it under many disadvantages, which will be remov'd when we go again, & grandpapa has promis'd that we shall; our trip was attended with disasters & accidents from the time we set off untill we return'd again, the morning we were to go when we got up we found it was a damp cloudy day, but Grandpapa decided at breakfast that it would not rain & sister Ellen and myself rejoic'd that the sun did not shine & that we should have a cool day for our journey we set off accordingly after Gil & Israel had made us wait two hours but we had not proceeded many miles before it clear'd up the sun shone out & we had one of the hottest most disagreeable days for traveling that could be, then came our first misfortune in going over a high bridge one of the wheel horses broke through & sank up nearly half way in the hole we all got out as quick as we could & found that the bridge was entirely gone to decay & not only several of the logs but one of the sleepers had broken down & that we had been in great danger of going down carriage & horses & all, the horses were all loosened & poor Bremo pull'd out by main strength, for he seem'd so overcome with fright that he was incapable assisting himself & lay quite passive & let them do what they would with him, he was hurt in no other way than being much skind & bruisd, but as it was we were oblig'd now to walk up a long tedious red hill & then pursued our journey in the carriage without any other accident, over abominable roads

August 19 Grandpapa means to hurry Johnny off so soon that I have not time to say any thing more of our trip to the Natural bridge particularly as I have written down three pages & have not got to the end of our first days journey, but if you are not tir'd already I will go on with our travels in the next letter, & will try to get a lit-



Cornelia Jefferson Randolph.
Bust sculpted by William Coffee, c. 1819.
Photo courtesy of Monticello.

tle better pen ink & paper that the reading them may not be such a task, at present I must answer the principle articles of your letter.

C.R.

Extract of August 30, 1817 Letter from Cornelia J. Randolph to
Virginia J. Randolph

poplar Forest Aug. 30 1817

I am very much oblig'd to you my Dear Virginia for your two letters & am quite outrageous at Elizabeth Harriet & Mary's neglecting me so, however I will write to Harriet if I have time because I promis'd her faithfully to do so . . . but to go on with our journey to the Natural bridge after we had cross'd that delightful mountain where the temperature of the air was the most charming that I ever felt . . . the next day it rain'd as hard as it could pour untill one oclock it held up then & we went to the bridge tho' it was showery all day, about two or three hundred yards from the bridge Patrick Henry a mulatto man lives, on the land of the widow Ochiltree he keeps the key of the shot tower & generally goes with persons who go to see the bridge he went with us, we knew the instant we were on the bridge & I cant concieve how any one can go on it without knowing, for you see the sides of the precipice; on looking down it has very much the effect on your head that looking down a well has, we stood on the edge & look'd down with perfect safety, & afterwards look'd out of the shot tower window, it is impossible to judge of the height from the top but when you go down & see how large objects are which you thought quite small you are astonish'd I thought I saw fern growing remarkably close to the ground & afterwards found out it was young walnut trees about 3 or four feet high we saw a barrel sunk almost entirely in to the ground which prov'd to be a thing made to protect some of the shot works about 8 feet high, the stream below look'd like a little branch & was in reality larger than Moores creek, what I took for stepping stones were large rocks large enough for us all to set on together with the greatest ease but above all what gave us the best idea of the heighth was a linen tube reaching from top to bottom, looking out of the window we thought it must be a great deal smaller at bottom than at top although it was so long but we found it was the same size all the way. There was only one steep difficult path to get down the hill & after we got there we found that a dam had been made which together with the rise of the water prevented us entirely from getting under the bridge & we should have been oblig'd to come away with scarcely an idea of the bridge if it had not been for the exertions of Patrick Henry who worked for nearly an hour to contrive us a way by which we might get along, which he did by laying planks & logs from one point of the rock to

another with great difficulty we succeeded & then the scene was beyond any thing you can imagine possibly . . .

