

History Takes the High Road

Preservationists trying to save parts of nation's first road for cars

The old roadbed is covered with underbrush, but the bridge still stands solid, its 1910 birthdate etched in the concrete as a reminder of the time that has passed.

It is history, hidden from view. This is the old Long Island Motor Parkway, the nation's first road designed for automobiles. The 88-year-old bridge, one of two remaining from the parkway's earliest years, rises above piles of debris on the grounds of the Old Bethpage Village Restoration, a complex of restored historic buildings depicting a 19th Century town.

"I hate to say this, but I almost call it sacrilege," said Robert Miller, standing next to the bridge last week after a hike through the woods behind the village. "At least clear away the garbage and underbrush to keep it from deteriorating so fast."

Miller, a Queens librarian, is one of a loose-knit band of en-

thusiasts who have spent years researching and retracing the old Motor Parkway, begun in 1908 by millionaire William K. Vanderbilt II. The parkway was a private toll road that eventually stretched for 45 miles from

Queens to Lake Ronkonkoma, one of the first concrete roads in the nation, and the first highway to use bridges and overpasses to eliminate intersections. Long before the Long Island Expressway, it was the first high-speed route from Queens to Suffolk County.

The Old Bethpage bridge, built using teams of mules to

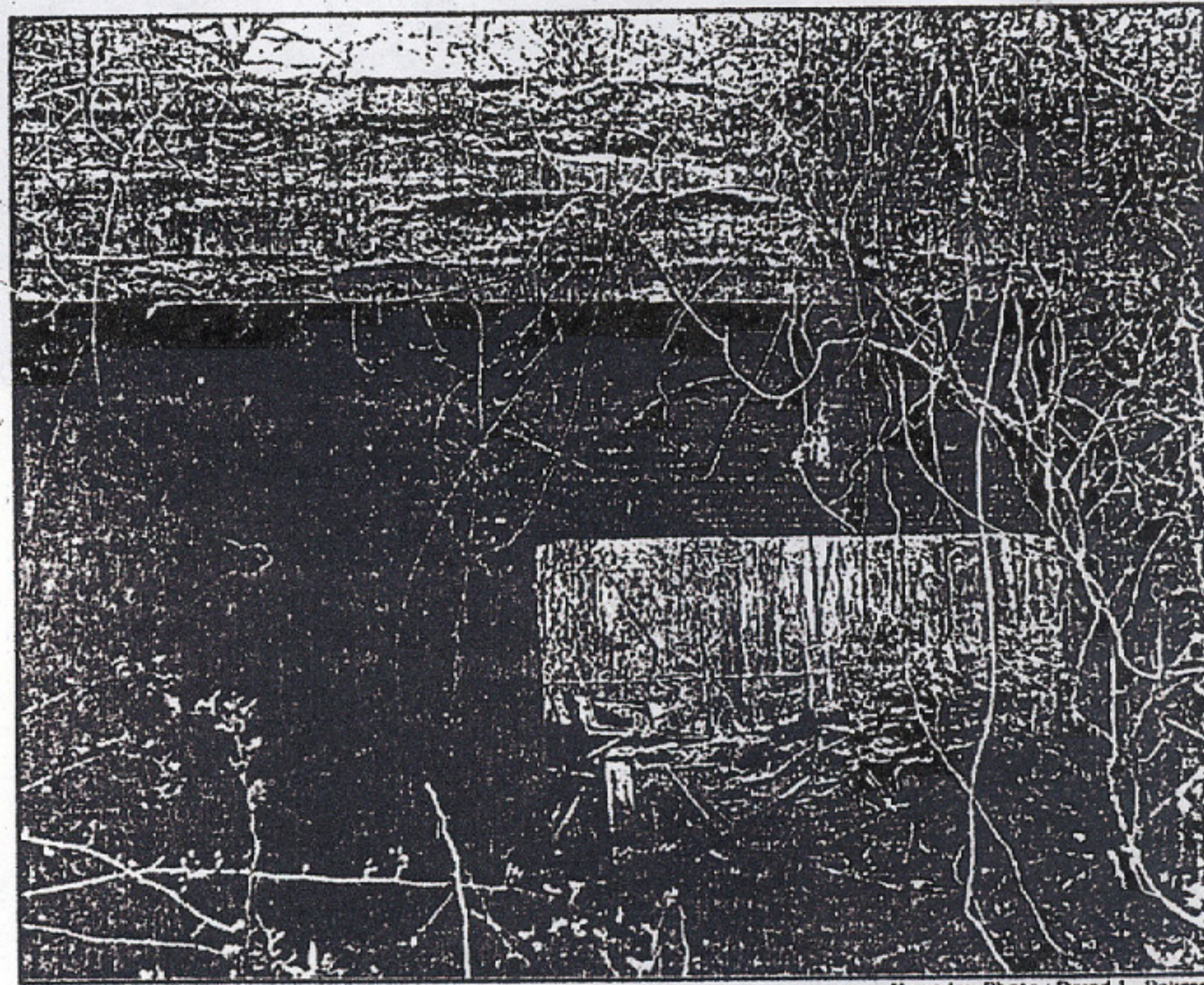
haul and hoist the steel beams, is one of a few remaining segments that have captured the imagination of these amateur historians. Another abandoned parkway segment runs for more than a mile through a wooded area in Bethpage State Park. There,

