

STATE-LEVEL RECORDATION

Matoaka Bridge No. 2

BARS No. 28A019

MC-1929

Location: WV 10 over Widemouth Creek at Matoaka, Mercer County, West Virginia

USGS *Matoaka, West Virginia*, Quadrangle. The bridge is located at UTM zone 17S, 478360.41 (Easting) and 4141158.79 (Northing). This coordinate represents the center of the bridge at mid-span. The coordinate was obtained on 8 November 2018 using Google Earth software.

Date of Construction: 1949

Engineer/Builder: Acme Construction Company, Oak Hill, West Virginia.

Present Owner: West Virginia Department of Transportation, Division of Highways
Building 5
1900 Kanawha Boulevard East
Charleston, West Virginia 25305

Present Use: Vehicular Bridge

Significance: In 2013, the West Virginia bridge survey determined that Matoaka Bridge No. 2 was not eligible for National Register listing. However, the bridge does contribute to the Matoaka Historic District (MC-1927), which is eligible for National Register listing.

Project Information: The project has been undertaken due to the poor condition of the bridge. Any future deterioration of the bridge would result in its closure. The existing bridge warrants replacement. This documentation was undertaken in October 2018 in accordance with a Memorandum of Agreement among the West Virginia Division of Highways, West Virginia State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Federal Highway Administration. These measures are required prior to replacement of this structure.

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November 2018

Summary Description of the Bridge and Setting

Matoaka Bridge No. 2 carries West Virginia Route 10 over Widemouth Creek in the community of Matoaka, Mercer County. The bridge is located approximately 20 feet southwest of the WV 10 and CR 10/11 (Old Matoaka Road) intersection at the southern edge of the community's commercial district. A church stands adjacent to the bridge. The bridge is a single span, wide-flange, steel stringer beam bridge. Acme Construction Company built Matoaka No. 2 Bridge for the West Virginia Highway Department in 1949. A disused railroad bridge of the Norfolk & Western Railway's Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) crosses Widemouth Creek upstream of Matoaka Bridge No. 2. The span length of Matoaka Bridge No. 2 is approximately 66 feet with an overall bridge length of 72 feet. Reinforced, full-height, concrete breast walls and abutments standing on stone foundations support the bridge deck. The deck is reinforced concrete with an asphalt overlay. The roadway width is approximately 33 feet, curb to curb, and a sidewalk, approximately five feet wide, flanks the westbound travel lane of the bridge.

Technological and Historical Significance

Matoaka Bridge No. 2 lacks individual historical significance and distinguished engineering. It has been determined not eligible for National Register listing. However, it contributes to the Matoaka Historic District (MC-1927). The bridge was built as part of a corridor improvement and re-alignment of WV 10 in the late 1940s and early 1950s, utilizing standard highway bridge design. As such, the bridge lacks innovative engineering and noteworthy design. It does not represent the master work of a recognized figure of note in American bridge engineering.

Historical Background

History of Matoaka

Prior to the arrival of the coal industry, the area relied on subsistence agriculture (McGehee 2013). By the late 1890s, the upper Widemouth Creek area contained a school, a bridge, and a post office, located at the confluence of Lefthand Fork of Widemouth Creek and Righthand Fork of Widemouth Creek. Matoaka dates from 1904, when the Norfolk & Western Railway, Bluestone Branch, began shipment of coal from local mines.

The Norfolk & Western Railway reached Pocahontas, Tazewell County, Virginia, in 1883 via the East River valley (New River Division). Immediately, railway executives began planning further expansion to the "... Bluestone River, near Pocahontas, which will without doubt offer their product for transportation during the year 1884" (*The North American*, 1884). With a connection to the New River Division at Bluestone Junction, the Bluestone Branch began hauling coal from mines within the Bluestone River drainage near Bramwell.

