



# *Olmsted 200*

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –  
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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## **Three Bridges Have Carried Water Street over the River**

Rivers and creeks are both benefits and obstacles for communities, especially in their early years. In Olmsted, the west branch of Rocky River and Plum Creek provided water power for gristmills and sawmills. But they also made travel difficult for people who needed to cross them – at least until bridges were built.

One of Olmsted's earliest bridges across Rocky River was built at Water Street



*Gib Doolittle built this bridge for Water Street in 1864. It lasted until a flood destroyed it in 1913.*

while the Civil War still was being fought, and part of the structure of that bridge still can be seen today. The current bridge is the third one to span the river at that location. It certainly is sturdier than its predecessors, but it lacks their charm.

Gib Doolittle built the original Water Street Bridge in 1864. At that time, he boarded at the home of Peter and

Asenath Kidney at what now is 7601 River Road. He was engaged to marry the Kidneys' daughter, Josephine, but he died of typhoid fever in 1865.

Doolittle must have been a skilled stonemason because he set his wooden-plank bridge on top of three tall stone pillars, one near each bank of the river and one in the middle. That bridge lasted almost half a century. It survived the flood of February 2-3, 1883, that destroyed the nearby dam at Damp's Mill and badly damaged a broom factory that Joseph Lay operated near the bank of Rocky River.



*Gib Doolittle lived here at the home of Peter and Asenath Kidney along what now is called River Road.*

But Doolittle's bridge did not fare so well when the river again flooded on March 25, 1913. That flood destroyed the dam at the mill operated by Thomas Chambers in



*The March 25, 1913, flood knocked out most of the bridge, but the stone pillar near the west bank remained standing. Part of that pillar still stands today below the current bridge.*

Columbia Township just south of the Olmsted Township border, the bridge on Sprague Road right on the Cuyahoga County-Lorain County line, the dam for Damp's Mill (no longer owned by Ed Damp) in Olmsted Falls and the bridge along

Water Street.

Charles Bonsey, who served as mayor of Olmsted Falls in the early 1940s, turned 20 in 1913. In an interview almost seven decades later with local historian Bruce Banks on March 26, 1982, Bonsey said something heavy, such as a log or a tree or big chunks of ice, knocked down the middle stone pillar for Water Street's bridge, and the bridge collapsed.

“And incidentally, a schoolmate of mine – a girl that was in my class in school – was driving a horse and buggy across the bridge, coming from east to west, and she just got across and the bridge went down,” Bonsey recalled.

In the months after the flood, a local man, James Scroggie, built a new bridge for Water Street. It lasted more than three-quarters of a century. One feature that many people appreciated was that the sides of the bridge were low, so motorists passing over it could look through its railings at the river and the beautiful David Fortier River Park below.



*Local artist Bob Sayers captured the beauty of Water Street’s second bridge and the park in this painting, used here by permission of his daughter, Liz Sayers.*



*This photo was taken by the Cuyahoga County Engineer’s Office in 1989, shortly before the 1913 bridge was torn down and replaced.*

However, by the late 1980s, the bridge neared the end of its useful life. It was called “rickety.” Also, it was wide enough only for a lane of traffic going each way and did not include sidewalks. The Cuyahoga County Engineer’s Department decided to replace it with a wider, sturdier bridge with sidewalks. But many local people didn’t like the design, which called for the bridge to have concrete sides, which would block motorists’ view of the river, topped with chain link fencing. At least one member of Olmsted Falls City Council suggested resisting the county’s plans, but that didn’t deter the county from building a new bridge with high concrete sides. The old bridge built by Scroggie came down in the summer of 1989.

Fortunately, the county did not tear down everything that was there. Underneath Scroggie’s bridge along the west bank of the river was part of one of the stone pillars that Doolittle had built in 1864 to hold up his bridge. When Bruce Banks learned that the construction crew for the new bridge was thinking about tearing down that pillar, he went to speak with them.



*This portion of the stone pillar Gib Doolittle built near the west bank of the river in 1864 remains underneath the current bridge.*

park on October 14, 2007. “So they would inscribe things that looked like letters but aren’t quite. You can see this looks like a ‘J’ but it’s a little more complicated. Then down there, there’s a backward ‘N’ and over here there’s some other sort of upside down ‘Js’ Then here is a backward ‘N.’ So they would inscribe these in, and you knew who did it and whether they paid them or they could say whether it was any good. Just about every stone has an inscription in it. So you could tell who did what.”

