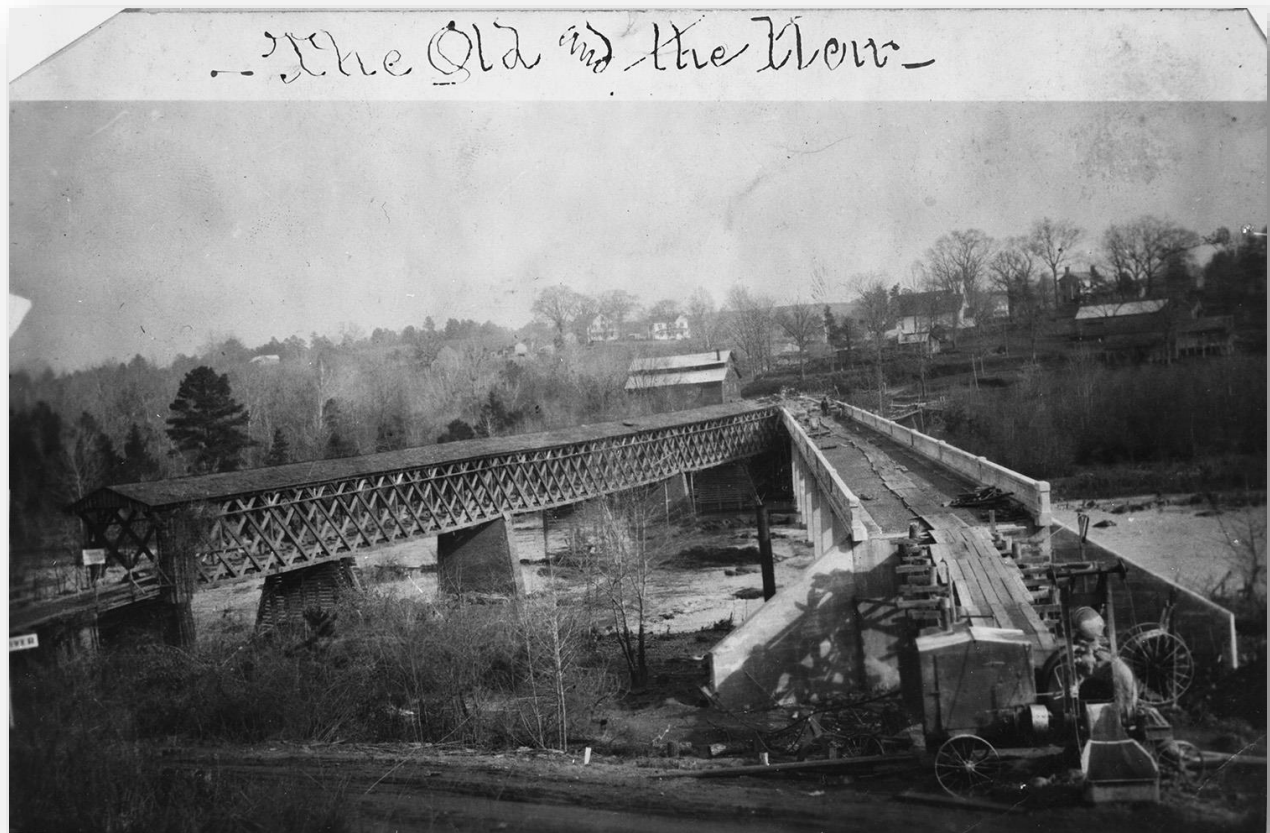


# BYNUM BRIDGE

**Recognized for Its Place in History**

**Placed on the National Register of  
Historic Places**



*1922 photo looking east on west bank showing new bridge nearing completion. The old bridge to its north.  
Photo by Nell Page Atwater. From Wilson Library Special Collections at UNC, Chapel Hill*

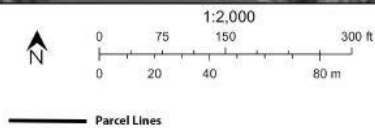
# Bynum Bridge Awarded Historic Designation

By Diane Swan and Debbie Tunnell

**We are proud to announce that Bynum Bridge, which was built and is controlled by North Carolina Department of Transportation, was entered into the National Registry of Historic Places on April 23, 2020.**