The Pocahontas Coal & Coke Company, a real estate corporation established in circa 1901 by the Norfolk & Western Railway, purchased mineral rights from land owners along Widemouth Creek, laying the foundation for regional economic and social transformation (National Park Service 1993: 52-53; Bailey

2010; Frey 2016). The Matoaka Land & Improvement Company, created by investors from Giles and Montgomery Counties, Virginia, significantly changed Matoaka. In 1903, the Matoaka Land & Improvement Company received its corporate charter from West Virginia (Mercer County Courthouse, Princeton, West Virginia [MCC] 1903: Record Book 49:235), and it acquired its first tracts of land from two local families, the Walkers and the DeQuasies (MCC 1903: Deed Book [DB] 47:189 and 442) through a trustee that same year. The company deeded land to Norfolk & Western Railway in July 1903 for Bluestone Branch right of way (MC-1926) through the planned town (Norfolk & Western Railway, 1903: 15 July). Intensification of coal field development and timber extraction around Matoaka occurred by 1907 as the Virginian Railway entered the town.

A fire in 1907 destroyed much of Matoaka's emerging business district (Lilly, 2012; Maxey and Adallis, 1985: 24; *Princeton Times*, 1966; *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1969: 14). The town was quickly reconstructed and grew through the next decade. The Matoaka Milling & Grocery Company began operation in 1907 and the Matoaka Opera House purchased building lots in 1911. Residential homes were built on Mercer Avenue, a school house was built, and a wholesale grocery store was built by Lewis, Hubbard & Company "on the railroad front". A resident doctor built a "\$10,000 business house at the corner of Bridge and Barger Streets," and, according to *The Daily Telegraph* (1911), "The Matoaka Power Company has its power and light plant almost complete." The town incorporated in 1912. The Matoaka Water Works purchased lots in 1913. The Matoaka Building and Loan Association was active at this time. By the end of the 1920s, town businesses included a newspaper, a jewelry store, a feed store, numerous general merchandise stores, a drug store, a café, and a handful of grocery stores. There were three hotels and four churches in town. Both the Virginian Railway and the Norfolk & Western Railway built stations at Matoaka, which had become the commercial, retail, and service center for coal camps in the Widemouth Creek drainage (McGehee 2013; MCC 1907: DB 65:29; 1911: DB 82:130; 1913: DB 93:277, 385; Maxey and Adallis 1985: 24; *Princeton Times* 1966; *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* 1969: 14; Harvey 2018). Growth and development continued until the late 1940s.

Matoaka Bridge No. 2 relates to construction improvements that realigned traffic patterns in Matoaka beginning in 1948. The West Virginia highway department upgrades included construction of a new roadway on the bank of Widemouth Creek opposite Old Matoaka Road (CR 10/11), replacement of an existing Pratt type pony truss bridge (see Figure 1) over Widemouth Creek (MC-1378) at First Avenue, and construction of a new bridge (MC-1929) at Old Matoaka Road adjacent to Norfolk & Western Railway Bridge No. 2309 over Widemouth Creek in 1949. The project widened First Avenue between the two bridges by acquiring right of way between rear property lines on the southeast side of Barger Street and the Bluestone Branch (MC-1926). First Avenue, therefore, drew through-traffic away from Barger Street, the town's main commercial thoroughfare. The new alignment then proceeded eastward along Second Avenue, which is closed presently, between the school and the creek. A section of Riverside Drive between Mercer Avenue and First Avenue was also vacated.

The period from 1918 to 1952 marked an interval of general prosperity in this region, a trend identified in the Coal Heritage study by the National Park Service. The global crisis created by World War II stimulated a final boom for the regional coal industry. Following World War II, the economic activity of Matoaka mirrored the pronounced downturn of the wider coal industry in southern West Virginia. The region's constricted reliance on mining and the lack of manufacturing jobs inhibited a diversification of the local economy. The Bank of Matoaka closed and moved to Princeton in 1958. Indicative of the

sluggish coal markets, the Virginian Railway and the Norfolk & Western Railway merged in 1959. Passenger service to Matoaka ended in 1953. Economic insecurity heightened racial protests in Matoaka when the county schools began desegregation in 1956. In the 1960s, increased mechanization of mining, advances in surface mining, alternative fuels, and decreasing profit margins led to declines in employment in the underground mines (NPS 1993: 14-17, 20, 54; Maxey and Adallis 1985: 24; MCC 1958: DB 363:274; Hawkins 2010; McGehee 2013).

