

The Bridge Builders: Kennedy Family

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

Three generations of the Kennedy family built covered bridges in southeastern Indiana from 1870 to 1918 and are credited with having construction fifty-eight (58) structures; perhaps even more if some of those on the list where the contractor is not known were also built by this prolific bridge building family.

Archibald McMichael Kennedy was the first of the builders. He was born August 25, 1818 in Guilford County, North Carolina. He moved with his family to Indiana in 1918 first settling in Fayette County, then later in Rush County.

A.M. Kennedy began working as a carpenter in in 1841 which trade he followed for twelve (12) years. He moved his family to Wabash County in 1853 where he began to supplement his work with the construction of small bridges. He returned to Rush County in 1864 and it was in 1870 that he received his first contract to build a two-span covered bridge over the east fork of the Whitewater River near Dunlapville in Union County. This bridge was removed 100 years later because of the construction of the Brookville dam. Before one span of it could be saved and moved to a park, vandals set it afire.

In 1871, Archibald and his son Emmett, now involved in the business, built their only bridge outside Indiana; a 150-foot span over Seven Mile Creek in Butler County, Ohio. They continued from that time to build numerous bridges over southeastern Indiana creeks and rivers and another son, Charles, came into the business until 1883 when Archibald was elected to the Indiana Legislature as a State Senator and turned the bridge building firm over to his two sons, Emmett and Charles.

Most Kennedy bridges were built with the Burr Arch Truss, and a 42 inch hand carved model of the truss made by Emmett Kennedy in 1872 can be seen in the Rush County Historical Society Museum in Rushville. This model was used for much more than show. It was used in presentations to county commissioners to explain the strength and advantages of the Kennedy bridge because most commissioners didn't know the difference in trusses. To demonstrate the strength of the truss, even in miniature form, the 250 pound Archibald would place the model between two chairs and then stand on it. The Kennedy family usually got the contract.



A. M. Kennedy

from Ron Branson's collection



E. L. Kennedy

*from a photo provided by granddaughter
Mrs. Byron Benson, to George Gould for
[Indiana Covered Bridges Thru the years](#)*

The peak production years for Kennedy bridges were 1881 thru 1884 when they built at least twenty-three (23). Then, competition from iron bridges reduced contracts to only six (6) in the next eight (8) years. Emmett temporarily retired after completing his famous Vine Street Bridge in Shelbyville in 1892. He continued to build houses and barns and make repairs to wooden bridges.

During a big flood in 1913, five bridges in Franklin County were either damaged or swept away. Emmett came out of retirement and he and son Karl built a two-span replacement for the Long bridge near Metamora in 1914 for \$13, 285. Then in 1916, Emmett with sons Karl and Charles R. received a contract for the last covered bridge built in Rush County, the 150-foot Norris Ford bridge, and in 1917-18, the last Kennedy bridge was built in Wayne County.

Most Kennedy bridges were single spans, although six (6) two-span, three (3) three-span, and one (1) four-span were also built by the Kennedy family. They built four (4) village-type bridges where the structure had walkways on either side of the roadway. Two were built in Rushville, one in Connorsville, and the aforementioned Vine Street bridge in Shelbyville. The Kennedy family considered the one in Connorsville their most outstanding structure.

In 1965, the last surviving member of the Kennedy builders, Karl, gave George Gould some interesting bits of information. He said the timbers for arch members were usually twenty-two (22) to twenty-four (24) feet long or the length necessary to cover two (2) panels. They were about 24 inches wide and cut with a saw to fit the curve of the arch. At the start of an arch, one timber on the left of the truss would cover one panel and the timber on the right would cover two panels. Thus the joints would always be alternating and never opposite. The butts to the arch had four to six feet of oak attached to the pine and were heavier and larger. This oak, fitted to set on the masonry, resisted decay better than pine. The Posts or Verticals were set at equal distances apart, either 8 or 10 feet, depending on the length of the bridge, and the struts or diagonals slanted outward from the center. As the panels reached the centerpost, the slant of the struts was reversed. Bolts were used in all structures to fasten the arch to the posts and diagonals.

The time required to complete a bridge depended upon the length, the location, and the difficulties encountered. For example, the contract for the Vine Street bridge was signed December 23, 1891 and called for its opening on March 1 of the following year. The bridge was completed on time. The price of this structure was about \$5,000 or \$27.50 per linear foot.

Following are the Kennedy bridges still standing in Indiana today:

- Guilford
- Forsythe
- Norris Ford
- Richland Creek

- Westport
- Moscow
- Longwood

- Offutt Ford
- Crown Point
- Smith