Something else involving Banks occurred after the construction crew tore down the 1913 bridge. He received a call that the removal of the bridge had revealed the opening to a cave up the embankment from the old stone pillar.

“I went down in it,” Banks said. “It was rather scary in that it was about a 45-degree angle down this path that was real narrow and slithery. You couldn’t turn around, so I had my son tie a rope to my feet and I slid down and he pulled me back out. If you wanted to crawl, you could go a long way that way. But it wasn’t a comfortable place to be.”

Banks wasn’t the only one who noticed the cave opening late in the spring of 1990. Joanne DuMound reported in her “Olmsted Dates and Data” column in the *News*

“I said this is kind of a historic relic of our community, and I talked them into just leaving it,” he said.

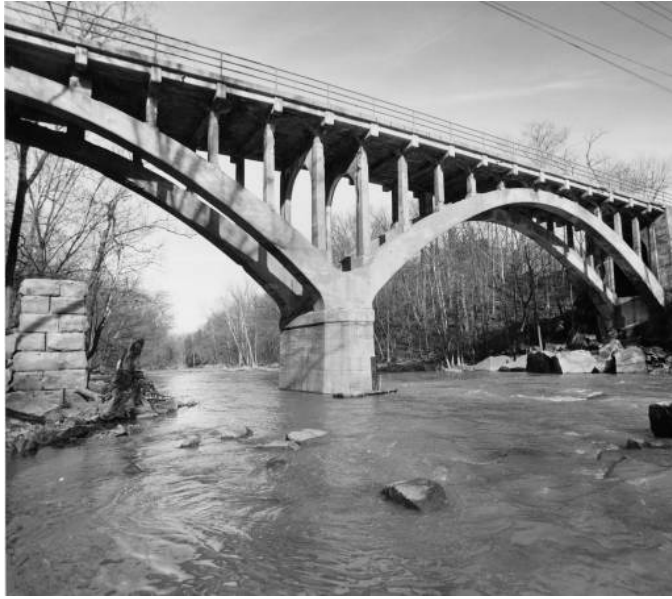
Thus, although the pillar is unfortunately a frequent target for graffiti artists, it still stands under the current bridge as a reminder of Doolittle’s stonemasonry. Many of the stones also tell another story about when they were quarried in the 1860s. Carved in them are symbols that almost look like letters but not quite. Banks figures they were carved by quarry workers, who either didn’t speak English or were illiterate.

“They sort of had a quality control measure or maybe it was a pay measure of how many stones did you make,” he said while giving a historical tour of the



*Workers left symbols like this on the stones in the 1864 pillar.*





*This photo from the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office shows the 1913 bridge before it was taken down in 1989. Note the pillar from the 1864 bridge on the left.*

*Sun* on June 7, 1990, that the cave caught the attention of Alfred Lee, a Cleveland Natural History Museum archeologist who lived in Berea. He discounted suggestions that the cave might have been part of the Underground Railroad that was used in pre-Civil War America to smuggle escaped slaves from the South to freedom in Canada. Instead, he said, that cave and others in the park likely were formed when water flowed through the sandstone and shale and created small open channels.

“Most of the evidence for the opening of some of these pockets in the sandstone has to do with quarrying activities in 1870s,” DuMound quoted Lee as saying. “Workers would hit the

cavities which ruined the quarrying and they would move to another spot. And, 1870 is a little late for the underground railroad.”

That cave entrance was sealed again when the current bridge was built.

According to the National Bridge Inventory, the bridge is 256.6 feet long. It includes two main spans of about 125 feet each built of steel. From edge to edge, the concrete deck is 40 feet wide. The width of the roadway between curbs is 27.9 feet. The latest available inspection of the bridge was conducted in August 2016, when it was listed in fair condition. That is down from all previous inspections from June 1991 through October 2016, when it was listed in good condition. However, the deck and superstructure were still

