

The Clark Pond Bridge Story

By Franz Edson, FOHNP Board Member

It all started innocently enough. I was at one of my first meetings as a newly elected member of the FOHNP Board. I commented that the entrance to the preserve was “underwhelming”, what with the boards, detritus, and general look of dishevelment. Greg Decker (then head of Sustainment, now President) nodded in agreement. The very next meeting, he brought in a picture of a bridge and said “who’s in?” Wow, I thought, a bond had been formed, and a team began to coalesce! The next 16 or so months were a blur of activity. First, we had to decide on a type of bridge; steel, composite, wood? We also had to develop an approach to foundations, monolithic concrete, or something else? Finally, we had to develop a budget, and come up with a plan to fund this project. Throughout our planning and engineering process, one tenant stood out above all others. We can’t disturb the fragile ecosystem in the vicinity of the proposed bridge. A steel bridge was out because we would need very large cranes to place it on the foundations. There was no way to get those cranes down there without tearing up the narrow band of wetlands by the spillway. Accordingly, we needed a bridge that we could assemble on site. We ended up finding a company in Minnesota that could build a prefab bridge to our specifications, then disassemble it and ship it to us. Foundations were another challenge. Most designs called for a monolithic concrete foundation, essentially a large and deep hole filled with concrete. That would entail more large machinery to dig the holes, and a way to get concrete down to the site. Greg Decker solved that problem by finding a product called pin piers, that are minimally invasive, and can be installed with hand tools.

So, we had a plan. Now we needed to start the engineering to ensure the bridge and foundations would be robust enough. We looked at static loads, live loads, snow loads. This entailed many calls to vendors, and some significant recalculations after the bridge vendor called and said the bridge had grown in weight by 60%! I was finally happy with our factors of safety, which allowed us to procure the pin piers (which were donated to the project by UBS in Niantic). Two more elements were needed to make this project a success. One was money. The Board decided that we would need to provide funding via a fund-raising campaign. Kris Lambert took the reins for this effort, and Greg and I helped by writing several proposals. Several local foundations and companies, and many individuals, came up big for us. Problem solved. The other element was installation. We needed someone who had access to small machinery (think Bobcat size) and had the experience to help us install the foundations and place the large beams on the foundations. Enter the third Musketeer, Drew Kenny, President and owner of Outdoor Lifestyles in East Lyme. Drew was a huge help in developing our approach to install the foundations and bridge, and subsequently doing the install.

The three of us installed the foundations this Fall. It wasn’t as easy as we thought it was going to be, but after a few days they were installed, leveled and plumb. Getting the Bridge delivered proved to be another challenge, it was lost and subsequently damaged during shipping, which delayed delivery to us by almost a month. Our six large crates, and an even larger tractor trailer finally showed up on a rainy day, with Drew’s help, we got the crates safely out of the truck. Fast forward several days, and we had the three beams set on the foundations. After staining all the treads and handrails off-site, Greg and I installed them all over a period of a couple of very cold weeks. Lastly, a large group of volunteers hand dug a large area on either side of the bridge so we could compact gravel and crushed stone to act as a base for the Granite Steps. Getty Granite provided the steps at a significant discount and were great to work with.

So, what’s left? We will install the steps in March and redo the path down to the bridge. We will also clear the area of invasive plant species, and replant with indigenous species. Be sure to join us for the Grand Opening on April 13!