

Laura A. Macaluso, Ph.D.

Independent Scholar

The Bridge in Antebellum America:

**Natural Bridge in Virginia and
Ithiel Town's Lattice Bridge in Connecticut**

This paper examines the ways in which bridges have been used as identity markers for two distinct areas of the United States during the long nineteenth century, an era of great social and technological change. Of interest to this investigation are the ways in which Americans assigned cultural identity markers to bridges, utilizing two bridges, one—a natural bridge in the southern states—and the other, an invented bridge form in the north states, and how each area of the country found characteristics in these bridges that marked them in some way, from tourism, to memory, to geographic identity.



Natural Bridge in central Virginia, along the Blue Ridge Mountains, began to take shape as a site of significance as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Most Americans lived east of the Appalachian Mountains, and land was continually under survey to understand its potential for growth and use. One of the surveyors who first measured Natural Bridge was none other than George Washington, the future general and president of a new country. Washington, from Virginia himself surveyed the area in 1750, before leaving for his first military experiences fighting for the King's Army in the French & Indian War. Later, another president of the young country, Thomas Jefferson, purchased Natural Bridge, calling it the “most sublime of Nature's works.”

While the southern states continued their agricultural expansion, growing by the leaps and bounds after the American Revolution and pushing westward, northern states were becoming industrialized. New Haven, Connecticut, a small city on the Atlantic seaboard halfway between New York City and Boston was one of these burgeoning places of industrial might, which began in earnest with the invention of the cotton gin and later the interchangeable gun manufactory lead by Eli Whitney, called the Father of American Invention. In this atmosphere of education and invention, came architect Ithiel Town. He moved to New Haven and there invented and patented the lattice bridge (sometimes called the Truss Bridge) in 1820.

This paper then looks at the “invention” of the bridge in antebellum American culture, which is reflective of the qualities and characteristics each part of the young country shaped for itself, an identity born of place and people.