Two of six interpretive bridge plaques I created for the city of Folsom

Bridge Facts

First dedicated in Folsom:
February 22, 1893

Dismantled and relocated to Siskiyou County: 1931

Rebuilt in Folsom: 1999-2000

Rededicated: April 15, 2000

1893 contractor:
San Francisco Bridge Co.

1999-2000 contractor:
Younger General Contractors

Type of structure:
Pennsylvania petit truss

Material used:
Steel with wood floor

Length of bridge: 330 feet

Width of road: 12 feet

Height above the water: 55 feet

Do you know?

Steel trusses were popular river crossings in the late 19th century. Truss bridges are anchored to the ground only at the ends – the steel beams interlink to support one another and keep the bridge aloft. The stone abutments that hold the ends of the Folsom truss bridge are original but they have been reinforced.

The Pennsylvania petit truss is a rare variation used for longer spans. When the Folsom truss bridge was built in 1893, it was by far the longest bridge of its type in the state. By 1999, no more than six such bridges remained in California, and Folsom's was the oldest.

Finest highway span on the Pacific Coast

That's how engineers described the Folsom Historic Truss Bridge when it was first built here in 1893. They predicted it would last more than 100 years — and they were right.

About 60 percent of the truss bridge is original. Some of the century-old steel beams were refurbished to meet current safety codes and others were replaced.

The signs at the portals aren't original, but they are exact copies of the ones that greeted travelers in 1893.

Look around you: The steel pieces that make this interpretive area distinctive are unused beams from the 1893 truss bridge.

The floor is new but it looks like the original. The old floor was timber planks. This floor is two crisscross layers of manufactured wood.

Folsom's newest bridge — or its oldest?

The Folsom Historic Truss Bridge was first built in 1893 to replace a cable bridge that had mysteriously fallen into the river. Ranchers welcomed the new bridge as a sturdy crossing for their cattle, and farmers north of the river used it to haul produce to the Folsom train depot. After Rainbow Bridge opened in 1919, the truss was abandoned, and in 1931 the state of California moved it to the Klamath River in Siskiyou County. When Siskiyou replaced the bridge in the 1990s, Folsom brought it home. It was rebuilt as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing and is now a popular link to local and regional trails.

Solving a problem: Getting the bridge across the river

The 1893 truss was built on a temporary support "bridge" in the river. By the 1990s, the river bottom had been so heavily quarried, it could no longer hold a structure.

The 20th-century truss was lifted across the river using a shipbuilding technique — a 140-foot tower with cables rigged to the corners of the bridge. It worked like this:

The bridge and tower were built on the south shore. A hydraulic jack pushed them on runners to the water's edge. The tower cables lifted the bridge over the water to runners on the other side, and the bridge was pushed into place.

Bridge Facts

Bridge opened: Feb. 10, 1919

Contractor: Ross Construction Co.

Cost of construction: $74,940

Type of structure:
Open-spandrel arch

Type of material used:
Steel-reinforced concrete

Length of bridge: 511 feet

Length of arch span: 209 feet

Width of bridge: 31 feet

Height above the water: 70 feet

Weight of arch: 4 million pounds

Do you know?

When it opened in 1919, Rainbow Bridge was officially known as the American River Bridge at Folsom and informally called simply "the bridge." In the early 1950s, a Folsom resident suggested to a Sutter Street shopkeeper that the more descriptive designation be used on postcards. The name immediately took hold, and the picturesque crossing, with its rainbow-shaped arches, has been Rainbow Bridge ever since.

Rainbow Bridge was the second concrete arch bridge in Folsom to be designed by county surveyor Drury Miller. Miller also drew the plans for the smaller Figueroa Street bridge, which opened in 1916.

