

The Covered Bridge Numbering System

The covered bridge numbering system was devised by John Diehl of Cincinnati, Ohio, while he was chairman of the former Ohio Covered Bridge Committee. The Ohio Historical Society used this system in 1953 with the publication of its first Ohio Covered Bridge List.

The system uses three numbers separated by hyphens. The first number represents the number of the US state in alphabetical order; for example, Ohio is number 35, Alabama is 01, and Wyoming is 50. The second number represents the county in that state. Thus, 35-01 represents Adams County in Ohio. Each bridge in that county can then be sequentially numbered as additional bridges are discovered or built. For example, the Harshville Covered Bridge in Adams County, Ohio, is given the number 35-01-02. All known covered bridges in Ohio (past and present) have been assigned a number using this system.

When the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges (NSPCB) published its first *World Guide to Covered Bridges* in 1959, it adopted the same system and expanded it to include additional numbers for Canadian Provinces. Thus, New Brunswick is number 55, Ontario is number 59 and Quebec is number 61.

As covered bridges were "discovered" in countries outside northern North America, they were identified with a letter abbreviation for the country, followed by a number signifying the administrative unit of the country and a sequential number for the bridge. For example, "MX" was used for Mexico, "A" for Austria, "S" for Switzerland, etc. As time went on, some bridges had letter abbreviations which no longer reflect the current name of the country. For example German bridges were still designated "WG" for West Germany and a Slovenian bridge had the prefix "Y" for Yugoslavia.

In the 2009 edition of the World Guide, the country identifier in the bridge numbering system for any country outside the United States and Canada was changed to be its two-character ISO country identification letters that are used for assigning Internet domains.

As new covered bridges were "discovered" in northern North America, many were given numbers even though they were constructed in recent years without the original purpose for covering bridges; namely, to protect the mostly wooden truss from rotting. Indeed, most of these new bridges did not even have a truss! A committee was formed by the NSPCB to address this situation, and it was decided to try to separate these new roofed structures from "authentic" old covered bridges by giving them a letter designation. Foot bridges would be identified with a lower-case letter and bridges large enough to handle vehicles would be given a capital letter. The 1989 edition of the World Guide attempts to include only "authentic" covered bridges with numbers, while a companion volume entitled *Romantic Shelters* was published to include all lettered structures. The "covered bridge" in Mohican State Park in Ashland County, Ohio, was designated 35-03-A because its truss consists of weathering steel. Only bridges with wood as an integral part of the truss would receive a number designation; all other "stringers" would receive letters.

Over the years, many old covered bridges have been modified by repairs to try to keep them in service a while longer. Sometimes they have piers or bents added to help hold them up, while other times I-beams are put under them to carry most of the load. The Belle Hall Covered Bridge in Licking County (35-45-01) was badly damaged by a truck, whose insurance company paid for "repairs" which consisted of adding I-beams and removing most of the old wood truss! Other old covered bridges are almost completely destroyed by fire or flood but then are rebuilt to closely resemble the old bridge. When this happens, a suffix "#2" is added to the bridge number to distinguish the new bridge from the old one. Older reference materials may also use a suffix of "G" for "gone" for bridges which were lost before the numbering system was developed. The Covered Spans of Yesteryear project - www.lostbridges.org – has assigned numbers to all of these past bridges so they can be more easily referenced.

There have been suggestions to include a system of suffixes to include every condition which is perceived by some as a deviation from authenticity. Then only "authentic" old covered bridges would

have the simple old numbering system and all other covered structures would have suffixes. For example, the suffix "B" could be used for bypassed bridges and "M" might indicate that the bridge has been moved from its original location. Similarly, a "T" might indicate that the truss has been modified; "R" could signify that the roof is not wooden shingles; "I" could tell of added I-beams; "A" could signify added pier(s) or bent(s) for added support; and "-" could be used on shortened bridges. Other suffixes could be used to tell of modern roof trusses replacing the original cross bracing system and sheet metal siding used in place of side boards. Also, a suffix "N" could be added to signify that the bridge has been built or rebuilt in recent years, say after 1920. This system of suffixes has been tested on occasion. Of course, the suffixes are subject to change each time the bridge is repaired.

Some additional information could also be provided for "romantic shelters" to distinguish those which are readily accessible to the public from those which are located on private property. Perhaps a suffix "\$" could be used to indicate locations with an entrance fee and a suffix "~" could signify bridges on private property that can be examined only by trespassing. A "romantic shelter" with only a letter then would be accessible in a public park or adjacent to a public road, while those with a suffix would require paying for or asking for permission to see them.

The origin of the numbering system was published in the Spring 1998 issue of *Bridges & Byways*, the publication of the Ohio Historic Bridge Association. The suffix system was first devised for the 1985 NSPCB covered bridge safari in western Ohio and eastern Indiana by Dr. James E. Reinoehl. Updates to reflect changes made in the 2009 *World Guide to Covered Bridges* were made by Bill Caswell.