

## The Elkader Bridges: 1853-1888

*Please note: For Elkader's 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration in 2021, Dave Beck researched and wrote a series of articles about the history of Elkader. These articles were featured in the Times-Register Newspaper and on the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Facebook page. He has kindly allowed these to be used on this website as well. Photos are courtesy of the Carter House Museum unless noted.*

A necessity for a river town like Elkader is a bridge. This is a feature we take for granted in this day and age but there was a battle in the early days over the rights of the river. Much commerce and trade was done with keel boats or steamers and the presence of a bridge or dam crossed paths with the merchant's purpose of easy navigation. Not until 1866 was the Turkey River declared by law to be non-navigable, meaning those who wanted to build bridges and dams had a greater right than the merchants who were plying the waters of the Turkey to bring goods to market.

Well before that year the founders of Elkader forged ahead anyway and put up the first bridge spanning the Turkey River. Construction on the bridge commenced in 1851, 5 years after the town was platted and named. It was completed in 1853. Up to that time citizens crossed the river on a flatboat or scow, bound from one side of the river to the other by ropes. The mill company owned the scow and employed a young man named Daniel Fay to navigate the crossing.

The first bridge was a simple wooden structure which was supported on both sides by slanted beams called bents. A description of this first bridge is given in an article in the Clayton County Herald of July 13, 1855. *The river is here about fifteen rods in width and has a wooden bridge supported by bents resting upon the solid rock which forms the bed of the stream.* By this description it appears there were no piers or abutments to support the span of the bridge.

By 1861 the bridge had deteriorated to a point where the decision was made to replace it. In March the work was well under way for a second bridge and newspaper articles later in the year describe the progress in construction of abutments and piers to offer support for the new wooden bridge. On December 19, 1861, the Clayton County Journal reported, *We are happy to announce to the public that one track of the bridge at this place is so far completed that teams can cross. On Saturday evening the main part of the east abutment was completed, and it being a moon-light night our citizens turned out en masse, and on Monday morning we noticed that the entire framework of the east span was in place and one track planked.* The old bridge was sold and used to span a slough at the north end of town near Lover's Leap.

Once again time and the elements took its toll and by April, 1870, the second wooden bridge also became rotted which necessitated replacement. An alarming report in the Clayton County Journal reported, *The other day in the company of several of our citizens we inspected the bridge spanning the Turkey River at this place and found to our surprise that the stringers were almost entirely rotted away...The bridge as it is now is positively unsafe. Those having heavy loads are warned to choose the river ford rather than the bridge.*

In June, 1870, Truesdale & Son were offered a contract to build the new bridge of

iron. On August 8 it was declared to be completed. *It is a fine looking, well built structure, and we have no doubt will give the best of satisfaction. Heavily loaded teams seem to make no impression upon it in crossing.* Yet, for all the confidence and hope put into the bridge to be long-lasting it was found to be unsafe by 1888. In June that year the board of supervisors called on Michael Tschirgi, an engineer in Dubuque, to assess the need for a new bridge. The need was found to be immediate and the board began to secure plans and specifications for another bridge.

## **The Elkader Bridges: Part 2**

By June 1888 the iron bridge which was built in 1870 was a cause for great concern and the Board of Supervisors called on Michael Tschirgi, a civil engineer in Dubuque, to inspect the bridge. His report showed the old bridge to be “faulty in design and in very poor condition to withstand the maximum load usually allowed for highway bridges and judged by the standard of the specifications for iron highway bridges it would be condemned.” With this report the supervisors made the decision to replace the bridge with a plan specifically calling for a stone structure which would be permanent and avoid the expense of yearly maintenance of replanking another iron or wooden bridge.