In the late 1960s, newspapers, sensing the town's loss of vitality and relevance, commemorated its glory days with retrospective articles. Permanent mine closures began in 1975. Arista, Piedmont, Wenonah, and Lamar mines closed at that time. A fatal fire in the business district destroyed a hotel in 1973. Freight service on the Bluestone Branch ended in 1984. By 2001, abandoned buildings blighted the town. A major fire in 2014 destroyed five buildings along Barger Street. Lastly, the town council recently began the legal process of dis-incorporation due to financial difficulties and sanitary problems with the antiquated municipal water supply system (*Princeton Times* 1966; *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* 1969: 14; Vorhees 1973; Mathews 1975; Hawkins 2010; DellaMea 2018; Toler 2018: A-1; Jordan 2018).

History of Acme Construction Company

In 1946, John M. Francesa and Basil F. Whitney incorporated the Acme Construction Company in Oak Hill. Both men had business experience as road contractors in Charleston prior to forming the partnership. Francesa included his daughters, Gloria King and Libby Anderson, as directors of the company. Francesa's daughter Doris Tina Francesa served as secretary-treasurer of the company (Polk 1949). Whitney also owned construction and concrete businesses in Welch and a coal business in Beckley. Francesa was a road contractor who had his own business located in Fayetteville. Separately, their companies won various contracts from the state highway department for a range of work including culvert construction, bridge construction, concrete foundation pours, and local road construction in the 1940s and 1950s (*Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1945: 5; *Charleston Daily Mail*, 1945: 16; *Bluefield Daily Telegraph*, 1949: 6; *The Raleigh Register*, 1950: 6; *The Sunday Register*, 1953: 1; *The Raleigh Register*, 1957, 3).

Through the Acme Construction Company, Whitney and Francesa expanded their business. The company received numerous paving contracts for county roads in 1947 (*Beckley Post-Herald*, 1947: 1). In 1951, the Raleigh County Memorial Airport hired the company to pave the runway, taxi apron, automobile parking areas, access road, curbs, gutter, and sidewalks at the airport (*The Raleigh Register*, 1951: 1). Not all of their work was praised. For example, the Beckley city engineer criticized the company for "thin paving" and "imperfections in several driveway projects" in 1951 (*Beckley Post-Herald*, 1951: 5). Whitney died at age 47 in Beckley in 1953, and his obituary noted that due to "the low prices he quoted for the work, many Raleigh County schools were able to afford blacktopped playgrounds" (*The Sunday Register*, 1953: 1). Following Whitney's death, the company built an asphalt preparation plant at Skelton to supply the local road construction and paving industry (*Beckley Post-Herald*, 1958: 12). The company continued to win numerous paving contracts from the state highway department. In 1958, a newspaper article noted that the company manufactured blacktop paving and concrete, employed approximately 30 workers, and operated a fleet of twelve concrete hauling trucks and fifteen blacktop trucks. "The firm deals in road construction but also has poured the concrete

foundations for the Beckley Memorial Hospital, Bluestone Dam, and the Raleigh County Memorial Airport, in addition to working on streets in and around Beckley” (*The Raleigh Register*, 1958:1; *Beckley Post-Herald*, 1951: 5). In the late 1950s and 1960s, the company found itself in conflicts with organized labor. Unionized workers struck and picketed the company in 1957, 1961, and 1967. The 1967 labor dispute involved destruction of company property. Unidentified suspects, according to police, used dynamite to destroy the company’s asphalt plant at Skelton (*The Raleigh Register*, 1957: 1; 1961: 2; *Beckley Post-Herald*, 1957: 12; 1967: 8).

