

# BRIDGE TO THE PAST: Groton company's structures remain

Gene Endres, Correspondent, October 27, 2016

One of the major industries in Tompkins County's history connects back to some of the earliest times in human civilization. After the tribes of the Stone Age, civilization entered the "iron age" when this abundant element became a basis for strong tools and structures.

Brothers Charles and Lyman Perrigo started the Groton Iron Works in 1852, while Daniel Spencer and Frederick Avery began the Groton Separator Works in 1847 to manufacture agricultural implements. By 1877, they had joined to form Perrigo and Avery, incorporating as the Groton Iron Bridge Works in that year. Their aim was to construct iron bridges using iron railroad rails in designs based on recent patents by members of their company.

The expansion of railroads and roads in this period called for many more bridge crossings and led to formation of numerous companies dedicated to building them. By 1877, some 450 bridge companies were listed in the United States, and more than 50 in New York state.

Groton Iron Bridge prospered, erecting more than 300 bridges between 1877 and 1885. The works grew to many buildings in Groton, employing 150 men. By 1887, the company re-incorporated as the Groton Bridge and Manufacturing Co. Its aim was "the manufacture of iron bridges, iron piling for bridges, portable steam engines, grain separators, hot air and steam air heaters and ... general repairing and job work."

In the 1890s, one of the first families of Groton led the company, with Frank Conger — first as vice president under Ellery Colby and then under William Fitch — taking the presidency when Fitch died. Corydon Conger, Frank's father, served as vice president. In 1900, financier J.P. Morgan sought to control bridge-building in the United States, buying out 23 leading bridge companies (including Groton's) and forming the American Bridge Co., which, in turn, became a subsidiary of his giant United States Steel Corp.

In 1902, Frank's brothers, Jay and Benn Conger, with manager E.A. Landon, bought the company back from American Bridge, branching out into steel frames for buildings (such as Rand Hall at Cornell), smokestacks, water tanks, road graders and other highway implements. Nevertheless, the company declined and Groton became known for other manufactures, such as typewriters.

By 1913, only 25 employees remained, though the company pioneered with concrete arch bridges, such as the one at Waterburg, near Trumansburg. By 1920, the remains of Groton Bridge Co. were sold back to American Bridge.

A number of the bridges built by Groton remain in use or are preserved. One original structure, the so-called Nubia Bridge, has been preserved as historically important and now can be seen

near the Groton Town Clerk's Office on Conger Boulevard. It is a rare example of how changing technology was changing the American scene.

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