

# Rush County Heritage – Preserving Rush County’s Past

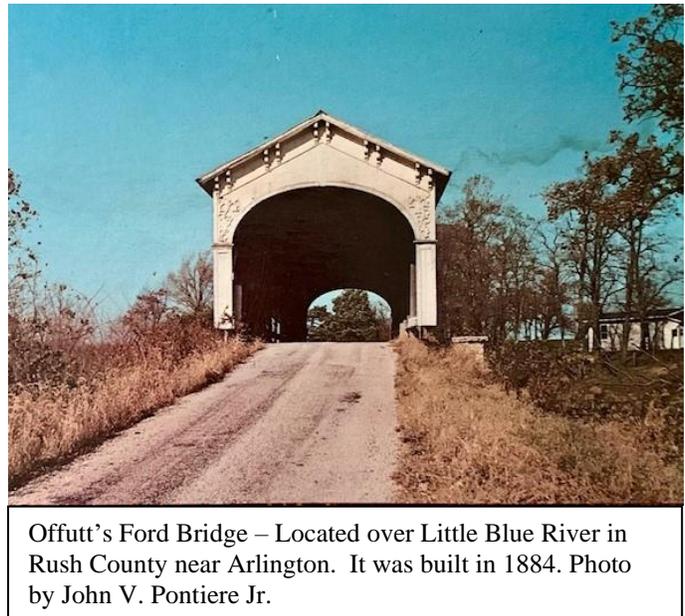
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Rush County Historian

This is the thirteenth article I have written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial in 2022. Thank you to former Rush County Historian Eleanor Arnold for providing information about Rush County Heritage. Most of my research came from telephone conversations with Eleanor and a hard copy summary that she sent to me.

According to Eleanor, “Rush County Heritage, Inc., was organized in 1986 in response to the Rush County Commissioners decision to stop doing repairs to the six Kennedy bridges still standing, then to replace them with concrete bridges as they fell below legal standards.” (The Commissioners offered to save only two bridges – the Moscow and the Forsythe.)

Here I need to remind readers that Archibald Kennedy and his sons from Rush County were the builders of these covered bridges. The bridges are unique with their substantial burr arch construction and Italianate style. At one time there were 17 of them in Rush County. The largest is the double-span bridge at Moscow.

Back to Eleanor’s account....“A mass meeting at the courthouse, followed by a series of letters to the editor brought a large crowd. Marsh Davis, an intern with Indiana Landmarks, had also been working to organize protests against the destruction of the bridges. It was decided to form an incorporated 501-C not-for-profit organization. Officers chosen that night: Larry Stout, President; Eleanor Arnold, Vice President; Gayle Binder, Secretary; Dick Malcom, Treasurer.”



After this meeting, efforts to preserve the six bridges really stepped up. Heritage had an initial membership of 400 families, and a petition to save the bridges was signed by 7500 people. Heritage members were present at all Commissioner’s meetings. Indiana TV stations and newspapers covered the situation, and extensive publicity went national with articles in USA Today and the Christian Science Monitor. One of the Commissioners was defeated in election by a bridge supporter. When the decision was made to save the bridges, Heritage took pride in the fact they had been successful. A bill was passed in the Indiana Legislature to give extra funding to preserve all covered bridges in the state. Heritage’s testimony helped pass the bill.

Because of their success, Heritage won the statewide Indiana Landmarks annual award for the best preservation project, and the National Trust For Historic Preservation named the project as one of eleven national winners.

So why was there opposition to these bridges? Basically because farm equipment was too large to get through them, and the load limits were too low. During the height of the debate the Ferree bridge near Milroy was burned, and the ruins were quickly removed. Investigation pointed to the probable use of accelerants and arson. To this day there are whispered accounts about who may have burned the bridge.

Fortunately we still have six bridges. A smaller bridge at Homer that had floated down Mudd Creek during a flood in 1892 ended up in a field on the east side of the creek. The Pioneer Engineers Club moved it to Caldwell Acres south of Rushville in 2008. By 2010 they had preserved it, and it now serves as a pedestrian bridge across a small ravine. The bridge is only 60 feet long and is constructed by the King and Queen Post method.

