

## Keeler Lane Bridge

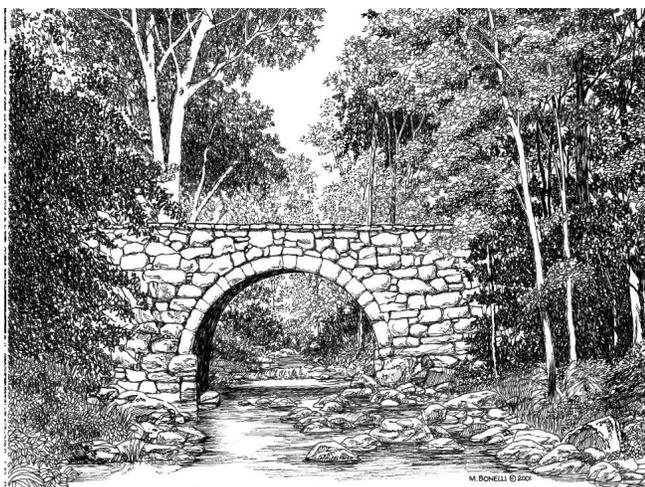
June 2017

by Susan Thompson

One of North Salem's most charming historic landmarks is the Keeler Lane Bridge, a lovely keystone bridge built soon after 1853 when the previous crossing was swept away in a storm. There has been a bridge on this site since at least the 1730s when the Keelers settled what we know now as Keeler Lane. The first bridge (or bridges) would have been constructed of wood, probably planks over wood or stone pilings. It would have been sturdy enough for cart, pedestrian and horse traffic – but not always for Mother Nature

In his journal, Alfred Smith Hawley wrote this account of the storm that took the bridge Nov. 13, 1853: *“Cloudy morning & rained a little at about 7 1/2 it lighted up a little the wind sprung up into the n.w. The clouds at the same time running from the S.E. & to all appearance clashed in the heavens. It thundered a little the rain falling in heavy sheets, & deluging the face of the County, sweeping almost everything before it. Roads were torn up & soon rendered entirely useless. The road up the hill to James Farris was torn to pieces in a dreadful manner beyond description. Also the hill near the corner by Elias Smith's & the Road over Ginea Hill. The bridge over Titicus River that goes to Nathan Keelers was carried away & a number of persons were on the bridge and narrowly escaped. The Bridge by C. Benedicts was swept away & the one below Salem Center. The brig near J. H. Purdies & a numb smaller ones to writ. The saw mill below my house & the one near E. Hawley & & the one near DG Baxters, Charles Cables mill dam & rad way was carried away & E. Finches was much injured & J. H. Purdies was also much injured. It was the greatest freshet the oldest person amonst us was said it seemed as if the flood gate of Heaven was thrown open and the rain decending awful fury Rolling & tumbling drops.”*

Most of the town's infrastructure was destroyed, and for months through that winter residents must have struggled with makeshift river crossings and roads in wretched condition. Still, they eventually managed to build the keystone bridge – a sturdy work of art that served the hamlet of North Salem well until the 1930s when the western portion of the arch and walls required repair. But with too much weight and traffic (the one-lane bridge was built 60 years before the first automobile came to North Salem), by the 1980s the arch, roadway and retaining walls were in critical condition.



Drawing by Mike Bonelli, courtesy of the North Salem Historic Preservation Commission

In 1986 the town received a commitment from the county to rebuild and restore the bridge, and the North Salem Historical Society led the campaign to maintain its historical integrity. Abba Lichtenstein was chosen as project designer/engineer, and Talle Construction was selected to do the work. The plan was to build a bridge within a bridge, and it worked: the original face and arch stones were removed, concrete slab beams were inserted across the span into new abutments, and the original arch stones were replaced and tied to concrete infill with steel bars. Except for the addition of a safety guard rail, the bridge looks as it did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The project, funded by the

New York State Transportation Bond Act, cost about \$340,000.