

Historic Significance

Researched and Photographed
by Dan Snow



James Otis Follett Bridge Builder

*James Otis Follett was born May 12,
1842 in East Jamaica, Vermont*

His father died when he was two. James went with his younger brother Samuel and his mother to live in Townshend on East Hill Road (now Peaked Mt Road). Follett married Clara Kimball in 1864, raised six children. Worked on the farm all his life. Drove geese to Boston twice a year.

James served in Company D of the 16th Vermont Volunteer Regiment. 2nd Brigade. Oct 23 1862 – Aug 10 1863. Promoted to Corporal, May 7, 1863. Was in the battle of Gettysburg and defended NYC during draft riots.

Samuel W. Follett, his brother, enlisted Dec 7, 1863, Company G, 11th Regiment, Died August 11 1864 of typhoid fever in Washington, DC.

James built his first dry stone arch bridge in 1894 at age 51. The cost was \$160.

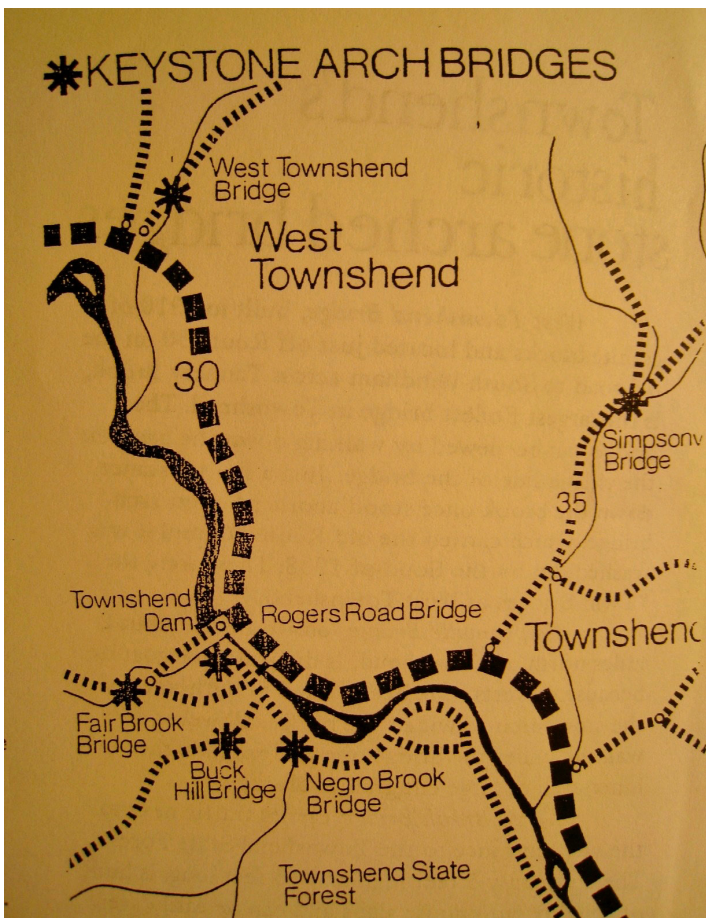


Top: West Townshend Bridge, Townshend, VT; Above: Follett in uniform

James was a deacon in the Townsend Congregational Church and the road commissioner for the town.

There is a bronze plaque at the Townshend Town Hall dedicated to “Deacon” Follett. In part it states, “his bridges of stone arch type were the only bridges in the West River Valley to withstand the flood of 1927. The Simpsonville bridge stood firm on its foundations though the bank washed away around it.” The tablet inscription goes on to characterize the “Deacon” as able, fearless, godly, a builder of bridges and men.

James Otis Follett died of pneumonia in 1911.



By looking through Townshend’s annual town reports it’s possible to follow Follett’s progress in stone arch bridge building. The line item reportage doesn’t tell the full story but it does give some idea of his activities between 1894 and 1911. For instance, in the 1896 report there appears a series of payments and debits that suggest the town purchased two pair of oxen, z paid for pasturing, hay, grain and shoeing, and that the animals were rented to James Follett for the purpose of moving and setting timber and stone. He worked the two pair, 110 days each at \$1.25 per day. At the end of the year the town sold the four oxen at what looked to be a profit, over expenses, of \$76. In nearly every year there is some type of reference to James Follett and bridges. 1897, arching two bridges - \$195; 1899 - building stone bridge; 1901- freight on granite- \$35; paid for granite- \$35; 1902- for work on arch bridge \$200 and \$140; 1911- arch bridge at West Townshend, \$815.

The Cold River double arch bridge in Walpole, New Hampshire was begun in the fall of 1907, three months after the covered bridge at that crossing burned. Follett’s bid of \$4,300 beat out a

Top, Right: Chase Brook Bridge, Putney, VT

Middle, Left: Negro Brook Bridge, Townshend, VT

Middle, Right: Fairbrook Bridge, Townshend, VT

Left: Arch Bridge Map



Above: West Townshend Bridge, Townshend, VT

\$5,800 bid by the United Construction Co. for a steel bridge with a concrete floor. The work was to be completed in 90 days but twice the wood frames on the east arch washed away, tumbling the partially constructed stonework into the river. The stone had to be raised from the river and the frames rebuilt. The 2' thick blocks were quarried in Fitzwilliam, NH. The span is 100' between the abutments. The arches

are 19' high. The bridge was 18' wide when built but widened to 36' in 1960 with concrete arches. Originally it had an 8" stone coping along the top edge with iron railings. It was finished at the end of January 1908. A flood in 2005, that took the lives of three people upriver, swept away the granite arches and the concrete addition. The bridge has since been replaced with a concrete structure. □



Left: Cold River Bridge, Walpole, NH; Right: Chase Brook Bridge, Putney, VT