The Moscow Covered Bridge was severely damaged by an F3 tornado on June 3, 2008. A lot of it fell into the Flatrock River. Through the efforts of Governor Mitch Daniels and the Construction Committee, Dan R. Collom and Sons rebuilt the structure. J.A. Barker was the engineer on the project. Some of the laborers that worked on the retrieval and reconstruction were inmates from the Indiana Prison System. The expense was funded by numerous corporate and individual contributors. The Rush County Commissioners at the time were Thomas H. Barnes, Marvin Cole, and Ken Masters. The Rush County Heritage preservation vision had prevailed!

By 1988 Rush County Heritage became involved in another preservation project. The Booker T. Washington School had been a segregated 1-8/1-6 school for the black community since 1905. It closed as a school in 1932 but continued to serve the community for meetings. By 1988 the building was in need of extensive work. A hole in the roof had been the biggest problem. Heritage stepped forward to help find funding to preserve the building. The Booker T. Washington Center Association, Inc., was formed. Officers were Bill Goins, President; Larry Stout, Vice President; Carl Harcourt, Treasurer; and Doris McDougal, Secretary. Other major supporters of note included Mayor Joe Delon and native son Joe Hogsett. The cost for preservation was \$164,470 and was completed in 1992. Eleanor Arnold remarked, "This effort also won the Indiana Landmarks State Award and the National Trust For Historical Preservation Award."

Today the school is being repainted on the inside and will continue to have a community room on the second floor. The first floor will be occupied by the Rush County Arts and Cultural Council (imagine: nation).

In recent years Heritage helped save a landmark north of Carthage, the Mount Pleasant Church. The church is better known as the "Beech" Church.

When Rush County opened for settlement in the 1820's, several families of the Quaker faith migrated to Ripley Township from North Carolina. Free settlers of color (African

Americans and Native Americans) came too from North Carolina to join their Quaker friends and neighbors. The Quakers were very active in the Abolitionist Movement. The Carthage area (including the Beech Community) served as a station on the Underground Railroad before and during the Civil War.

At the Beech a thriving, blended community evolved with a school, two churches, and a library in the Mt. Pleasant Beech Church. A sign erected by descendants at the Beech Church is worded: “Free Colored People from North Carolina settled here in 1828. On June 16<sup>th</sup> 1832, by a resolution adopted by the church members, they chose the AME Church as their religious denomination. On October 2, 1840, the Indiana Conference of the AME Church was organized here.” (AME stands for African Methodist Episcopal.)

In 1870 the Beech community near the church had 34 farmers holding 2,496 acres. “However over the years their well-schooled and hard-working young people began to leave farm life, as many were doing at the time. The population dwindled and the church ceased regular services,” according to Eleanor Arnold. By 1914 it was agreed there would be a “grand reunion” once a year on the last Sunday in August. The reunions have continued to this day.

The Beech Church continued to be maintained by the descendants of the community until the building had deteriorated beyond normal maintenance. Bill Goins and I made a trip to the Beech to observe its condition. Bill “sounded the alarm” with Rush County Heritage. Eleanor Arnold stated, “Heritage took the lead in fund raising activities, ably assisted by the descendants group, Rush County Historical Society, and many contributors, large and small. A large \$100,000 donation from a donor who wished to remain anonymous and a large \$50,000 grant written by Heritage (Eleanor Arnold) were received, and today the little church stands firm.”

Indiana Landmarks was instrumental in coordinating the project. But in my opinion, the project would not have succeeded without the late Bill Goins. His contacts and diligence were key in promoting awareness of need and seeking funds. The Beech Church was rededicated in 2018.

In Arnold’s words, “The Heritage Group has continued through the past thirty years to educate the public about the worth of our built environment. They accepted the gift of the historic Knights of Pythias Building, better known as the old Boys and Girls Club, from the city and began looking for a good alternative use for it. As the old Durbin Hotel across the street from it fell into decay, the problem became worse. But by working with developers, these two buildings became apartment buildings which are now full and with a waiting list.”

Heritage also initiated the Main Street Program (MSP), now known as the Heart of Rushville. At it’s founding Indiana First lady Judy O’Bannon came to Rushville to speak. Eleanor Arnold and Larry Stout served on the first MSP Board.

Arnold said in summary, “Recently a book was published which pictured and explained the most significant historic preservation projects in Indiana in recent years. Rush County Heritage was honored to be shown as chiefly responsible for three of them – the covered bridges, the Booker T. Washington building, and the Mt. Pleasant Church.”

Hopefully Rush County Heritage will continue to help preserve Rush County's significant historical structures. As local government faces decisions about which structures should be saved, Rush County Heritage will need to be vigilant and involved.

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