Adieu my Dear Virginia. I have neither time nor paper to write any more & I dare say this will more than satisfy you

yours

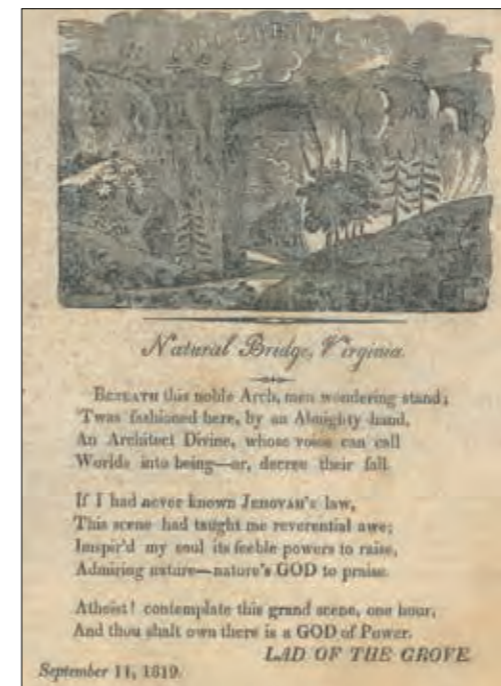
C.R.

SOURCE

J. Jefferson Looney and others, eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, vol. 11 (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 622–24 and 628–30; originals in the Nicholas P. Trist Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina.

Article and Poem from September 18, 1819, *Lexington News-Letter*

Note that the writer's second paragraph quotes Jefferson's description of Natural Bridge without quotation marks or attribution. (See page 10.)