ON THE ROADS



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Newsday Photo / David L. Pokress

Officials say this 88-year-old bridge, once part of Long Island Motor Parkway, is not a top restoration priority.

the original concrete surface with brush marks on the surface is still evident in spots. And some Queens residents are attempting to make the parkway sections in the borough eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

The parkway buffs find it ironic that history lies ignored behind the Old Bethpage museum. "Here's an organization that's chartered to do preservation, and here's something that should be preserved," said Dale Welsch of Fort Salonga.

Officials at the Old Bethpage Village Restoration, which is part of the Nassau County parks department, say they're aware of the bridge and its historic significance. But restoring it and allowing the public access would cost money. With seven historic buildings waiting for restoration, it's a matter of priorities. And it doesn't help that the bridge represents the early years of the 20th Century, while the museum's focus is on an earlier period.

"We've got buildings that are sitting here that haven't been restored," said Jim McKenna, the park's director. "I don't know how fast we're going to get a Motor Parkway bridge restored, unless of course they've got a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand dollars they wish to donate to make it possible."

The bridge, which took the parkway over a farm road, was part of the old Powell farm when the county purchased the land in 1963. By then, most of the Motor Parkway had already been abandoned for 25 years. The cleared area around and underneath the bridge had been used as a dumping ground for abandoned cars and trash for years, and when the park opened, it continued to be used as a temporary storage area for building debris from the museum and other county properties, said Gary Hammond, museum superintendent.

"Speaking personally, it would be great to see it preserved and restored," Hammond said. "It's very unusual that it's survived."

The Motor Parkway was closed to traffic in 1938 after competition from Robert Moses' Northern State Parkway made it impossible to run a toll road. When Vanderbilt turned the road over to Nassau, Suffolk and Queens Counties, only Suffolk kept a 13-mile easternmost stretch as a road, which now runs from Dix Hills to Ronkonkoma and is called the Vanderbilt Motor Parkway. Queens kept parts of the



Newsday Photo / David L. Pokress

This path in Bethpage State Park was once part of the Vanderbilt parkway.

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— Daniel Marriott, historic road expert

parkway as a bikeway running through backyards and Alley Pond Park. But in between, most of the roadway and dozens of bridges have been long lost to development.

The group has made some progress with the section at Bethpage State Park, however. After hearing complaints from the parkway buffs, the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation decided to stop dumping garden waste on the roadway and cleaned up the area. "We have buried treasure at Bethpage State Park!" Welsch wrote in his letter to Commissioner Bernadette Castro.

And Ed Wankel, the deputy commissioner on Long Island, said last week that he plans to ask a committee studying trail usage in a wooded section of the park to consider whether signs could be added to point out the parkway's location. "What we may look into is the possibility of putting up signage so that hikers or whoever else is using the park could identify that area as the old Motor Parkway," Wankel said.

Winthrop Aldrich, the parks department's chief historic preservation official, is enthusiastic about the idea. "Where these traces of the original route survive, it's of interest to people," Aldrich said. "Maybe there's some historic photographs we could reproduce on weather-proof storyboards . . . It's an interesting story and there's no reason we shouldn't try to promote it."

The idea of saving historic roads is a relatively new one, said Daniel Marriott, a historic road expert with the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "In general, in the United States we still don't think of roads as historical resources," he said. "We kind of got the thing with houses, but roads we're just starting to understand."

In 1938, when the Long Island Motor Parkway closed to traffic, no one saw it as anything more than a failed toll road. Such a gift would no doubt be looked on differently today. While its 22-foot width was far too narrow and its hairpin curves too sharp for modern traffic, the route would have made a perfect bikeway, a word that did not come into use until 1965.

Our roadways create the very development that gobbles up our history, bringing cars and gas stations and parking lots, putting a superstore where a farmhouse once stood. But roads can also be a link to our past, showing us where we went and where we're going.