

# A bridge through time

## A history of Fairfield County's John Bright #2 Covered Bridge

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Covered bridges have long held an important place in Fairfield County history. In the 19th century covered bridges made it possible to construct the roads, canals, and railroads that fueled the county's economic and population growth. "The covered bridge," writes Miriam Wood in *The Covered Bridges of Ohio*, "was the sturdy, reliable, and often shabby workhorse of the Ohio transportation system." For many years Fairfield County boasted the most covered bridges of any county in the state. Indeed, Fairfield County was, in the words of one history of the county's covered bridges, "far and away the covered bridge capital of Ohio." Unfortunately, most of the county's covered bridges were lost to floods or the ravages of time and were replaced during the 20th century. Today, there are less than 20 covered bridges left in the county.

Fairfield County would have fewer covered bridges, however, were it not for local preservation efforts. One of the county's success stories is the John Bright #2 Covered Bridge. Built in 1881, John Bright #2 originally spanned Poplar Creek on Bish Road near Baltimore. The historic bridge was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975. In 1988, it was moved from its original site to the campus of Ohio University Lancaster, where it was refurbished and now conveys pedestrians across Feters Run. (John Bright #2 has a younger sibling, John Bright #1 Iron Bridge, which was also built over Poplar Creek in the 1880s and was also subsequently moved to Ohio University Lancaster to rejoin its relation across Feters Run.) On the 25th anniversary of its relocation and preservation, John Bright #2's fascinating history provides a glimpse into 200 years of Fairfield County history from its pioneer period to the coming of railroads and industrial development in the late 19th century to the successful efforts in the recent past to preserve some of the county's most distinctive, but endangered, cultural landmarks.

### The original John Bright

John Bright #2 was so named to honor one of the county's pioneers. John Bright was born in Berks County, Pa., and moved, with his brother David Bright, to Ohio sometime before the War of 1812. The Bright family had emigrated from Germany to America in the 1700s and somewhere along the way had changed



John Bright #2 now stands over Feters Run on the campus of Ohio University Lancaster. It was damaged by fire in January. While workers replaced burned timbers, they discovered other problems to address. The bridge is open once more to cyclists and pedestrians.

the family name from Brecht to Bright. The Bright brothers, like many Pennsylvania Germans who moved to Fairfield County in the early 1800s, probably traveled by horseback along Zane's Trace, an early road from Wheeling, W. Va., to Maysville, Ky. Settlers started to move into the area when most of the Indians left after ceding much of Ohio to the United States in the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. The county was organized in 1800.

John Bright settled on Poplar Creek in what would later become Liberty Township. He may have resided on land that his father had purchased. Hervey Scott, in his 1877 history of Fairfield County, describes the area as being "covered with dense forests of beech, sugar, and other forest trees." Bright, according to Scott, "cleared many acres of land, placed splendid improvements upon his property, and developed one of the best farms in the township." He operated both a flour mill and a saw mill on his farm.

In addition to being a successful farmer, John Bright was a religious leader in his community. He was a member of the Evangelical Association, a Methodist sect founded by Jacob Albright in Pennsylvania in the 1790s. As early as 1816, missionaries carried the church's message to Fairfield County, where they originally held church services in private homes. In 1830, John Bright donated some of his property for the construction of the first Evangelical Association church in the