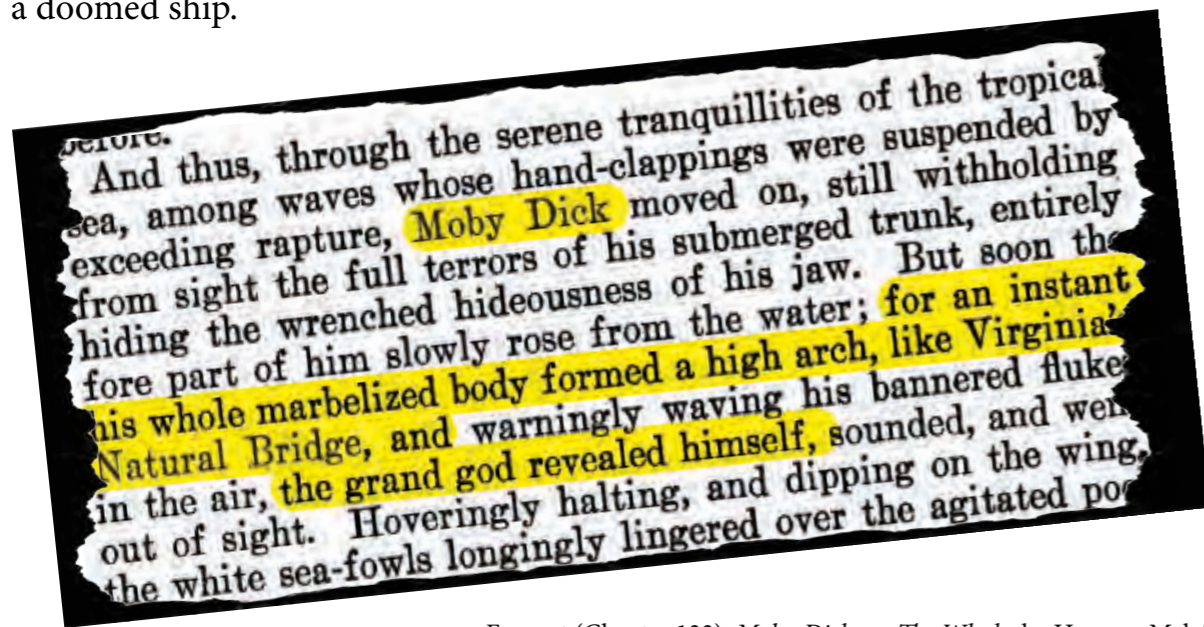


SOME weeks since the Editor of the "News-Letter," visited the *Natural Bridge*, and took a sketch of it, which he has had engraved, and now presents it to his readers, accompanied with a description, that has been pronounced, by all who have ever seen this grand natural curiosity, to be strictly correct.—A view of this most stupendous work of nature, has impressed on our mind, emotions and sentiments, that time and the vicissitudes of this life, can never efface. All we will now say is, "that as we looked down into the gulf from above, our knees shook under us; and as we looked up from below, at its sweeping arch, blue as the heavens that appeared above, and everlasting as the earth beneath, we were struck with feelings of sublimity, which no object we have ever seen had hitherto inspired."

The *Natural Bridge* is the most sublime of nature's works. It is on the ascent of a hill, which seems to have been cloven through its length by some great convulsion. The fissure, just at the Bridge, is 212 feet. It is about 45 feet wide at the bottom, and 90 feet at the top; this of course determines the length of the Bridge, and its height from the water. Its breadth in the middle is about 60 feet, but more at the ends, and the thickness of the mass at the summit of the arch, about 40 feet. A part of this thickness is constituted by a coat of earth, which gives growth to some trees. The residue, with the hill on both sides, is solid rock of lime-stone. Though the sides of the Bridge are provided in some parts, with a parapet of fixed rocks, yet few men have resolution to walk to them and look over into the abyss. You involuntary fall on your hands and feet, creep to the parapet, and peep over it. As the view from the top is painful and intolerable, that from below is delightful in an equal extreme. It is impossible for the emotions arising from the sublime, to be felt beyond what they are here: so beautiful an arch—so elevated, and springing as it were up to heaven, the rapture of the spectator is really indelible.

Melville Compares Moby-Dick's Arched Back to Natural Bridge

Herman Melville published his great novel *Moby-Dick, or, the Whale* in 1851. Ishmael, the narrator, tells the story of Captain Ahab's obsession with the albino sperm whale that had on an earlier voyage destroyed his ship and severed his leg. The novel was a commercial failure and out of print at Melville's death in 1891, having sold only 3,200 copies during his lifetime. It was rediscovered in the 20th century. D.H. Lawrence said it is "one of the strangest and most wonderful books in the world" and "the greatest book of the sea ever written." It draws on Melville's sea experiences as well as Shakespeare and the Bible, exploring themes of good and evil and God and man set in a close environment of fearsome whalers aboard a doomed ship.



Excerpt (Chapter 133), *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale*, by Herman Melville. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.

Colonel Henry Chester Parsons and the Natural Bridge Forest Company

Henry C. Parsons (1840–94) was born in Saint Albans, Vermont, and was graduated from the University of Vermont in 1862. He enlisted as a captain in the First Vermont Cavalry on September 18, 1862, and was wounded at the Battle of Gettysburg on July 3, 1863. He was discharged for wounds on January 4, 1864.

Known as "Colonel Parsons" after he moved to Virginia, he was an entrepreneur and formed a company to build the Richmond-Allegheny Railroad. In 1881 he purchased the Natural Bridge and 200 acres. He ran a railroad line to Natural Bridge Station and arranged for wagon, surrey, or buggy transportation the re-