National Register of Historic Places Nomination  
**BYNUM BRIDGE**  
Old Bynum Road  
Connecting SR 1871 and SR 1713 over Haw River  
Bynum, Chatham County, North Carolina  
**National Register Boundary Map**



## **Bynum Bridge the Old and the New**

For over 75 years, the Old Bynum Bridge carried cars and people across the Haw River. Everything changed, however, in the late 1990s when the North Carolina Department of Transportation discovered that the bridge was deteriorating and initiated plans to replace it. After a long-heated battle, the bridge was saved, with the NCDOT opting to close it to vehicular traffic and declare it a pedestrian bridge. In 2015 the community was shocked when the Old Bynum Bridge was characterized as “orphaned and abandoned”. Determined to show its value in the community, neighbors used these events to mark the beginning of a new chapter for this treasured Bynum landmark.

### **The Old**

People have been crossing the Haw River near present-day Bynum for more than 200 years. In the early nineteenth century, travelers used Bynum’s Ferry. Then in 1839, a bridge was built near Bynum to allow easier passage between the county seat of Pittsboro and the college town of Chapel Hill. The area continued to grow and in the 1860's Luke Bynum built a wooden dam and millrace to provide power for a cotton gin and gristmill on the Haw River. After the Civil War, in 1872, Luther and Carney Bynum added a Cotton Mill and “Bynum” district was born. Due to heavy rains and flooding which frequently washed out bridges across the Haw, the county commissioners voted on April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1879, to build a new bridge (higher and with a ramp) at the "Bynum’s Factory".



*Late 19<sup>th</sup> century photo of covered bridge and grist mill at Bynum, looking west from the East bank.  
From Wilson Library Special Collections at UNC, Chapel Hill*

The next forty years brought incredible change as horse drawn carts gave way to automobiles because mass production made car ownership affordable. This transportation revolution spurred North Carolina and the federal government to upgrade roadways. In North Carolina, Governor Locke Craig—the state’s first “Good Roads Governor”—embarked on an ambitious campaign to improve the state’s roads, assisted by the establishment of the State Highway Commission in 1915. At the national level, the Federal Roads Act of 1916 provided increased funding for roads and bridges and promoted the adoption of standardized road and bridge designs. In 1919, the Good Roads Association, a small band of North Carolina civic leaders, proposed a bill that would develop a network of hard-top roads to connect all the county seats and principal towns. Reinforced concrete bridges, which could be built quickly, became the bridge of choice for local governments with tight budgets. In 1921 Bynum Bridge became part of a \$50 million bond issue from Governor Cameron Morrison and the state legislature. The first organized statewide road and bridge campaign in NC history. The Bynum Bridge was State Project No. 400, and in March 1922 the Chatham Record reported that the contract to build was awarded to R.M. Walker and Company from Atlanta, Georgia for \$50,000. By June 16th, 1922, this newspaper could report that construction on the Bynum Bridge had started. Construction was completed on May 18th, 1923.

At its completion Bynum Bridge was considered state of the art engineering. It is the longest first-generation tee beam bridge built before 1924. The first tee beam designs consisted of three longitudinal beams (as Bynum Bridge has), but by the late 1920s the standards were updated for wider roadways, and later examples usually consisted of four or more beams. It is also the longest unaltered reinforced concrete tee beam bridge known to remain in North Carolina. The bridge has a length of 806.1 feet stretching across nineteen spans of about 43 feet each. Only one tee beam bridge in the state is known to have been longer. The White Oak River Bridge in Swansboro was built 30 years later, in 1952, and replaced or overbuilt in 2001. The Old Bynum Bridge is intact and still retains the original piers, beams, deck, and parapets in all spans, making its preservation not only vital to the Bynum community but also the history of bridge construction in North Carolina.

## **The New**

Since its closing to vehicles in 1999, Bynum Bridge has come to life as a pedestrian destination. With its proximity to the Lower Haw River State Natural Area and the county-owned Bynum Beach Access Area, Bynum Bridge has become a focal point for nature-related activities, special gatherings and events for people in Bynum, Chatham County and beyond. It is much used and enjoyed by pedestrians, cyclists, wildlife observers, walking groups, families and stargazers. Many well-attended public events take place on Bynum Bridge.

