MNDOT HISTORIC ROADSIDE DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES INVENTORY

SL-DUL-2428
CS 6925
Lester River Bridge (Bridge 5772)

Historic Name	Lester River Bridge (Bridge 5772)
Other Name	

CS #	6925
SHPO Inv #	SL-DUL-2428

Location	TH 61 at Lester River
City/Township	Duluth, City of
County	St. Louis
Twp Rng Sec	50N 13W Sec 5 50N 13W Sec 8
USGS Quad	Duluth
UTM	Z15 E575790 N5187280

Hwy	TH 61
District	1A
Reference	4.8

Acres	
Rest Area Class	NA

SP #	

Designer	Morell and Nichols Cruikshank, Wm. H.
Builder	McLean, C.R.

SHPO Review #	

Historic Use	Bridge/ Culvert/ Dam
Present Use	Bridge/ Culvert/ Dam

MHS Photo #	013545.24-25 013546.01-07

Yr of Landscape Design	Ca. 1924
Overall Site Integrity	Intact/Slightly Altered
Review Required	Yes

MnDOT Historic Photo Album	

National Register Status	~~Eligible, see Statement of Significance~~ Now listed: see http://www.dot.state.mn.us/roadsides/historic/files/wayrep-suppl.pdf for additional information.

Historic Context	Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960 Reinforced Concrete Highway Bridges, 1900-1945

List of Standing Structures

Feat#	Feature Type	Year Built	
01	Bridge/Culvert	1924	

NOTE: Landscape features are not listed in this table

Fieldwork Date	10-12-97
Prep by	Gemini Research Dec. 98 G1. 39
Prep for	Site Development Unit Cultural Resources Unit Environmental Studies Unit

Final Report	Historic Roadside Development Structures on Minnesota Trunk Highways (1998)

■ BRIEF

The Lester River Bridge (Bridge 5772) is a stone-faced concrete arch bridge that carries T.H. 61 (London Road/Congdon Blvd.) over the Lester River in the northeastern portion of the city of Duluth. The bridge is located at the intersection of T.H. 61 and 61st Ave. E.

■ STANDING STRUCTURES

Bridge 5772. Built 1924 by C. R. McLean for the City of Duluth. Designed by Morell and Nichols and Duluth Asst. Engineer Wm. H. Cruikshank. The Lester River Bridge is an intact concrete and stone "earth filled and open spandrel arch bridge" that carries T.H. 61 over the Lester River. It is approximately 164' long and 36' wide, and was designed to carry two 18'-wide lanes and two 5'-wide walkways. It has concrete abutments. The bridge's headwalls and railings are built of random ashlar, rockfaced, dark brownish-black gabbro with smoothly-dressed speckled gray granite trim. (The plans specify "random ashlar masonry of native stone with seam face finish" and "pean hammer finish stone, light gray granite.") The structure's 102'-span is a wide, shallow arch that is edged with gray granite voissoirs. The arch is enframed by shallow stone piers with blind rounded arches near the top. Bands of smooth gray granite mark the top and bottom of the railings. The stone railings are anchored at each end by a 28"-square stone pier that is topped by a low polygonal gray granite finial. There are poured concrete sidewalks between the railings and the roadway. Metal guardrails have been added to each end of the bridge.

The original bridge plans include specifications for a stone bridge plate that was to read "Erected 1924 by Joint Contribution of Chester A. Congdon Estate, City of Duluth and County of St. Louis." This plaque does not currently exist.

■ OTHER LANDSCAPE FEATURES AND PLANTINGS

The bridge is aligned roughly east and west and is located just a few feet north of the shore of Lake Superior. Both the lakeshore and the banks of the river are lined with small stones. Concrete city sidewalks extend along both sides of this portion of London Road. No original landscaping plan has been located.

■ SETTING

The bridge is located in a residential neighborhood within the bounds of Lester Park, a 46-acre park that extends north from the bridge. The shore of Lake Superior is located a few feet south of the bridge. The bridge is surrounded by Lake Superior on the south, Lester Park on the north, and residential neighborhoods on the east and west. Standing immediately west of the bridge on the shore of Lake Superior is the U.S. Fisheries Station-Duluth (built 1885-1887), which was listed on the National Register in 1978. Immediately east of the bridge is the Brighton Beach Overlook which contains a small stone marker and a parking area. (The marker was erected in 1972.)

The Lester River Bridge is an important feature along the North Shore Drive or Scenic North Shore Drive, which follows T.H. 61 (London Road) between 12th Ave. E. in Duluth and the

Lester River, then follows T.H. 61 and C.S.A.H. 61 (Congdon Boulevard) out of Duluth to the northeast. Shawn Perich writes in a 1992 travel guide: ". . . not until you cross the Lester River Bridge do you first see the lake up close and leave the city behind. For most of us, this marks the real beginning of the North Shore Drive" (Perich 1992:2). The Lester River Bridge marks the eastern end of Duluth's Skyline Parkway.