GEOLOGY OF THE BRIDGE

Much of the sedimentary bedrock in this part of Virginia consists of thick deposits of calcium carbonate, formed in a warm, shallow sea by carbonate-generating organisms (the main component of mollusk shells and coral skeletons) nearly 500 million years ago. These deposits consist of limestone and dolomite, which dissolve when water interacts with the chemicals in the rock. Limestone dissolved in water forms carbonic acid, a weak and diluted acid that over time can dramatically carve out a limestone landscape. Rainfall and groundwater have dissolved and etched out canyons, caverns and sinkholes throughout the region. There are approximately 2,500 caverns in Virginia, characteristic of what is called karst topography. Approximately one-fifth of the United States consists of karst topography. Around 200 million years ago, the James River and its tributaries, including Cedar Creek, were formed, flowing northeast to the Chesapeake Bay. Cedar Creek was then 200 feet higher than it is today. As the creek carved into the limestone, it created an underground stream with a waterfall inside a cavern. When the roof of the cavern collapsed, it left a canyon. However, there was a section of massive, thick rock that was more resistant to the water, and it remained as the Natural Bridge.

maining two miles to the Bridge. He built several hotels and made Natural Bridge a tourist destination where hundreds of people would vacation for the summer.

He formed the Natural Bridge Forest Company and transferred ownership of the Bridge to the company in 1884. He purchased 2,000 acres surrounding the Bridge and added that to the company's holdings. It became the largest privately owned park in the United States.

Parsons was involved with numerous railroads in different capacities and was politically connected to James G. Blaine, who was a Congressman and U.S. Senator from Maine, Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1869 to 1874, and candidate for President on the Republican ticket in 1884 (narrowly defeated, however,



Colonel Henry Parsons.
Vermont Civil War Collection,
courtesy Francis Guber.

by Grover Cleveland). Blaine was associated with several scandals involving alleged bribes from railroad companies.

In 1890 Parsons was sued for fraud in Chancery Court in Rockbridge County by stockholders of the Allegheny Coal & Iron Company, seeking to have Parsons' acquisition of Natural Bridge voided. This suit may have been settled, as no articles on the suit subsequent to the filing of the complaint can be located.

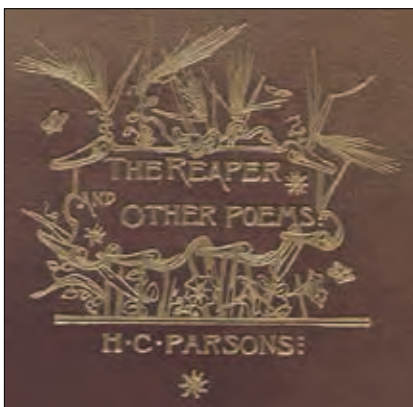
In June 1894 Parsons was shot to death by a C&O Railroad conductor named Thomas Goodman, who alleged that Parsons slandered him in a letter written to a C&O official seeking Goodman's dismissal. The letter accused Goodman of

permitting women of ill repute to ride as passengers for free and stating that such women had harassed Parsons' family. (The feud between Parsons and Goodman had originated earlier when Goodman insisted that Parsons's wife show her pass for riding on the C&O.)

Goodman was tried for murder and was initially convicted of second degree murder and received a sentence of eighteen years. This verdict was reversed on appeal, and after a second trial, relocated from Covington to Charlottesville, Goodman was acquitted on the grounds of self-defense, though Goodman had shot Parsons five times and Parsons carried only a penknife.

In December 1900 the Natural Bridge Forest Company and Parsons' widow, Nellie S. Loomis Parsons, sold Natural Bridge and 435 acres to the Natural Bridge Development Company for \$29,700 cash plus \$20,000 in debt. She and her family had moved away from the area after her husband's death.

Colonel Parsons published a volume of poetry entitled *The Reaper* [homage to Cyrus McCormick's reaper, introduced in Rockbridge County in the 1830s]. The book can still be found on Amazon.com.



Cover (detail, *The Reaper*, 1884.
Courtesy Washington and Lee
University's Leyburn Library.

19th-Century Graffiti

Tourists to Natural Bridge in the 1800s wrote and carved their names and dates of their visit into the canyon walls adjacent to the Bridge. They can still be easily seen today. A few examples are shown below.