Several stargazing groups including the Chapel Hill Astronomical and Observational Society and the Bynum Astronomy Club have used the bridge as an ideal gathering place to search and enjoy the dark skies. The National Audubon Society reported in their February 2015 “Birders Guide” that of the many bird watching areas in the N.C. Piedmont, “few are better than the Bynum Bridge area in Chatham County”. The Bynum Bridge is also the site of several important community events. For a few years it was host to Bridgefest, an art show where local artists sold their work. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the Bynum community has been known to celebrate Independence Day with a potluck meal on the bridge. “Pumpkins on the Bridge”, sponsored by Bynum Front Porch, is a much beloved annual event—on October 31<sup>st</sup> of course—that features hundreds of community carved and candle-lit Jack-O-Lanterns placed on the bridge from dusk until midnight. Bynum Bridge and the community made the cover of Chatham Magazine’s “Best of Issue” Oct/Nov 2019. The bridge is a favorite site for photographers, painters, musicians, writers and other artists. The Bynum Bridge also serves as a canvas for creativity and free expression. From time to time some artwork appears on the bridge that is not family friendly. It is usually covered up quickly by a merry band of “bridge fairies” who seek to support wholesome creative expression.

Bynum Bridge even pulls its weight as a contributor to public infrastructure. It carries an important interconnection for water service between and the Haw River water supplies of the Town of Pittsboro and the Jordan Lake Northern Chatham County supplies.

Bynum Bridge no longer serves as a major roadway transit point, but it still connects communities and people. It helps connect everyone with the beauty and restorative quality of nature, especially in this present time of social distancing due to the Coronavirus outbreak. Generations have stood on Bynum Bridge daydreaming, wishing, thinking, working out a problem, sharing a romantic moment or simply watching the Haw River waters roll on toward the sea. As Cynthia Raxter, Bynum resident, noted “That river has heard lots of laughter and carried away many a tear.”

## Historic Designation

The application for historic registration is a detailed process usually submitted by Historic Preservation Consultants. In the fall of 2015, Bynum Residents began wondering about the historic status of Bynum Bridge and began searching for answers.

NC Department of Transportation is the owner of Bynum Bridge (NCDOT Bridge #405). In 1997 Nicholas Graf, then administrator of the Federal Highway Administration of DOT, was looking at replacing Bynum Bridge because of its deteriorating capacity to carry the increasingly heavy load of traffic. A historic structural survey report was prepared by Jill Marie Lord, April 23, 1997. Mr. Graf sent her findings to NC State Historic Preservation Officer David Brook in May 1997. He concluded that according to the report, Bynum Bridge was eligible for further study for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A- It's role in the state highway system, and Criterion C- a good example of reinforced concrete deck girder bridges built in 1920. NCDOT did not need to pursue historic nomination any further once the bridge was identified as eligible. When Bynum Bridge was added as a project study, under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, NCDOT was required to stay in compliance of that Act. National Registry listings are mostly seen as symbolic, unless held privately where significance can provide financial incentives.

Residents still wanted Bynum Bridge recognized. Bynum Bridge was not listed as historic by its owner NCDOT or in the National Archive. On November 22, 2015 Diane Swan and Cynthia Hermans submitted another study list application for Bynum Bridge to the State Historic Preservation Office. Bynum Bridge was again accepted and added to the Study List of potential nominations to the National Register in February 2016.

The next few years under the guidance of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources (NCDCCR), and with help and support from the broader Bynum Community, Diane Swan and Debbie Tunnell plowed through research, application, and approval processes. Diane Swan said, "I think that what got me through this, besides Debbie's consistent cheer and help, was being a novice and not understanding the magnitude of what I had taken on". On May 16, 2018 the first draft of the "completed" application to the Historic Register for Bynum Bridge was submitted. Fine tuning of checklists, photo archives, and technical rewrites under the guidance of Hannah Beckman-Black, Jennifer Brosz and Michael Southern of the Raleigh Office of the NCDCCR, allowing for a final submission on December 2, 2019.