John Francesa, at age 72, died in Fayetteville on 29 November 1965. Various obituaries described him as a native of Italy and a road contractor, as well as president of the Acme Construction Company. As a contractor, he also participated in the construction of Kanawha Boulevard, Skyline Drive, and Blue Ridge Parkway, in addition to the aforementioned projects (*Beckley Post-Herald*, 1965: 4; *The Raleigh Register*, 1965: 3; *Charleston Daily Mail*, 1965: 6). His daughter Doris Tina Francesa operated the family business following her father’s death and managed the 1967 strike. In 2008, she died at age 80 (*Beckley Register-Herald*, 2008).

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FIGURE 1



Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) bridge and part of Matoaka, circa 1920, courtesy of the Mercer County Historical Society.

MATOAKA BRIDGE NO. 2
(West Virginia State Bridge No. 28-010/00-006.91)
Final State-Level Recordation

STATE-LEVEL RECORDATION
INDEX TO PHOTOGRAPHS

Name of Property: Matoaka Bridge No. 2, MC-1929
City or Vicinity: Matoaka
County: Mercer
State: West Virginia
Name of Photographer: Matthew G. Hyland, Ph.D.
Date of Photographs: 17-18 October 2018
Location of Original Digital Files: TRC Engineering, Inc. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Photograph 1. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, through view of spandrel parapet walls, newel posts, and First Avenue travel lanes, facing northeast.

Photograph 2. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, through view of First Avenue toward Barger Street commercial area, parapets, newel posts, sidewalk, and travel lanes, facing north.

Photograph 3. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, Arista Mountain Road, facing southwest at newel post on upstream side of the bridge.

Photograph 4. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, from Old Matoaka Road, abandoned railroad bridge of the Bluestone Branch (MC-1926), spandrel parapet wall, and The Bridge Baptist Church (MC-0132) in the background, facing northwest toward Bailey Street.

Photograph 5. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) rails, and Bridge No. 2903, facing southwest.

Photograph 6. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, downstream view from Bailey Street Bridge and The Bridge Baptist Church (MC-0132), facing south of southeast.