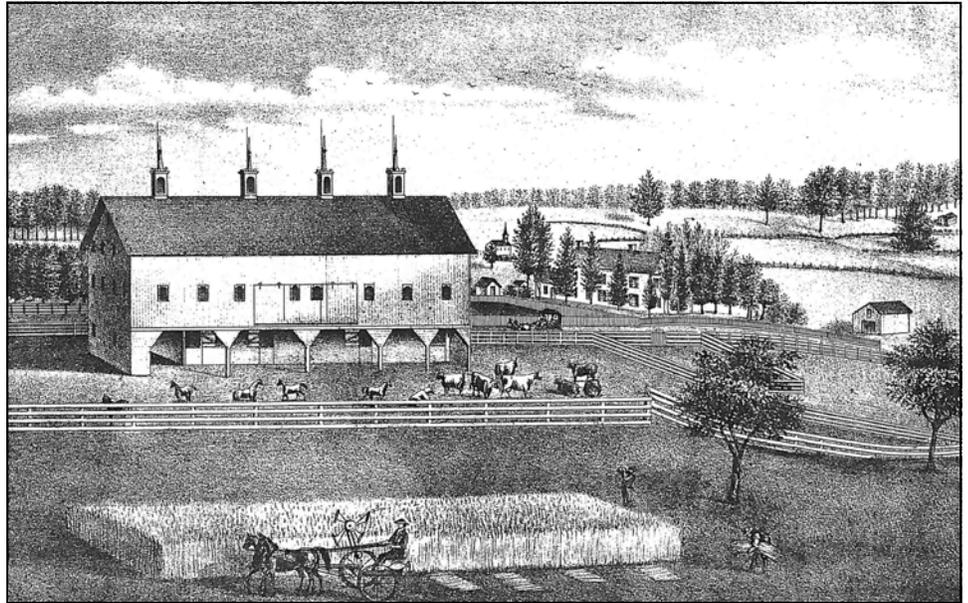
county. In the 1870s Evangelical Association members from Liberty Township raised \$8,000 for two new churches, which may have replaced the original church on Bright's land.

Although John Bright died in 1853, long before the construction of the new churches, his memory lived on in his family, his farm, and the covered bridges that bear his name. He married three times and reared a large family before he died at the age of 66. In his 1901 history of Fairfield County, C.M.L. Wiseman, who was a contemporary of John Bright's children, wrote that Bright and his sons were "very prominent men in their township" and were "well known throughout the county." At least two of his sons, John and Enoch, were successful farmers and prominent citizens in their own right. The younger John Bright acquired the family farm after his father died and owned it in the 1880s when the John Bright bridges were built. According to Wiseman, John Bright would have been proud of his offspring: "His descendants bear an honored name and worthily maintain the reputation of the old pioneer."

#### August Borneman and Building John Bright #2

If August Borneman, the founder of Hocking Valley Bridge Works and the builder of John Bright #2 (and #1), came to Ohio determined to pursue a career as a bridge builder, he chose the right place. Born in Germany in 1843, Borneman immigrated to the United States in the 1866 after having served in the military, where he may have received training as a machinist. By 1870, Borneman had made his way to Lancaster. According to Census records, he resided at a boardinghouse in town and listed his occupation as a journeyman machinist. Although it is not clear whether Borneman received formal training as a bridge engineer before arriving in Lancaster, the area's industrial growth would have given Borneman the opportunity to gain practical experience as a bridge designer and builder. The construction of the Columbus and Hocking Valley Railroad, which, when completed in the late 1860s, ran from Columbus to Lancaster to Athens, sparked immigration, agriculture, and industry throughout the county. The railroad also opened new coal fields in the Hocking Hills south of Lancaster and led to the creation of new manufacturing firms, including Lancaster Iron and Shovel Works, Hocking Valley Manufacturing, and Borneman's Hocking Valley Bridge Works.

In the late 19th century Ohio was home to some of the nation's most innovative bridge builders and largest bridge-building companies. The King Iron and Bridge Company of Cleveland, for example, was one of the nation's largest and most successful bridge companies and held a number of metal bridge patents. The Wrought Iron Bridge Company of Canton built bridges throughout the country and published an important book on the history and science of iron bridge building. Dayton's David H. Morrison, founder of the Columbia Bridge Works, was a leading bridge engineer and designer. He was perhaps the first



The John Bright property as depicted in the 1875 Combination Atlas Map of Fairfield County, Ohio. Bright's son John acquired the farm after his father died in 1853 and was the owner when the bridges were built.

bridge builder in the country to develop a suspension truss bridge. His Germantown Bridge, built in 1865, features a metal suspension chain made of a series of wrought iron eye bars connected by pins. The suspension chain forms an inverted arch, which, similar to the cable in a suspension bridge, holds the bridge together.