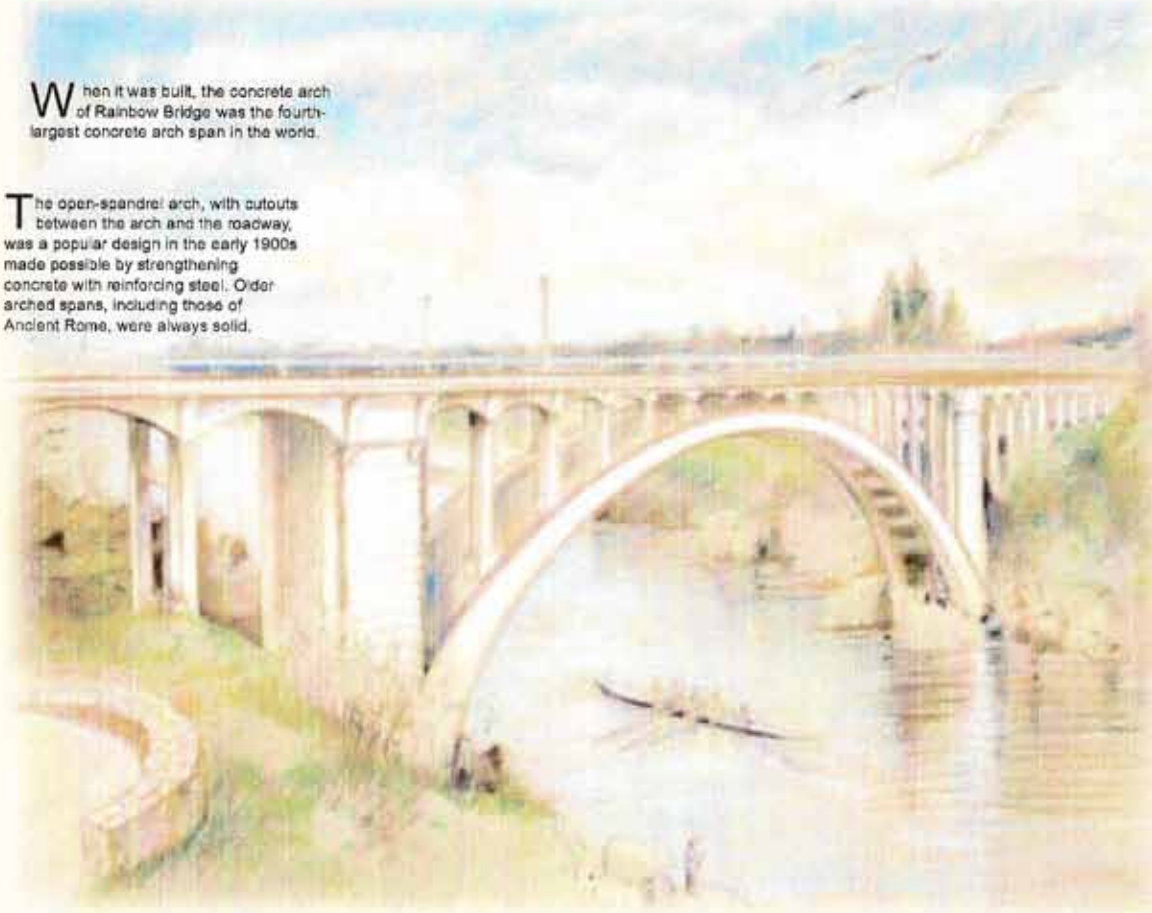
In the year Rainbow Bridge opened, 1919, the state raised its maximum speed limit to 35 mph.

A rainbow rising out of solid rocks

In 1918, when Rainbow Bridge was going up amid granite outcroppings, *The Folsom Telegraph* described the structure as "rising apparently out of solid rocks." It still looks that way today.

When it was built, the concrete arch of Rainbow Bridge was the fourth-largest concrete arch span in the world.

The open-spandrel arch, with cutouts between the arch and the roadway, was a popular design in the early 1900s made possible by strengthening concrete with reinforcing steel. Older arched spans, including those of Ancient Rome, were always solid.



A bridge meant for tourists

Sacramento County had big plans for Rainbow Bridge when it opened it 1919. The graceful structure with its distinctive concrete arch was to be the final link in a "40-mile loop ... through some of the richest agricultural lands in the state." County officials predicted the pastoral drive between Sacramento and Folsom "was destined to become famous" as a tourist attraction. The route followed Greenback Lane on the north and Folsom Boulevard on the south. Those roads no longer lure sightseers, but Rainbow Bridge is still one of the most photographed spots on the American River.

Look above you: In spring and summer, the skies fill with cliff swallows darting about to catch flying insects. These little gray birds, the famed species of San Juan Capistrano, live in mud nests under the eaves of the bridge. Each nest contains nearly 1,000 tiny "bricks" of mud.

Rainbow Bridge was part of highway history

For one year, in 1927, Rainbow Bridge was part of the historic Lincoln Highway, the first coast-to-coast route in the United States. By 1915, the Lincoln Highway reached from New York City to San Francisco. It divided in Nevada to circle Lake Tahoe – roughly following today's Highway 50 and Interstate 80 – and became one road again in Sacramento. In 1927, the route was altered to cross Rainbow Bridge and rejoin at Greenback Lane. The Lincoln Highway designation was removed in 1928 when the federal government began numbering its highways.