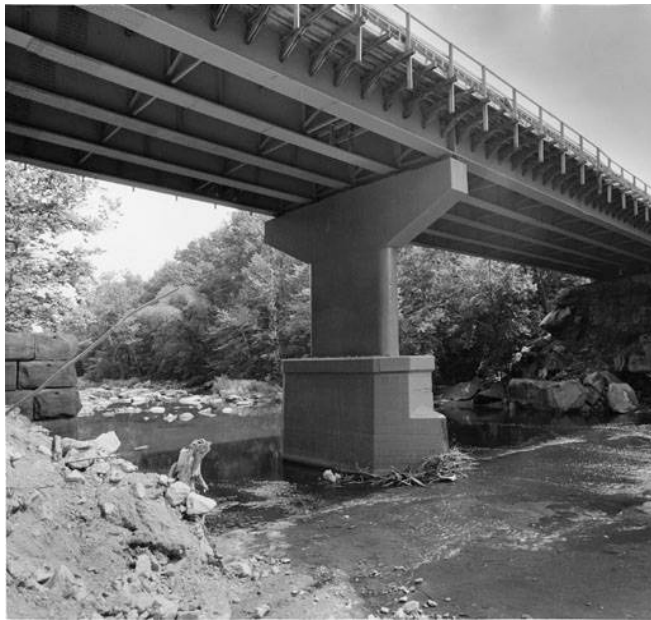


*The 1913 bridge was partially demolished when the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office took this photo.*

listed in good condition in 2016. The inspection report recommended the bridge could use structural work, including hydraulic replacements, estimated to cost \$232,000.

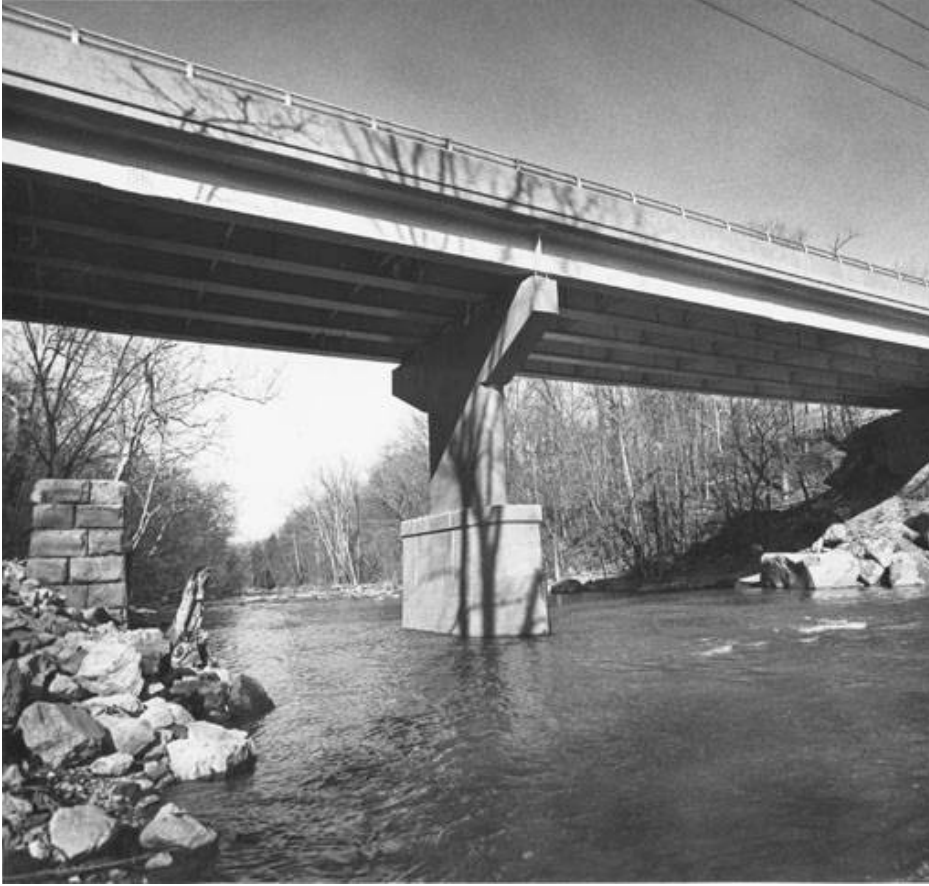


*The upper right photo shows a pillar for the current bridge as the bridge was being built in 1990. On the left are photos showing the newly constructed bridge from below. Note the portion of the stone pillar from the 1864 bridge standing next to the bank in both photos. These and other photos taken by the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office in 1989 and 1990 are from the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Photography Collection, which is part of Special Collections of Cleveland State University. The photographer was Thomas F. Oakley.*