Fairfield County boasted its share of creative bridge builders in the late 19th century, including William M. Black, who, like Morrison, experimented with suspension truss designs. Black owned the Ohio Iron and Bridge Company of Lancaster and built numerous bridges in Fairfield County in the 1870s. In 1875, he earned a patent for a suspension truss bridge with an inverted bowstring arch made up of a chain of eye bars.

Borneman may have first learned about bridge building from Black in the early 1870s. If he did, Borneman was a quick study. In 1877, Black took on Borneman as a partner and the two opened their own bridge works in Lancaster. But the partnership did not last. The next year Borneman won bridge contracts in his own name. Black left the area shortly thereafter.

Borneman quickly replaced his former partner as the leading bridge builder in the area. From 1878 to 1889 he built, remodeled and repaired dozens of bridges in Fairfield and surrounding counties — either under his own name or under the name of his company, the Hocking Valley Bridge Works. He was clearly a favorite of Fairfield County commissioners. His name appears over and over again in county records. As Borneman's business took off, he opened his own bridge works in Lancaster and earned patents for his bridge designs as well as for farm machinery.

One of Borneman's greatest creations was the John Bright #2 Covered Bridge. In 1881, Borneman won the contract to build the bridge on Bish Road over Poplar Creek. On July 11, Fairfield County commissioners instructed the county auditor to "advertise for proposals for the masonry and superstructure of a bridge in Liberty Township near the residence of John Bright." The bridge was to "span 70 feet, height 11 feet . . . with abutments to be built of good black sandstone, well bedded and grouted, with clean, sharp sand and fresh burnt lime." Two weeks later, county

commissioners awarded Borneman the contract for three bridges, including John Bright #2. Borneman submitted several possible bridge plans, including an all-metal bridge. The commissioners chose Borneman's "combination" metal and wood suspension truss.

Borneman built John Bright #2 at a time when metal bridges were starting to supplant wooden ones, and its design reflects that transition. "The John Bright covered bridge," writes bridge historian David Simmons, "spans the transition between wood and metal technology — both in terms of design and calendar." Borneman's bridge, which doubtless drew upon Black's designs, features a metal truss with an inverted bowstring suspension chain. It also features an innovative metal sway bracing system that stabilizes the floor and roof. The roof, floor beams, and side panels are all made of wood. Sometime later a wooden arch was added to the bridge, perhaps because the original inverted bow suspension chain proved inadequate. The bridge cost \$13.25 per linear foot for a total cost of \$927.50 for the 70-foot span. The county commissioners awarded the contract to build the foundation to Peter Stultz at a cost of \$4.95 for 25 cubic feet. This brought the total cost of John Bright #2 to over \$1,000.

It is not known how the county paid for the bridge, but typically the money for bridge building came from various sources. Local property taxes presumably covered the bulk of the cost for the bridge. But the state sometimes contributed funds for bridge building. And when a citizen petitioned the county to build a bridge, it was sometimes the petitioner's responsibility to raise any money for the project over and above what the county commissioners were willing to pay. "They did this," writes Miriam Wood, "by going door to door in the neighborhood where the bridge was to be built and extracting promises or 'subscriptions' from neighbors." It is possible that the Bright family and other Liberty Township residents might have helped to pay for John Bright #2. It is also possible that Borneman or one of his employees might have had the "thankless task" of collecting money due for the bridge from Bright and his neighbors, since bridge builders were sometimes responsible for collecting money owed for their bridges.

Eight years after building John Bright #2, Borneman died suddenly and prematurely from a heart ailment; he was 45 years old. He left behind his wife, Mary, four brothers and two sisters. He was buried at Forest Rose Cemetery, which had just been acquired by the city of Lancaster and at the time was located at



By the time John Bright #2 bridge was deemed unsafe for vehicular traffic in 1988, its roof was rotted and it had lost its siding. Photo by Thomas Shurtz, Fairfield Heritage Association.

the far north end of town. A simple, but sizeable monument, with the words "Borneman" carved on it in German lettering, still marks his grave.