Five Killed In Bus Accident Tuesday Night

Greyhound Bus Skids From
Wet Pavement Near
Natural Bridge

Five persons were killed and a score injured, some seriously, when a Greyhound Lines bus skidded from the road on a curve, turned over and crashed into a sign board at Natural Bridge at about midnight Tuesday.

Bound for Washington from Roanoke, and traveling through a blinding thunderstorm, the huge vehicle skidded on the wet pavement and landed wheels up less than 75 feet from the south en-

Bus Nearly Falls From Top of Natural Bridge

Near midnight on July 1, 1936, a Greyhound bus with 33 passengers traveling from Roanoke to Washington, D.C., skidded off the highway and nearly plunged from the top of Natural Bridge. It overturned and was stopped about 15 feet short of the precipice by a billboard sign advertising the wonders of the Bridge. The veteran driver, J. J. Olderson, was caught in a severe thunderstorm that caused the bus to hydroplane as it went around the curve in the highway at the top of the Bridge. Five people were killed and 24 were injured. The driver deliberately hit an embankment to slow the bus down as it was about to crash. Survivors were treated at Stonewall Jackson Hospital.

Compiled from contemporary newspaper reports

Lexington Gazette, July 3, 1936

DID YOU KNOW?

The Bridge is a collapsed cavern.

Eleanor Roosevelt's Day at Natural Bridge

The First Lady had a six-days-a-week syndicated newspaper column with an audience, at its height, of more than four million readers.

April 13, 1937

We reached Natural Bridge on Saturday at about 7 p.m., after a most glorious drive through the Shenandoah Park. The Skyline drive is really very beautiful. Having started late — at a quarter of 1, to be exact — we didn't stop until nearly 3 o'clock, when we pulled out at one of the parking places with a glorious view down into a ravine and drank hot coffee. We had brought orange juice also, but our hands were so cold that we couldn't unscrew the top. We've learned, however, to accept such vicissitudes with calm, and we were grateful that it happened to be the coffee which we were able to unscrew! With my usual optimism, I thought that Spring began in April, but it really was mid-Winter — beautiful, clear blue sky and cold as Greenland.

After dinner we wandered down to see the illumination and pageant. The lighting is beautiful, and gives it all a mysterious, almost prehistoric aspect. This morning after breakfast we walked down along the stream again, under the Bridge, and thought it just as impressive as it was last night. It is extraordinary to think what years it has taken of slowly dripping water to break through that stone wall, and the old arbor vitae trees, said to be over a thousand years old, were a tremendous surprise to me, for I didn't know they ever lived that long.



Canadian Rock Experts Work To Shore Up Natural Bridge

Virginian-Pilot, Norfolk, November 5, 1999

CANADIAN ROCK EXPERTS WORK TO SHORE UP NATURAL BRIDGE

For centuries, Virginia's famed Natural Bridge has been celebrated as a feat of divine engineering, so seemingly solid that Indians, pioneers and modern motorists have trusted the limestone span to carry them high across the creek that carved it.

Now, however, that trust has been shaken: Engineers are attempting to improve nature's handiwork in the wake of an October rock fall that killed a Georgia tourist under the bridge's vaulting arch.

Rock experts dangled on ropes from the 215-foot-tall formation Wednesday, chipping loose stone from an attraction climbed by George Washington, owned by Thomas Jefferson and almost synonymous with central Virginia.

Thursday, the team is expected to begin drilling through the bridge in the first step of a plan to install metal bolts in the eons-old rock, which has lured tourists since the late 18th century and carried a paved highway since 1935.

"We're going to extremes," Natural Bridge spokesman David Parker said. "It's a permanent fix."

The bridge stretches about 90 feet across a chasm carved by Cedar Creek, a small tributary of the upper James River a dozen miles south of Lexington, and is believed to be the remnant of a tunnel gnawed by underground water.

First described in 1742, the formation so moved George Washington that he supposedly carved his initials in it. Jefferson was so taken

that he bought the bridge and the acreage around it in 1774.

