

106 SUCCESS STORY

Work of Art Spans the Potomac River Washington, D.C.; Alexandria, Virginia; Oxon Hill, Maryland



“Visually, the Wilson Bridge is actually far more than an engineered bridge structure. I believe it is a work of art. It is, at once, a utilitarian bridge, a memorial, a new landmark, and a sculpture of unprecedented scale.”

— JANOS ENYEDI
Artist, Furnace Road Studio 2006

THE STORY

The Woodrow Wilson Bridge is one of only two Potomac River crossings on the Capital Beltway, the 64-mile interstate highway surrounding Washington, D.C. Built during the first wave of interstate highway construction in the late 1950s, the drawbridge was designed to avoid the Alexandria National Historic Landmark District, yet it passed directly through the larger Alexandria Historic District designated later.

THE PROJECT

Built to connect the suburbs of Maryland and Virginia, the Woodrow Wilson Bridge was carrying more than twice its intended capacity by the 1980s. The high volume of local traffic and especially high volume of interstate truck traffic compounded its deteriorating condition. By 1990, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in cooperation with the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA) and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), proposed to replace the decaying bridge with two spans which would maintain the current crossing during construction and ultimately update the full structure, expanding its carrying capacity. The 1961 bridge was not considered eligible for the National Register. However, the proposed project would be built 50 feet south of the present bridge, and its expanded footprint crossed the Alexandria Historic District, including the Jones Point Lighthouse and Park, the Mount Vernon Memorial Highway, pre-contact and historic archaeological resources, and a historic cemetery later identified as the Freedmen’s (Contraband) Cemetery. Given the scale of the undertaking and with multiple state, local, and non-governmental stakeholders, initial proposals for replacing the bridge met with significant opposition based on anticipated impacts to historic properties.

THE 106 PROCESS

FHWA was the federal agency funding this project and responsible for conducting the Section 106 review process under the National Historic Preservation Act, which requires agencies to identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required

Photos: Above, spanning the Potomac; Right, the highway bridge; a cyclist rides at Jones Point Park under the bridge (photos by Trevor Wrayton, Virginia DOT)

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Photos: Left, a view of the Alexandria Historic District; Above, Jones Point Park (photos by Trevor Wrayton, Virginia DOT)

to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of historic properties when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

Early in consultation, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) encouraged a multi-disciplinary collaboration that was key to a successful outcome. One of the first steps taken was to convene a design charrette with participation by multiple jurisdictions and interested parties. The outcome suggested the basic form of a new crossing to minimize the footprint, profile, and height—lessening the visual impacts on significant historic properties.

THE SUCCESS

Since the bridge structure could not be hidden from view, the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) developed by the consulting parties set out principles for design of the new bridge to be compatible with its historic setting. These principles called for a bridge with high aesthetic value, reflecting the historic arch tradition of bridges over the Potomac, minimizing piers, and maintaining the historic park underneath and were the basis for the competition that ultimately selected the final design.

Importantly, the MOA established a Design Review Working Group (DRWG) for continued stakeholder involvement as the design was refined. Chaired by ACHP staff, the DRWG oversaw implementation of key agreement provisions, recommended additional mitigation as the design process unfolded, and addressed opportunities to benefit historic sites outside the project footprint. For example, archaeological investigations led to the re-discovery and ultimate preservation and interpretation of the Freedmen’s Cemetery, following the DRWG recommendations. Even the higher than anticipated volume of dredge material was transported to restore a former gravel mining operation to farmland and enhance a National Historic Landmark site on the James River.

The collaborative Section 106 process resulted in an award-winning, signature bridge that functions as a regional transportation link for vehicles, pedestrians, and bicycles; complements its monumental setting; and provides a gateway into the Alexandria Historic District.

Consulting Parties:

- Federal Highway Administration
- ACHP
- State Historic Preservation Officers from D.C., Maryland, and Virginia
- National Park Service
- SHA
- VDOT
- City of Alexandria, Virginia
- Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
- Prince George’s County, Maryland
- Daughters of the American Revolution

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

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