■ INTEGRITY

Alterations

The bridge appears to have been built fairly closely to plan.

Two segments of the southern railing's gray stone cap have been patched with poured concrete. Metal guardrails have been added to each end of the bridge. The original date plate is missing. The structure is otherwise intact.

The bridge retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Notes on Condition

The bridge appears to be in fair condition. Two segments of the southern railing's gray stone cap have been patched with poured concrete.

■ HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

According to City of Duluth records, the Lester River Bridge was constructed in 1924. The city contracted in June of 1934 with C. R. McLean to build the bridge. The bridge was to have been completed by October of 1924, but the City granted the contractor an extension to May 1925. (City Contract No. 2750, City Engineer Job. No. 2024.)

Note: The Mn/DOT Bridge Unit records the date of the bridge as 1935. (Perhaps the assignment of this date is related to the incorporation of the bridge into the trunk highway system in 1934.)

The bridge was apparently financed by Chester Congdon and built as part of the original construction of Congdon Boulevard. Congdon North Shore Boulevard, as it was originally called, begins at Lester River, extends along the north shore to the Lake County line and is now part of C.S.A.H.'s Scenic North Shore Drive. The road was built in the 1920s, during the advent of tourism along the north shore. In 1915, Duluth businessman and philanthropist Chester A. Congdon and the City of Duluth began development of this boulevard with Congdon paying all costs for acquiring the right-of-way for this parkway. By 1922, construction of the road began in earnest with Congdon's widow, the City of Duluth, and St. Louis County financing the construction. This section of road became a trunk highway in 1934 according to the Mn/DOT construction log.

The original bridge plans (drawn May 21, 1924, on file at the City of Duluth) indicate that the bridge was "Designed by Wm. H. Cruikshank, Asst. Eng'r from recommend'tns by Morell and Nichols, Landscape Architects and Engrs."

The Morell and Nichols Collection at the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota contains drawings and plans of the bridge that are dated July 1923.

Morell and Nichols served as Consulting Landscape Architects for the City of Duluth, designing the layout for Lester Park, as well as designing the seven bridges on Amity Creek north of Lester Park, among many other projects. They also designed Congdon Boulevard. (Morell had landscaped C. A. Congdon's home and Congdon Park in 1909-1910.) The Morell and Nichols collection in the Northwest Architectural Archives contains several plans, drawings, etc. for Lester Park and other work in Duluth. The Lester Park Bridge is stylistically similar to other bridges Morell and Nichols designed for the City of Duluth. (The Lester Park Bridge was built three years before Morell's death.)

Emil Miller may have been one of the stonemasons who worked on the Lester River Bridge. Miller's grandson, Bruce Miller, recalls his grandfather commenting that he helped construct the Lester River Bridge and several bridges along Seven Bridges Road. During the 1930s Emil Miller helped construct the Thompson Hill Overlook, the rock wall along Skyline Drive near 40th Ave. W., and several other WPA projects along the North Shore. Miller quit the masonry trade during World War II to work in the steel plant in Duluth (Miller 1998).

■ PREVIOUS SHPO REVIEWS

There apparently have been no previous SHPO cultural resource reviews of the property, except for its inclusion in the Mn/DOT Historic Bridge Inventory. The Bride Inventory determined the bridge to be eligible for the National Register. (A photocopy of the bridge study inventory file has been placed in the Lester River Bridge roadside development inventory file.)

■ STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Lester River Bridge (Bridge 5772), built in 1924 for the City of Duluth and later incorporated into the trunk highway system, is one of seven bridges recorded in this inventory that are faced with stone. It was designed by Morell and Nichols in cooperation with Duluth assistant engineer William H. Cruikshank.

This property has been evaluated within the historic context "Roadside Development on Minnesota Trunk Highways, 1920-1960." The bridge was not built by the state highway department but was acquired and became one of the MHD's roadside development assets when this roadway became part of the trunk highway system in 1934. It is recommended that the Lester River Bridge is ELIGIBLE for the National Register under this historic context because it meets the following registration requirements:

Significant to Transportation History. The Lester River Bridge is associated with the early development of Congdon Boulevard, also known as the North Shore Drive, as one of the state's most important, early tourist routes. It stands at a prominant location that is essentially the gateway to the North Shore Drive. The bridge is a pivotal structure that dates from the original construction of this portion of what became T.H. 1 (later T.H. 61). T.H. 1/T.H. 61 was designed primarily as a scenic highway to carry tourists along the pristine North Shore of Lake Superior. The highway is significant within the development of the state's trunk highway system. (National Register Criterion A.)

Design Significance. The Lester River Bridge (Bridge 5772) is an excellent and early example of the a small stone highway bridge designed to enhance, and blend with, its natural surroundings. It has stonework of excellent quality. The site displays the special labor-intensive construction techniques and distinctive use of indigenous materials that are usually seen in federal relief construction from the 1930s. Furthermore, the bridge is an important, early example of the roadside development work of prominent landscape architect A. R. Nichols and his firm, Morell and Nichols. (National Register Criterion C.)