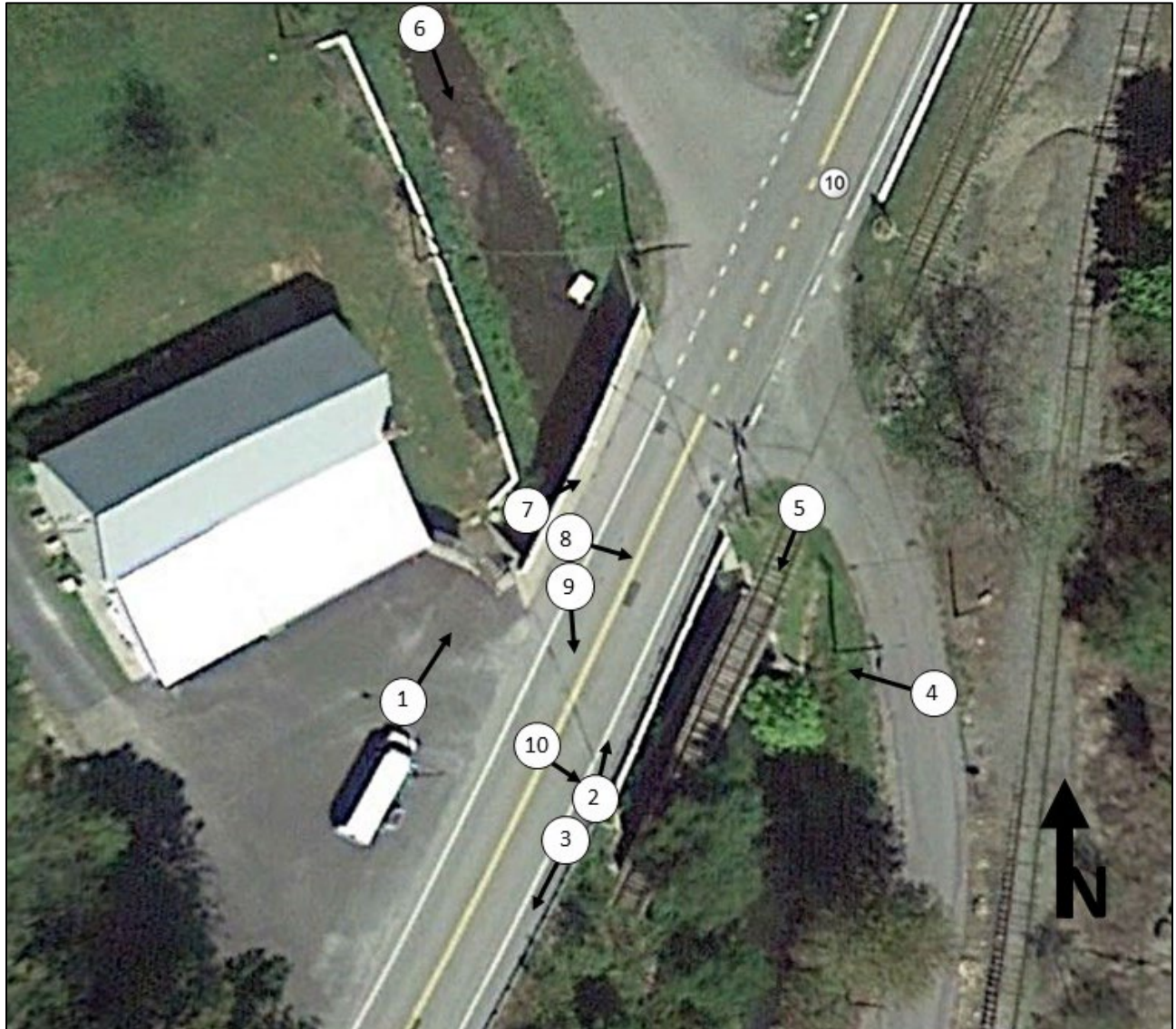
Photograph 7. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers, braces, abutment, underside of deck, and Widemouth Creek, facing northeast.

Photograph 8. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers, braces, abutment, adjacent Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) Bridge No. 2903, and Widemouth Creek, facing northeast.

Photograph 9. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers and bracing at south abutment, facing southeast.

Photograph 10. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of bridge builder's plaque, facing southeast.

PHOTOGRAPH KEY





Photograph 1. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, through view of spandrel parapet walls, newel posts, and First Avenue travel lanes, facing northeast.



Photograph 2. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, through view of First Avenue toward Barger Street commercial area, parapets, newel posts, sidewalk, and travel lanes, facing north.



Photograph 3. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, Arista Mountain Road, facing southwest at newel post on upstream side of the bridge.



Photograph 4. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, from Old Matoaka Road, dis-used railroad bridge of the Bluestone Branch (MC-1926), spandrel parapet wall, and The Bridge Baptist Church (MC-0132) in the background, facing northwest toward Bailey Street.



Photograph 5. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, and Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) rails and Bridge No. 2903, facing southwest.



Photograph 6. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, downstream view from Bailey Street Bridge, The Bridge Baptist Church (MC-0132), facing south of southeast.



Photograph 7. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers, braces, abutment, underside of deck, and Widemouth Creek, facing northeast.



Photograph 8. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers, braces, abutment, adjacent Bluestone Branch (MC-1926) Bridge No. 2903, and Widemouth Creek, facing northeast.



Photograph 9. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of steel stringers and bracing at south abutment, facing southeast.



Photograph 10. Matoaka Bridge No. 2, view of bridge builder's plaque, facing southeast.