

The Bridge Builders: J. A. Britton (and Sons)

(Information was extracted from George Gould's Indiana Covered Bridges Thru the Years for the following)

Joseph Albert Britton was born in 1839 in a log cabin east of Rockville, Indiana, and spent most of his life in Parke County. He learned the trade of carpentry from his father.

In 1862, Britton enlisted in the local infantry and was rushed to Kentucky. There, he and his company, surrounded in their first skirmish, were captured and became prisoners of war. After the war, Britton read law and was admitted to the Indiana and Kansas bars. But life as a lawyer did not appeal to him and he returned to Rockville in 1870 where he again took up carpentry and primarily built house until 1879, when he began to work on the construction of bridges.

In 1882, he obtained his first contract; the scenic Narrows bridge. This was the first bridge in a career that would last four decades.

Britton had eight sons and four daughters. Several of the sons were involved in bridge building: son Edgar worked on one; son Lawrence assisted with three; and son Charlton assisted on several more. Eugene Britton was active with his father and in 1915 contracted on his won the construction of the Bowsher Ford bridge in Parke County.

The early Britton bridges were not as well constructed as the later ones. It is possible that he worked for Daniels before going into business on his won, but no documentation has been found as to whether the two Rockville men were friends, though doubtless, they knew each other and competed against each other for contracts after 1882.

In general, Britton built short, one span bridges. Only two, two-span bridges are known. Britton, like Daniels, preferred the Burr Arch truss. Britton used the arch even in short fifty and sixty foot spans. Two exceptions are the Phillips and Weisner's Brook spans in Parke County, both 43 feet long.

Both builders used similar woods, timber sizes, and panel construction, but Britton used metal tensioning rods in all structures. Daniels only in his later bridges. Daniels, however, experimented more and adapted more to new ideas. At first glance, it was and remains difficult to tell the work of the two apart except for the outline of the portal opening. Daniels used a slightly curved top to the opening. The Britton structures used a flat top opening with the outer edges sharply angled at about 130 degrees , to meet the side panels. Through the years, many of both builders' bridges have been damaged, repaired and modified so that few retain their original outline.

Following are the standing bridges in Indiana believed to have been built by J.A. Britton:

- Sanitarium
- McAlister
- Harry Evans
- Marshall
- Boshier Ford
- Cox Ford

- Zacke Cox
- Mecca
- Sim Smith
- Phillips
- Melcher
- Leatherwood

- Narrows
- Cornstalk
- Rolling
Stone
- Hills-Baker
Camp
- Dunbar