*On the lower right is another Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office photo showing the high concrete walls on the current bridge that prevent motorists from viewing the river and park below the bridge.*





*On top is another photo from the Cuyahoga County Engineer's Office showing the completed bridge carrying Water Street over Rocky River in 1990. Again, it shows the portion of the stone pillar from Gib Doolittle's 1864 bridge still standing next to the western bank of the river.*



*On the bottom is a view toward the falls on Rocky River near the mouth of Plum Creek in David Fortier River Park. This view still is available to pedestrians on the Water Street Bridge but not to motorists because of the bridge's high walls.*



## What's in a Street Name?

Some of the roads around Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township share names with the early residents who lived along them – including Stearns, Fitch, Cook, Usher, Schady, Sharp, Jennings, Sprague, Bronson and Lewis. But the reasons for other names are not so clear. In many cases, naming rights have gone to the builders who created the streets in their housing developments, so the names might not have any relationship to the history of the area. Others might have interesting stories behind their name, but knowledge of those stories has faded with time.

David Kennedy, an *Olmsted 200* reader, thinks he might have uncovered the story behind the name of a street in his neighborhood in the section of Olmsted Falls that once was the separate village of West View. He wrote that a former Olmsted Falls mayor once told him about a conversation the mayor had had with Russell Ingersoll, who long had lived at 25742 Herb Street in an old yellow house dating back to 1888. Ingersoll said some community official once asked his father, Herbert Ingersoll, what the street should be named, and his father immodestly suggested calling it Herb Street.



*This Ohio Champion pin oak stands next to Herb Street in the southern section of Olmsted Falls that once was West View.*

Kennedy did a little research and found that there was a Herbert Ingersoll who was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Westlake, and so was his son, Russell Vernon Ingersoll. That doesn't necessarily prove that Herb Street was named after the elder Ingersoll, but it certainly indicates it was possible.

Another point of interest associated with Herb Street that Kennedy pointed out is a large tree near the former Ingersoll house. It is a state champion pin oak with a trunk circumference of almost 20 feet. It stands about 106 feet tall. It shares the distinction of being an Ohio Champion pin oak with one at Goshen in Clermont County and one at Granville in Licking County, according to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Under national rules, they are so close to each other in size that they are considered co-champions.



And it is not the only state champion oak tree in Olmsted Falls. In back of a River Road house is a state champion northern red oak that has a trunk circumference of 301 inches (a bit more than 25 feet) and stands 116 feet tall. Anyone not invited into the backyard of that River Road house can see the tree by going to where Main Street (north of Water Street) dead-ends and looking across a pasture.

*Thanks go to David Kennedy for offering information for this story about the naming of Herb Street and the information about the big oak trees. Anyone else who knows how an Olmsted street or road got its name is invited to share that information with readers by sending it to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com).*

## **Readers Recall OTFD's Fundraisers and Paramedics**

Several people responded to last month's story about the history of the Olmsted Township Fire Department. A few people noticed fathers or grandfathers in old photos of



*This is the entrance to the current station for the Olmsted Township Fire Department along Fitch Road.*

the department when it was staffed entirely by volunteers. One reader, Patrick Carroll, recalled one of the regular fundraising events the firefighters held to pay for the department's operations.

"I have fond memories of the annual Bazaar behind the fire dept. building they used to have on that small patch of land," he wrote." In 1965 I won a duck at that bazaar. The contestants were to throw a safe balsa wood ring and try to land it on an adult Peking duck's head. After two tries I did, and went home with my new pet duck who I named Clyde. Later after I returned from Vietnam at the close of the war in 1975, my brother and I bought a house with our veteran's 'perks.' All through college this became like a frat house! It was just South on Fitch Rd., before Cranage down from the fire dept. It was great, too, in that when we would 'party' at 'The Corral,' we would not have to drive."

Another reader, John Prest, wrote that he went to work for the Olmsted Township Fire Department as its first paramedic and continued to work there until January 2000, when he was hurt on the job.

Records show that, after considering it for two years, the township trustees decided in the spring of 1991 that the fire department should add paramedic service. Fire

Chief Allen Sanders got equipment for the service by borrowing it from a neighboring city and Southwest General Hospital. He estimated the cost of the new service would be \$54,487 for the first year.