On June 30, 1888, the bid for erecting the bridge was given to the company of Byrnes & Blake of Dubuque for a cost of \$13,000.00. The design by Mr. Tschirgi called for a double arch structure, 204 feet in length and 30 feet wide with a 6 foot sidewalk in the interior of the bridge. By mid July the quarrymen were at work cutting the stones from the Cole quarry at the top of Lover's Leap. An August 8, 1888, article in the Elkader Register reported, “a large force of men in Cole's quarry are getting out rock for the new bridge and they are getting out some massive stones. This week they will build a temporary bridge and railroad track across the river at the quarry and dress the rock on the west side.” Whether this plan to take the stones across the river was carried out is uncertain. A road cut is still visible on the side of the hill behind the asylum showing the access to the quarry which was used to bring the stones down from the top of the hill.

It is an interesting fact in regard to the construction of the stone arch bridge that there was always access across the old iron bridge while the new stone bridge was being built, even though it was being constructed in the same place as the old bridge. Thus the inconvenience for the town was lessened. An iconic photo from October, 1888, by Elkader photographer D. C. Hale, shows the laying of the first key stone. A closer look at the photo reveals the iron bridge piers and road bed can be seen in the background of the photo.

Though the bridge was originally expected to be completed in December 1888, it took until August, 1889, to finish the work. No workman was injured in its construction but a young boy of the town who was watching the workers one day, slipped through an opening of the bridge and fell to the river below. As the Register reported, “he fortunately escaped with no damage done beyond a thorough wetting.”

The total cost of the keystone arch bridge construction was finalized at \$16,

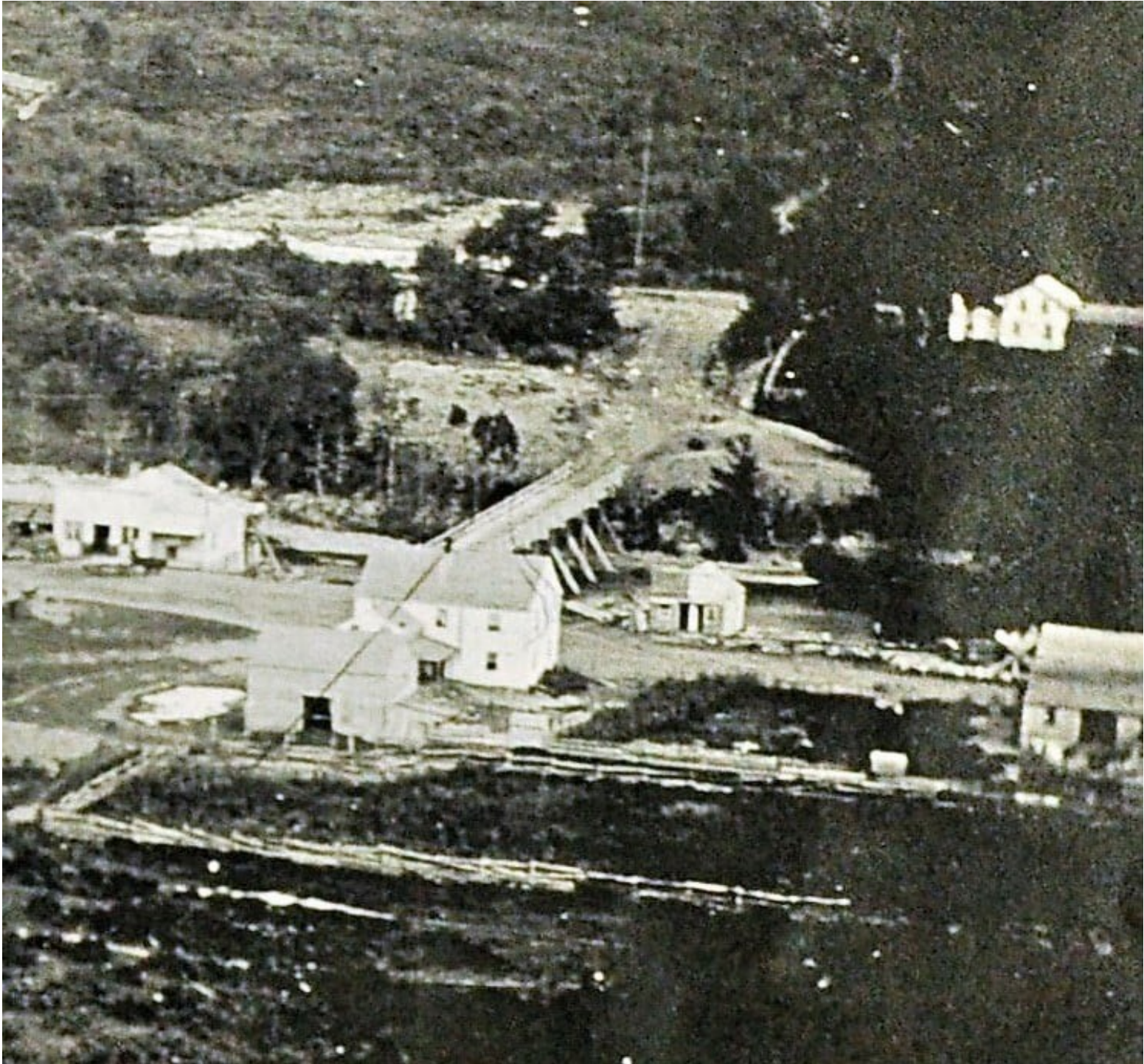
282.49. The weight is estimated at 18,618,255 pounds, equal to 9,309 tons. A stone tablet was placed at the center of the bridge on the interior of the north side containing the date of construction, names of the Board of Supervisors, engineer and contractors. The sidewalk on the north side of the bridge was built in 1924 thus freeing up the interior of the bridge to vehicle traffic. Another sidewalk on the south side of the bridge was planned but was never constructed.

