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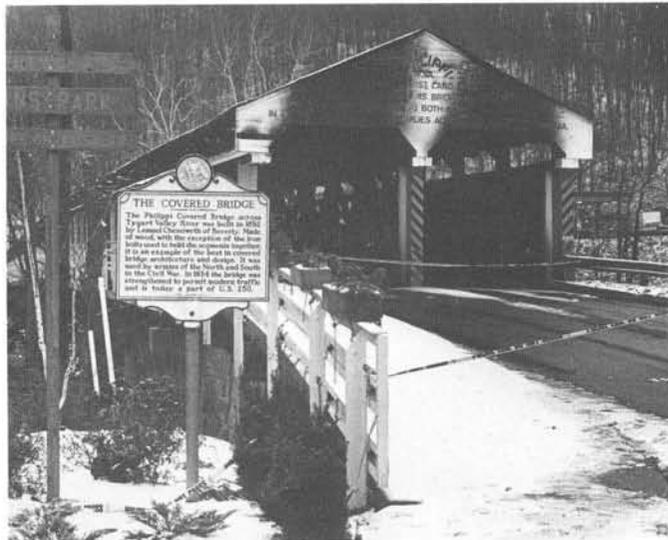
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1852 Philippi Bridge uncovered, charred in bizarre blaze



Top left: The Feb. 2 blaze, here consuming the siding and roof. Top right: The charred remnants. Left: The east portal, before. Bottom left: The east portal, after. Bottom right: The bridge in happier days, Sept. 1982. Lars Byrne photos courtesy The Barbour Democrat, Philippi.



Built in 1852 across Tygart's Valley River in W.Va., the Philippi Covered Bridge is a two-span, 276'-long, double-barrel Burr arch truss. It is the work of Lemuel Chenoweth, prolific builder of covered bridges in the state. It is the site of one of the first skirmishes of the Civil War on June 3, 1861. In his *Great American Bridge & Dams* (Preservation Press, 1988), Donald Jackson [SIA] notes that, given the bridge's strategic location, it is remarkable that it survived the Civil War unburned.

The bridge's luck ran out on Feb. 2, when a disastrous fire destroyed the original siding and the modern roof structure. The main trusses, which are the essence of a covered bridge, were badly charred.

The fire had an unusual origin. A gasoline tank-truck overfilled the storage tank of a nearby service station, causing over 1,000 gals. of gasoline to flood onto the bridge. The catalytic converter of a passing automobile ignited the gasoline and set the wooden bridge ablaze.

Because of its historic significance, and the fact that it is perhaps the most visited historic structure in W.Va., it was decided to rebuild the bridge, retaining as much of its original elements as possible, and to restore it to its condition in 1861. Emory Kemp, SIA president, has been appointed by the W.Va. Dept. of Highways to take charge of this rebuilding.

The work will include a cleaning of the charred main structural members, preparation of measured drawings, an evaluation system for repair or replacement of main members, an analysis of the strength of the fire-damaged trusses, and the design of the siding, roof structure, and other components. The U.S. Forest Service is providing the yellow poplar from the Monongahela Natl. Forest, and the W.Va. Hardwood Producers Assn. will prepare the siding and roof sheathing. A substantial part of the rebuilding costs is expected to be covered by insurance.