His obituary referred to him as "the well known proprietor of the extensive Hocking Valley Bridge Works and prominent citizen of Lancaster." He was remembered as a "fine mechanic, an excellent draughtsman, [who] in his knowledge of bridge building had few superiors." Although he was "greatly mourned," his name lives on in his bridges, especially John Bright #2.



This monument still marks the site of August Borneman's grave in Lancaster's Forest Rose Cemetery."

### Preserving John Bright #2

August Borneman built numerous bridges during his short career, but only five, including John Bright #2 (and John Bright #1), are still in use today. The three other bridges are covered bridges: the Johnston Covered Bridge over Clear Creek in Fairfield County, the Hills Covered Bridge over the Little Muskingum River in Washington County, and the Kidwell Covered Bridge in Athens County. The Kidwell Bridge, which was rehabilitated in 2003, is the only bridge Borneman built that is still open to vehicular traffic.

John Bright #2 is still standing thanks to the preservation efforts of local organizations, officials, and residents. In 1988, Fairfield County Engineer Robert Reef deemed John Bright #2 unfit for vehicular traffic and designated it for replacement. John Bright #2 had already been restricted to loads of 2 tons or less, which meant school buses, fire trucks, and other large vehicles could not use it, and it had a rotted roof and no siding. Because of the historical significance of John Bright #2 and many of the county's other old bridges, Reef did not want to demolish them. Instead, he opened up a sort of "adoption agency" for the county's historic bridges and joined forces with the Ohio Historical Society and the Ohio Historic Bridge Association to

find new homes for them.

Former Ohio University Lancaster Dean Ray Wilkes responded to the call to preserve John Bright #2. Wilkes contacted Reef about acquiring the bridge after seeing an article in a local paper about Reef's adoption campaign. He then worked to secure the funds, materials, and labor required to relocate and renovate the bridge.

Moving the bridge proved to be a challenge. It had to be moved intact, so a truck towed the 35-ton bridge along on twin I-beams and 16 large wheels. It traveled no more than 10 mph and had to make frequent stops. Before the 70-foot-long bridge began to move down the road, university staffers had to remove the bridge's roof so it could pass under utility lines. The bridge, however, was still too tall to pass under some of the lines, so utility workers had to raise them as the bridge passed underneath. In the end, it took almost a day to move the bridge the 12 miles from Bish Road to the Ohio University Lancaster campus.

Once the bridge made it to campus, there was still a great deal of work to do. Professor of Engineering Gary Lockwood surveyed the site across Fetters Run and designed new abutments, which were constructed by university staff using 46 yards of concrete and sandstone blocks from the original bridge site. A local sawmill company donated poplar-wood siding to replace the side walls. University staff and community volunteers attached the siding, fixed the rafters to shore up the roof, and painted the bridge using a special paint mixture that closely matched the original paint. The dedication for the relocated bridge took place on Oct. 28, 1988. It took two more years to complete the restoration. In the end, Ohio University Lancaster, Fairfield County, and other local organizations and residents donated their time, labor and more than \$15,000 to preserve John Bright #2.

The relocation and restoration of the John Bright #2 Covered Bridge preserved one of Fairfield County's treasured historical

landmarks. In the late 19th century Ohio had more covered bridges than any state in the nation, with Fairfield County leading the way in the state. At the same time, Ohio was home to some of the most innovative bridge builders in the country, with Fairfield County's August Borneman among them.

As one of the county's few remaining covered bridges, Borneman's John Bright #2 keeps this vital heritage alive and, like the bridge's unique suspension chain, serves as a vital link to 200 years of county history.

*The author is an Assistant Professor of History at Ohio University Lancaster. He would like to thank Miriam Wood and David Simmons for sharing their time and their vast knowledge of Ohio's historic bridges with him.*

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