Today the Keystone Arch Bridge stands as a testimony to the craftsmanship and genius of that day. A unique feature of Elkader which adds much to its charm and beauty.



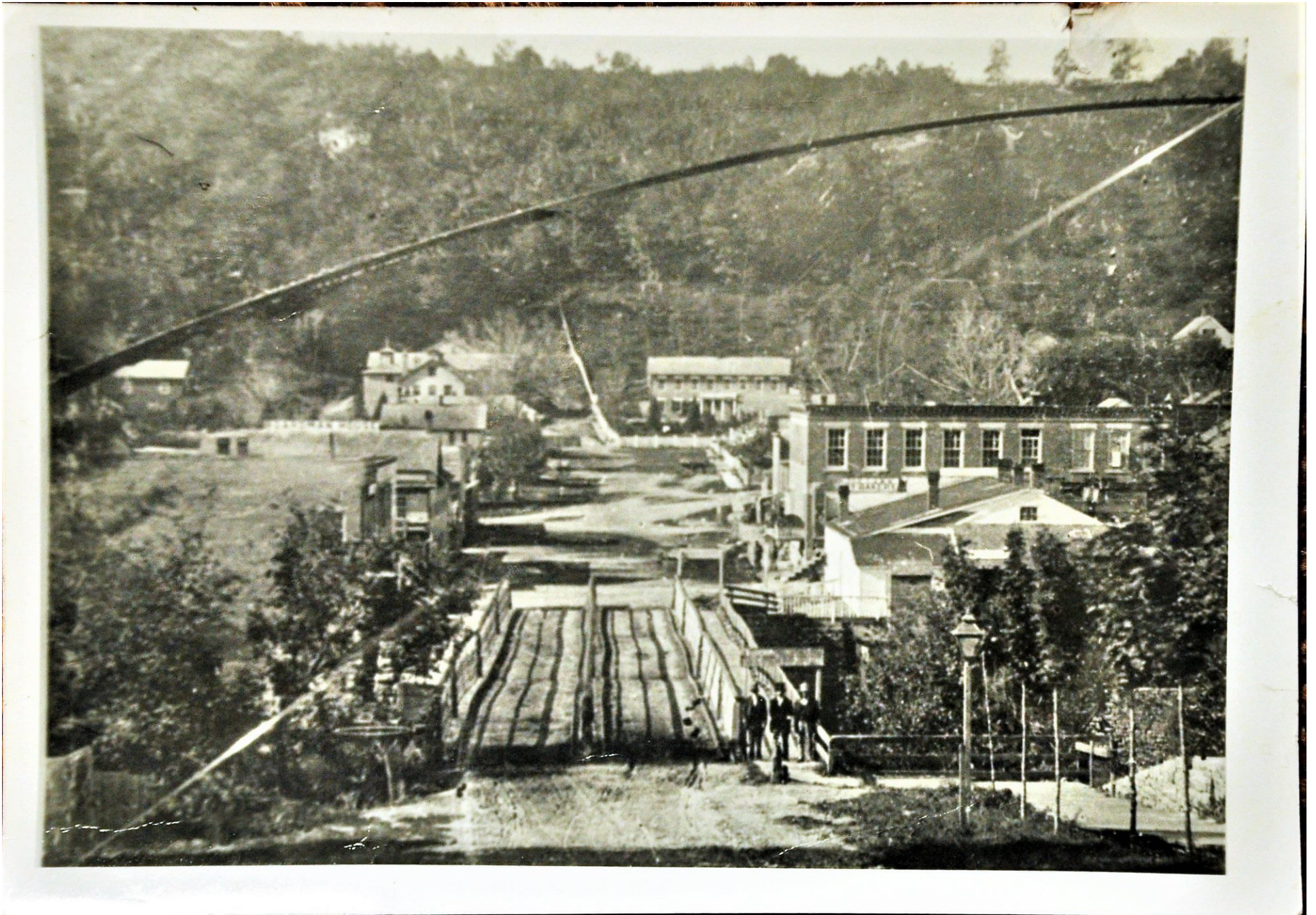
This photo was taken in the last week of October, 1888 by photographer D.C. Hale. It shows the first key stone to be placed in the west arch of the bridge. A closer look at the photo shows the old iron bridge which was built in 1870. The vertical pier in the arch was one of the supports for the iron bridge. By careful planning in construction of the key-stone arch bridge there was always access from one side of the river to the other over the old bridge.





1853 This is one of the earliest photos of Elkader. Shown at the center is the first bridge supported by slanted beams called bents.





This is a photo looking toward Kramer's hill from the area of the courthouse. It shows the iron bridge built in 1870.





This photo show the old iron bridge built in 1870 with the early courthouse in the background. The courthouse was only 1/3 of its current size until 1877.