In the years since, the bridge has gone through a succession of owners, given Rockbridge County its name, become an instantly recognizable Virginia icon and spawned a roadside explosion of souvenir shops, petting zoos and motels.

The Oct. 23 fatality that prompted this week's reinforcement effort was thought to be the first of its kind, Parker and Rockbridge County Sheriff Robert Day said.

Louise Cathy of Stockbridge, Ga., was standing beneath the bridge shortly after 9:30 a.m. that Saturday when a 6-by-1-foot slab of rock broke away from the arch's underside, bringing a shower of smaller rocks with it.

Cathy, 83, a member of a Georgia-based

bus tour bound for Cape Cod, Mass., had approached a rock podium beneath the bridge to read several plaques displayed there as a handful of other tourists walked away.

"They heard a crack and one of the guys looked over, and he said it was like he was looking at it in slow motion: The big slab came down, and a lot of other smaller rocks and dust and debris," the sheriff said. "He said it was almost like it was snowing. The big slab hit that podium, and she was hit by one of the smaller rocks."

Cathy was struck on the head and pronounced dead a short time later at Lexington's Stonewall Jackson Hospital.

Natural Bridge's private owners assembled a local engineering team after the accident, which

in turn recommended a Quebec-based firm that specializes in rock stabilization.

Beginning Thursday, Parker said, the workers likely will dig into portions of U.S. Route 11, the road crossing the bridge, and then drill through soil and rock to the arch's underside. They'll run thick bolts through the holes, in an attempt to hold the formation intact.

Route 11, which was closed to most traffic Wednesday, will be shut down completely until the bolt installation is completed, Parker said.

The work is expected to take no more than two weeks.

The workers also will install sensitive monitors in the bridge to alert the attraction's managers of any future rock shifts.

NATURAL BRIDGE SCRAPBOOK



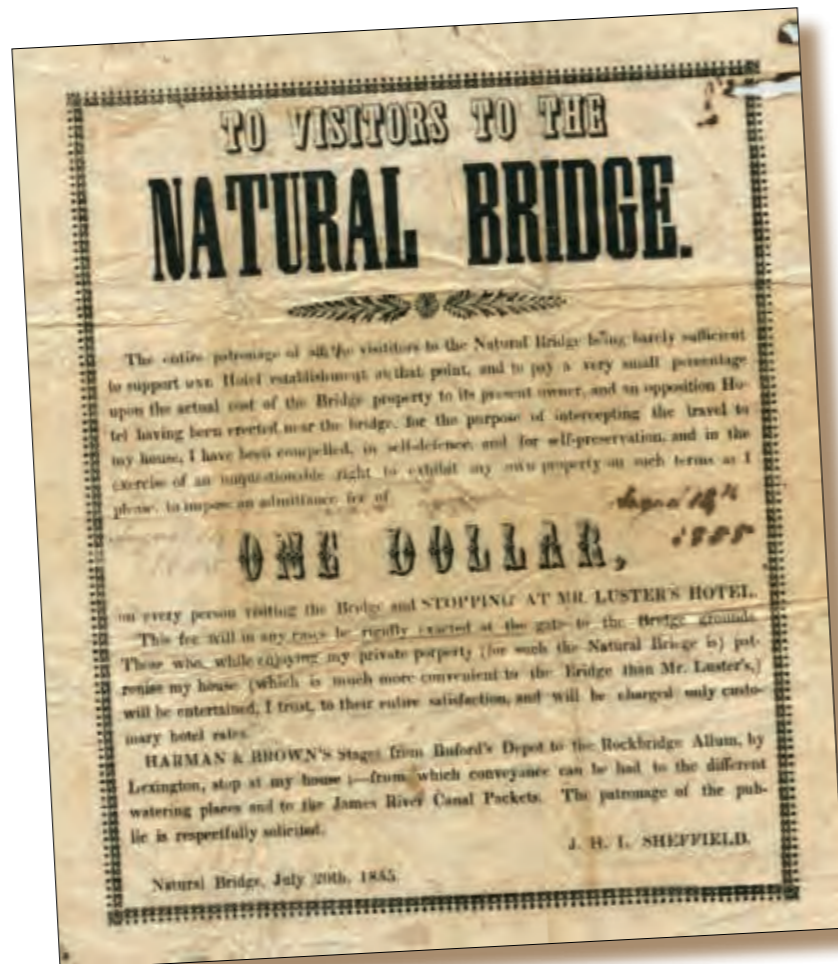
(Re-created)



