

NEWS

Kim Varney Chandler digs up the stories of NH's covered bridges in debut book



by **Kelly Sennott** For the Monitor
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Kim Varney Chandler of Hancock recently penned "Covered Bridges of New Hampshire." Credit: Courtesy

It's more expensive to restore and maintain a covered bridge than to replace it with a steel or concrete structure. And yet, New Hampshire is still home to 60 of them, thanks to the local communities that fought to keep them alive.

Hancock resident Kim Varney Chandler chronicles the stories behind New Hampshire's covered bridges in her new book, *Covered Bridges of New Hampshire*, published by Peter E. Randall Publisher, which features her own photography and years of in-depth research.

Chandler, who grew up on the Seacoast, says the idea for the project began in 2012, when, after a decade of living in Virginia, she and her husband moved back to their home state.

“When we moved to Hancock, I had honestly only been west of Concord half a dozen times in my life. I didn’t know much about the area at all, and I’m just one of those people who needs to know more. I immediately bought all the Hancock history books – there are three – and walked around, looking at the buildings and different places in town,” Chandler said.

She was drawn in particular to the covered bridges, which felt very ‘New England’ to her. She was curious; who built these bridges, and why? And more importantly, why were they still here? Swanzey was not a very big town, and yet, it had four. Covered bridges are not inexpensive to preserve.

Chandler, a hobbyist photographer, says her original idea was to photograph all the covered bridges nearby – then, all the covered bridges in the state – but, eventually, life got in the way, and she put the project away.

In 2020, with fewer social obligations, Chandler found herself with a little more time and came back to the covered bridges. She decided to organize her notes and photos and get back to the remaining bridges with her husband and their Chocolate Lab, Pemi.

In between these visits, she reached out to engineering firms, construction companies, bridgeworks, historical societies, and talked with the experts. The deeper she dove, the more intricate the project became. Instead of just photos, what if she created a website chronicling everything she’d learned? While researching at the Historical Society of Cheshire County, its director, Alan Rumrill, suggested she write a book.

“I didn’t set out to write a book. It just sort of happened,” she said. “I’ve always loved history. I’ve always loved writing. I guess I just felt this was my chance where I could finally do something with that. Not that I couldn’t a long time ago. But I’d just never given it a lot of thought. I’m not going to say with COVID there was extra time, but it definitely made me shift in thinking about what was important and what were the things I really wanted to do.”

Chandler says one of her favorite stories in the book is about Corbin Bridge, which was built in the 1800s and lives on a Newport rural road. When, in 1993, it was mysteriously lit and burnt to the ground, the town had a choice. They could either take the insurance money, build a steel or concrete bridge and have the state take ownership, or, they could raise more money and rebuild a replica.

“It was a conflict. The town leaders and a small group of people who identified themselves as ‘bridge people’ kind of battled it out. Nobody wanted to burden the taxpayers to put in another covered bridge,” she said.

In the end, the townspeople hired Arnold Graton and his late father, who Chandler says have been forerunners in restoring and rebuilding covered bridges using 19th-century methods, to build a replica of the original. “He invited the community to come help, and the people felt part of it. They felt a sense of pride. When they talk about that bridge now, it means a lot to that town to have it there,” she said. “Those are the stories that I found amazing – these towns that fought to keep them.”

She says the story of Newport is one you'll see around the state, over and over in different variations. Some communities built roads to go around the covered bridges, keeping the original structures intact. Others enhanced them to accommodate two-way traffic.

Since its November publication, the book has been endorsed by the National Society for the Preservation of Covered Bridges, and Chandler has started a podcast about New Hampshire's covered bridges. "I just felt like I had more to say, and that other people had more to say, and I wanted to give them a space to say it," she said.

For Chandler – who, by day, is a counselor at Fall Mountain Regional High School – the aspect she enjoyed most was meeting the individuals involved in preserving these structures and becoming part of the "bridge people" community.

"It's not a complete history by any means. It's a start," she said. "I hope this book makes people stop for a minute and think about what they're looking at; to think about why that bridge is there, and to honor it and the people who worked to keep it there."

You can learn more about Chandler, her book, and her upcoming events at coveredbridgesnh.com and her podcast at podcast.coveredbridgesnh.com.