## **Bynum Bridge awarded National Historic Register Designation**

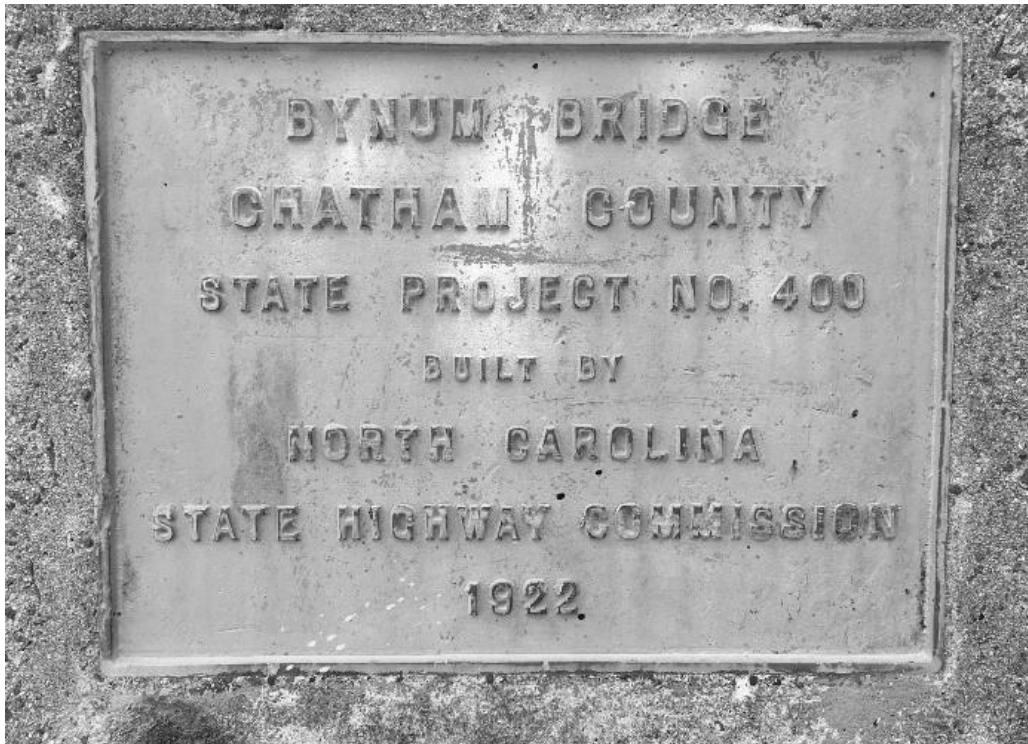
On February 13, 2020, a presentation for the submission of the application was given by Jennifer Beckman-Black to the review board of the National Register Advisory Council (NRAC), part of the State Historic Preservation Office in the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources (NCDCCR) recommending Bynum Bridge for the National Register of Historic Places. Their recommendation was accepted and submitted to the National Parks Service for final review. The National Park Service reviewed their recommendation and Bynum Bridge was listed in the National Registry of Historic Places (Chatham County NC #100005196) on April 23, 2020, 23 years to the day from when its survey report first acknowledged its historic significance.

What began as an effort to recognize the importance of the bridge to this community, ended up also establishing the importance of the Bynum Bridge to the history of the State. Bynum Bridge has been deemed a structure associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history and a bridge which embodies a distinctive method of construction that helped make North Carolina “The Good Roads State”. As stated on the Bynum Bridge’s cover photo in Chatham Magazine’s Oct/Nov 2019 issue, “All Roads Lead to Bynum”.

Many thanks to the “broader” Bynum community and especially to Hannah Beckman-Black, Jennifer Brosz and Michael Southern of the NCDCCR for their patient expertise and guidance. Bynum Bridge is neither abandoned nor orphaned. Bynum Bridge is history, heritage, and family held deeply in the hearts of the community surrounding it.

Plans are being made to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of Bynum Bridge,  
Bynum style of course, in 2022.  
We all hope you join in the celebration.

## **Congratulations Bynum Bridge!**



*Historic Marker Plate on Bynum Bridge, Photo Credit Diane Swan, May 2018*

*Many thanks to Mitchell Bratton of Performance Printing Services  
for generously donating this publication for the community of Bynum.*

*© Diane C. Swan and Debbie Tunnell, Bynum, May 2020*