Dr. Chester A. Reeds descends from the top of Natural Bridge on March 5, 1927. Photographed by Pacific & Atlantic Photos Inc.



Above: Map, 1882, from the collection of Royster Lyle Jr.



Left: Natural Bridge stage coach, 1906.



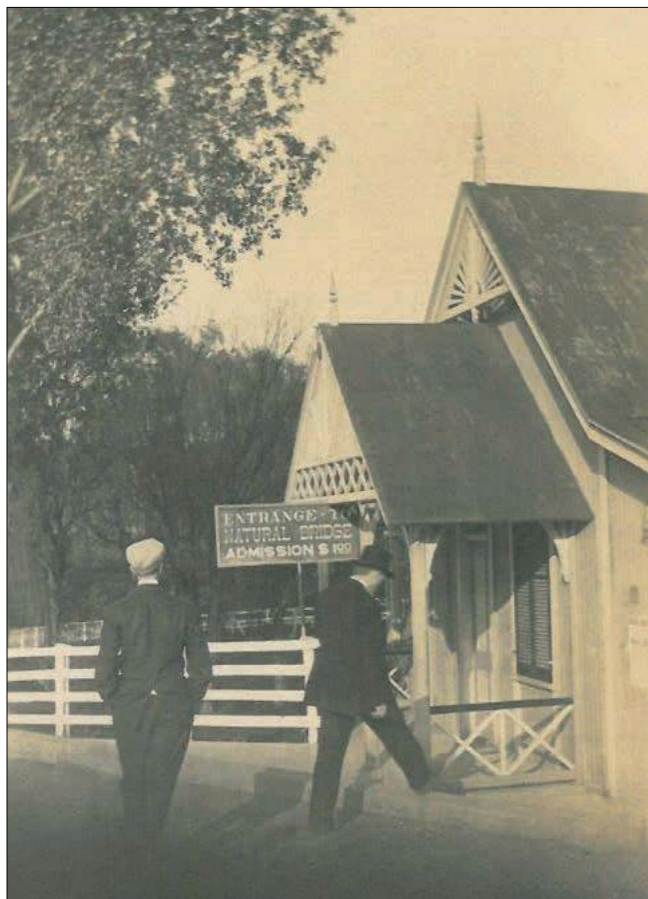


Left: View from the top of the Bridge looking down on Cedar Creek.

Center: Entrance today.

Bottom left: Natural Bridge High School, built in 1939.

Bottom right: Natural Bridge Station.