*Olmsted Township's current fire station went into use in 2011. On the far right is the police station, which was completed in 2005.*

The plan was to change positions for two part-time firefighters into fulltime combination firefighter/paramedic positions, while another fulltime firefighter already working for the department would add paramedic duties to his job. Prest was hired as one the two new employees assigned to both paramedic and firefighting duties. The new paramedic service began on April 1, 1991.

Olmsted Township was the last community in Cuyahoga County served by Southwest General Hospital to set up a paramedics program, although a couple of other communities outside the county still did not have paramedics by the time Olmsted Township started that service. When the trustees initiated the service, they also required any newly hired firefighters to become state-certified paramedics within one year of their hiring. In that way, the fire department gradually filled its ranks with members who could do double duty.

## Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about a project to renovate and reuse an Olmsted Falls building from the early 1800s.

If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com). *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia,

Florida, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

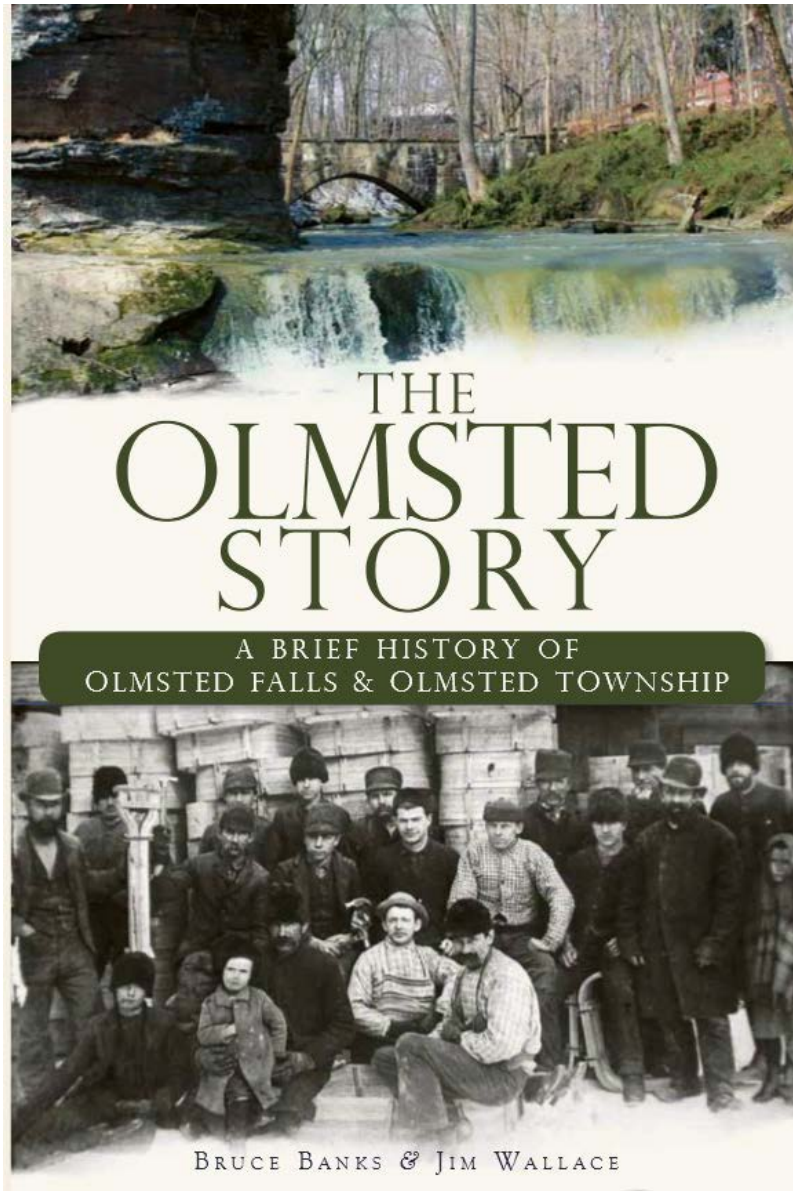
Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read. All of the issues of *Olmsted 200* also are available on the website of the City of Olmsted Falls. Find them at: [http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted\\_falls\\_history/index.php](http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/index.php). A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help in proofreading and editing many issues. Written contributions and photos, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com).

*Olmsted 200* is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. ***The Olmsted Story*** is available at the Village Bean in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.





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