Bridge 5772 was also determined to be ELIGIBLE for the National Register by the Mn/DOT Historic Bridge Inventory ("Reinforced Concrete Highway Bridges, 1900-1945" historic context).

The property may also be associated with the "Tourism and Recreation in the Lake Regions, 1870-1945" and "Urban Centers, 1870-1940" historic contexts.

■ OTHER COMMENTS

This property may require further evaluation for potential archaeological resources.

The Lester River Bridge was inventoried in 1984 during a City of Duluth cultural resources survey and given the survey number SL-DUL-L-64.

T.H. 61 (London Road/Congdon Blvd.) is quite busy over the bridge, particularly in the summer months.

This site is also associated with local historic contexts established by the City of Duluth's Heritage Preservation Commission.

■ REFERENCES

Bridge plans. City of Duluth.

Eubank, Nancy. *The Zenith City of the Unsalted Sea. Duluth Historic Contexts Study.* Prepared for the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission. August 1991.

Frame, Robert H. III. "Reinforced Concrete Highway Bridges in Minnesota." National Register Multiple Property Documentation Form. August 15, 1988.

Miller, Bruce. Telephone interview. 1998.

Minnesota Historic Highway Bridge Inventory form for Bridge 5772. The 106 Group, Ltd. 1993.

Morell and Nichols Collection. Northwest Architectural Archives. University of Minnesota Libraries, St. Paul.

Nunnally, Patrick D. *Jewel of the North: Duluth's Parkway System*. Prepared for the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission. July 1997.

Perich, Shawn. *The North Shore: A Four-Season Guide to Minnesota's Favorite Destination*. Duluth: Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers, 1992.

■ ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Duluth gabbro was used to construct the Lester River Bridge. The hills in and around Duluth were formed from an ancient lava flow called Duluth gabbro, one of the oldest rock formations on the continent. Gabbro is an igneous coarse-grained rock containing dark minerals that give it its dark color. The stone is commercially referred to as "green granite," "black granite," and "trap rock." Gabbro was quarried as early as 1896 in and around Duluth. During the early 1930s, a growing demand for "black granite" resulted in a number of new quarries opening near the city. Gabbro was used to construct many buildings in Duluth and roadside development features and state park structures along the North Shore.

Lester River was named for an early settler who homesteaded near the mouth of the river. Prior to that, it was called "Busabika zibi" by the Ojibwe, meaning "Rocky Canyon River," or "the river that comes through a worn hollow place in the rock." The river is approximately 15 miles in length, and flows through Lester Park on the eastern edge of Duluth.

Lester Park (approximately 46 acres), located on Snively Blvd., between London Road and Graves St., had been established by 1920. The park is considered to be the starting point for the Duluth's Skyline Parkway.

The Brighton Beach Overlook and marker, located a few feet east of the Lester River Bridge on the lakeside of Congdon Blvd., is constructed of mortared granite. The text of the plaque addresses the Duluth Parkway System and the Seven Bridges Road which begins about 100 yards west of the marker. The marker was erected in 1972.

The city of Duluth was named for Daniel Greysolon Du Luth, a French explorer and fur trader who first visited Lake Superior in 1678. The city was first settled by Euro-Americans in 1850-51, and platted and named in 1856. Duluth was incorporated as a town in 1857 and as a city in 1870. The city's expansion to the southwest eventually asbsorbed eight independent small communities located along the western bank of the St. Louis River: Fond du Lac (estab. 1856), New Duluth (estab. 1890), Gary (1916), Morgan Park (1914-1916), Ironton (1889-1893), Oneota (1856), Rice's Point (1858), and Riverside (1916). The City of Duluth extends for approximately 25 miles (southwest to northeast) along the shores of Lake Superior.

Lake Superior and T.H. 61

Lake Superior is the largest body of fresh water in the world. The lake is 383 miles long, 160 miles wide, and is 489' to 1,400' deep. The Ojibwe called the Lake "Kitchigumi," meaning "Great Water." The early French traders called the lake "Lac Superieur" because it was located at the head of the Great Lakes. By the early 1920s, Duluth and the North Shore area had become a mecca for tourists.

Trunk Highway 1 along the North Shore was built during the 1920s and 1930s and named the "Lake Superior International Highway" by the highway department in 1926. Its number was changed from 1 to 61 in 1934. The highway was the only thoroughfare to serve North Shore towns in Minnesota and to provide access to the Canadian North Shore from the state.

It was specificially designed (and in some places, realigned) to provide outstanding views of the lake. Between Duluth and the Canadian border, T.H. 61 travels approximately 165 miles through three counties: St. Louis, Lake, and Cook. With the completion of the highway, recreation and tourism became important components of the North Shore economy.