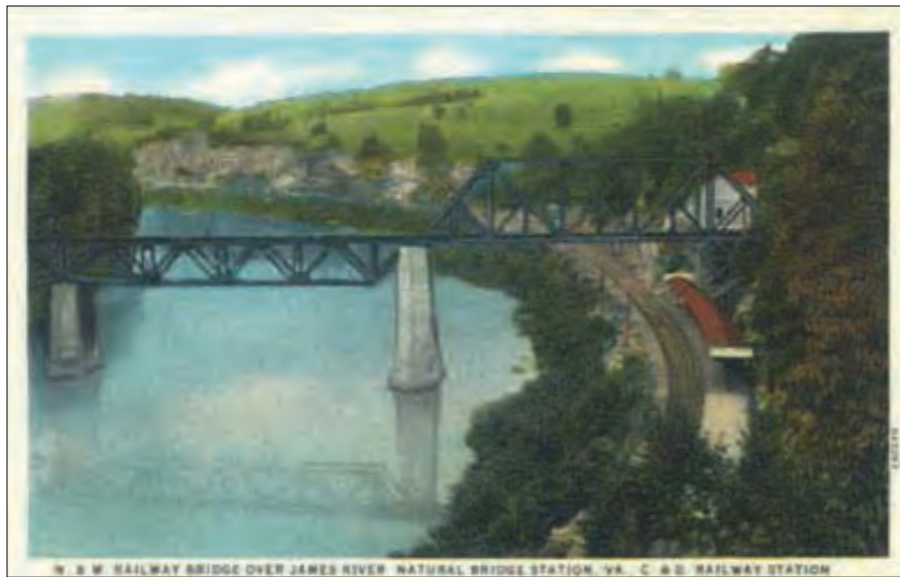


Top Natural Bridge Hotel, 1909. Photo by Michael Miley.

Directly above: Postcard.

Left: Gate House, 1910-11.





NATURAL BRIDGE TODAY

Natural Bridge State Park officially opened on September 24, 2016. However, while managed by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, it remains owned by the Virginia Conservation Legacy Fund (VCLF), and it is the only state park operating on privately owned land.

In May 2013, then-owner Anthony Puglisi announced his plan to sell the Natural Bridge complex before the end of the year. Tom Clarke, CEO of Kissito Healthcare, Inc., a Roanoke-area non-profit nursing home chain and parent of VCLF, emerged with a plan to transition the Natural Bridge to a Virginia state park.

Under the plan, the Virginia Resources Authority, a state entity, would lend VCLF \$9.1 million with which to purchase most of the property of the Natural Bridge. At the same time, the actual Bridge itself and 188 surrounding acres were to be given by Mr. Puglisi to the VCLF, with a conservation easement recorded on the deed of transfer, qualifying Mr. Puglisi for a state tax credit. VCLF was to then operate the park, paying off the state loan with initial annual payments in the area of \$900,000. As annual revenues were anticipated at two million dollars, it was thought the loan could be paid off within five years. At that point, the Bridge and most of the property would be transferred by VCLF to the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, while VCLF would retain the hotel and caverns.

In February 2014, the agreement was formalized and an initial transfer of property to VCLF was made involving the hotel. On May 12, 2014, with a ceremony at the Natural Bridge, Mr. Puglisi transferred the Bridge by deed of gift to VCLF.

continued ►

In 2015, VCLF allegedly defaulted on its second annual payment obligation on the loan from the Virginia Resources Authority, paying only about half of the required \$920,177 due on October 1, 2015. Newspaper articles appeared reporting on the “sharp criticism” of Tom Clarke by members of the Virginia Resources Authority financing board. Not only was VCLF allegedly in default, but other questions were raised at a hearing in Richmond.

At the hearing, members of the financing board mentioned possible foreclosure on the loan, while Mr. Clarke mentioned possible sale of the Bridge and claimed he had “plenty of offers.” Ultimately, the Resources Authority did not foreclose, but the Department of Conservation and Recreation has taken over the operation of the Bridge as a state park well in advance of the repayment of the loan and the transfer of the property to the state. Just over \$6.5 million is still owed on the loan, and the state cannot legally assume ownership until it is debt-free.

According to a January 30, 2019 article in the *Lexington News-Gazette*, President Bob Gilbert, of Friends of Natural Bridge State Park, stated that VCLF has stopped contributing to the required annual payments under the loan agreement, although it is the primary debtor. Efforts are being made to try to get the state to issue a bond or a legislative earmark fund to cover the remainder of the debt to avoid the uncertainties of a default and foreclosure.

According to State Parks Director Craig Seaver, the state is working on a master plan that will result in new hiking trails and additional programming and activities.

