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Stories*

New Smithsonian Exhibition on Covered Bridges Set to Open at The State Museum of Pennsylvania on March 12, 2006

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Contact: Howard M. Pollman
Marketing Director
PHMC
(717) 705-8639
hpollman@state.pa.us

Harrisburg, PA - Few structures in America combine architectural ingenuity, economic necessity and romantic idealism better than the covered bridge. The Smithsonian traveling exhibition, "Covered Bridges: Spanning the American Landscape," celebrates these iconic structures and the individuals behind their development through photographs, architectural schematics and models. The exhibition will open at The State Museum of Pennsylvania, 300 North Street, Harrisburg on March 12, 2006 and continue on a multi city national tour after it closes on July 16.

"Covered Bridges" was developed by the Historic American Engineering Record, a division of the National Park Service, and the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES); it is funded in part by the Federal Highway Administration. In addition to the Smithsonian designed exhibition, The State Museum is adding components that illustrate some of the bridges that Pennsylvania has lost. Approximately 204 covered bridges remain in Pennsylvania, more than any in any other state. However, written records suggest that over 1,500 covered bridges once existed in the Commonwealth. Since the nineteenth century, hundreds of covered bridges have disappeared. Floods, fires, and replacements have claimed most of these bridges.

Though they first appeared in Europe during the Middle Ages, covered bridges flourished in the United States in the 19th century, where they helped encourage the country's economic development by way of a growing network of roads. The first covered bridge in the country appeared over the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia in 1805, and by the 1870s more than 10,000 covered the American landscape as part of the country's westward expansion.

From the beginning, individual inventiveness played an important role in the proliferation of covered bridges. As the industry grew, individual builders experimented and adapted each

MORE

THE STATE MUSEUM OF PENNSYLVANIA

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other's designs in hopes of finding a means to build stronger bridges with the least amount of materials. In addition to being visually appealing, the resulting structures were engineering masterpieces—both important factors in their survival today.

Covered bridges grew in popularity among the general public in the early 20th century and became attractive subjects for artists and advertisers. They appeared in advertisements for everything from tires to thermal underwear, feeding the nation's desire for nostalgia. In some cases, advertisers took their messages to the bridges themselves, creating enormous billboards on both the interiors and exteriors.

Despite their appeal, between 1870 and 1970, 90 percent of the country's covered bridges were destroyed by arsonists, natural causes and progress in transportation. Today only about 750 remain, concentrated mostly in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Vermont, Indiana, New Hampshire and Oregon. Community leaders in these states have recognized their value as a tourist attraction, and they have become symbols of community pride and history. Perhaps no single person did more for the covered bridge in recent times than author Robert James Waller, whose 1992 book "The Bridges of Madison County" stayed on the New York Times bestseller list for more than 150 weeks.

The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) has been sharing the wealth of Smithsonian collections and research programs with millions of people outside Washington, D.C., for more than 50 years. SITES connects Americans to their shared cultural heritage through a wide range of exhibitions about art, science and history, which are shown wherever people live, work and play. For more information, including exhibition descriptions and tour schedules, visit www.sites.si.edu.

Since its founding in 1969, the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) has been a key component of the Cultural Resources Division of the National Park Service. Like its sister programs, the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Landscapes Survey, the HAER program produces detailed documentation of historically significant sites and structures for a national collection hosted by the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. This documentation serves as a record of the nation's built environment and as a valuable tool for the preservation and stewardship of some of the most important and most fragile cultural resources.

For detailed information on the Covered Bridges exhibition and other museum programs visit The State Museum's website: www.statemuseumpa.org.

The State Museum of Pennsylvania is one of 26 historic sites and museums administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Museum hours are Tuesday through Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday 12 noon to 5 p.m. General admission to The State Museum is FREE. Individuals who need special assistance should call (717) 787-6778 or the Pennsylvania TDD relay service at (800) 654-5984.

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