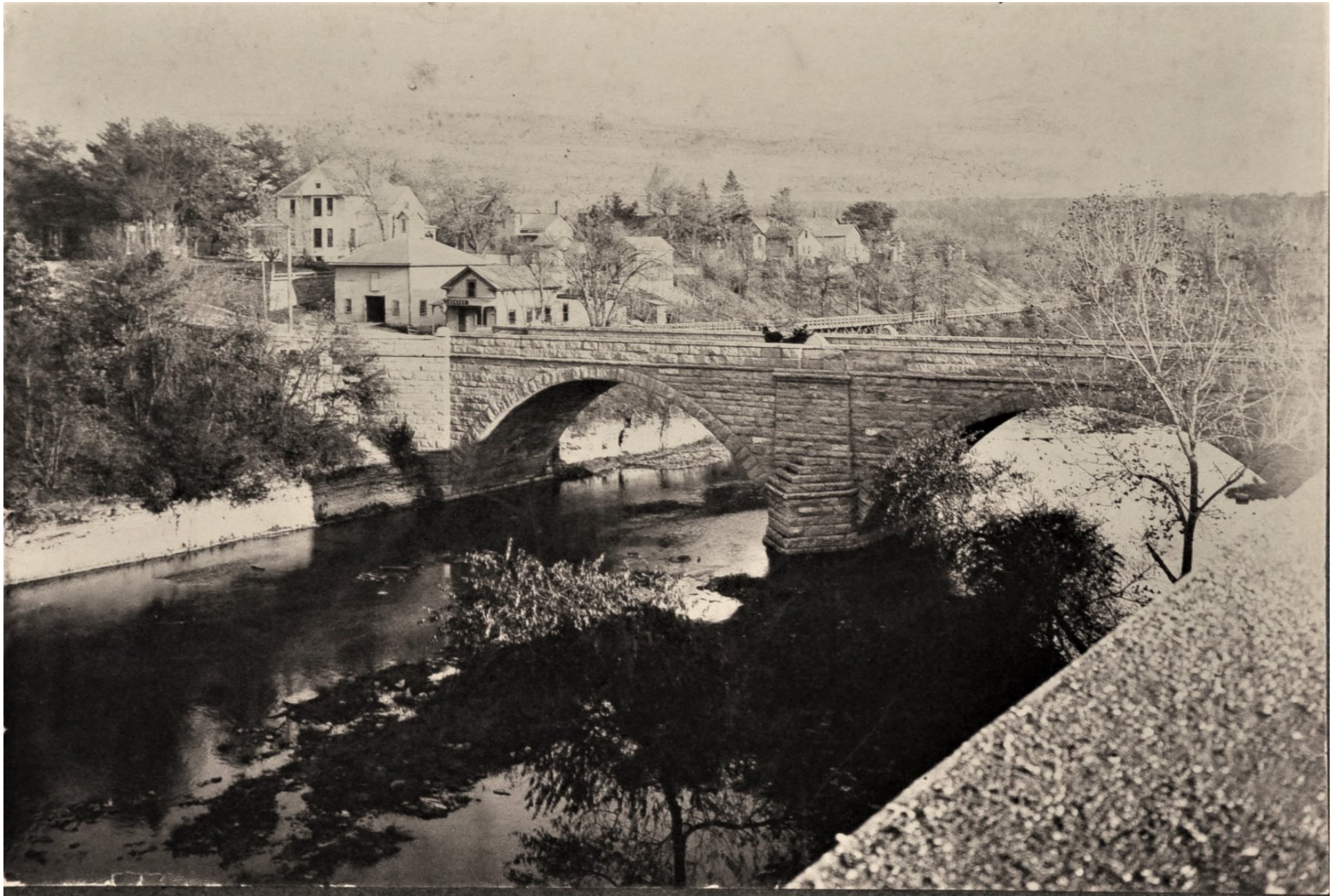
The iron bridge around 1880 with the courthouse in the background. The courthouse would not have the clock until 1896.





Taken around 1875 this photo is a side view of the iron bridge built in 1870. The mill and dam are in the background.





This photo was taken from a window of the old mill. Just off the bridge was the old laundry business and you can also see the wooden walkway to the train station leading off to the right in the photo. It was called City Steam Laundry and was owned by Joe Lamm.





Before the sidewalk was built on the north side of the bridge people walked on the interior of the bridge .





This photo was taken from the courthouse roof. If you look closely at the Catholic Church steeple it has scaffolding around it which dates this photo to 1899.





Taken from the area of the old train station where the coop is now. It shows the old mill in the background. The shape of the dam in the background dates this picture between 1899 and 1914. That dam was built by the Schmidt Brothers in 1899.





Elkader artist Tom Webber made this photo famous when he painted this scene a number of years ago. The photo was taken around 1905









A photo of the bridge with the boardwalk to the train station at the bottom right.





The broken dam dates this photo to late spring 1899. A flood in March of that year destroyed the old John Thompson dam. The Schmidt Brothers rebuilt the dam later that year.



