

From Baldwin Bridge to Pace's Bridge

By Doug Berg, revised April 2022

Nowadays in Chatham County, North Carolina, when people canoe the Haw River from Chicken Bridge to Bynum you might hear a few fragments of local lore: "Chicken Bridge got its name when a previous bridge, called Baldwin's Bridge, collapsed under a chicken truck in the 1950s."

The journey down the river is a journey back in time. You pass the uncertain and unremarked locations of the former Clark/Jones ferry, saddleback rock, Douglas/Moody's ferry, Crow's ford, the Dark/Lutterloh mill, and then, just a couple miles down the river from where you started, the brick piers of a long-ago bridge can be seen.

"That's Pace's Mill Bridge, destroyed by a tornado in the 1920s. Some people were killed." Most of us are content with that much, but if you delve into it there is more to the story. There were two bridges we know of on those brick piers down at Pace's, and it appears there were two trellis bridges there previously.



1950 Studebaker chicken truck sitting precariously on the broken section of what is now known as Chicken Bridge.

Back up the river there have been three bridges at the Haw River crossing now known as Chicken Bridge. That first bridge at the Chicken Bridge location was a steel truss bridge built around 1925 and known at the time as Baldwin's Bridge. A span collapsed under a truckload of chickens in about 1951.¹ No one was hurt, but that spelled the end of Baldwin's Bridge. After a few years with no river crossing, a twenty-foot wide, single-lane bridge of creosote-treated timber replaced Baldwin's Bridge. That second bridge is the bridge remembered for Halloween celebrations when folks would place lighted pumpkins on the rails. Sometime after the current bridge replaced that bridge, the Halloween celebration relocated to the old Bynum Bridge, where it continues to the present.

Not much else is commonly known about that original steel truss bridge beyond the fact that, before the chicken truck incident, it was known as Baldwin's Bridge, and is shown as such on the 1932 soil map of Chatham County. The first mention of this bridge appears to be what the Chatham Record had to say after the destruction of the Pace's Bridge, two miles downstream, by tornado, May 7, 1924:

"Will Build A Bridge. The highway commissioners of Chatham County have decided that on the first Monday of August they will take up the matter of selecting a site for a bridge over Haw River. It will be remembered that the steel bridge at Paces Mill was destroyed by tornado that passed over that section early this year. The bridge will probably be built further up the river than Paces Mill where the river is not so wide.

Another article a few months later: October 23, 1924:

"The board passed an order to give contract to build a bridge over Haw River, two miles above old Pace Mill. The bridge at this point was destroyed by a windstorm in the early spring, as was also the mill building. The farmers living on each side of the river will open up and build the road without any expense to the county, the bridge only being built by the county."



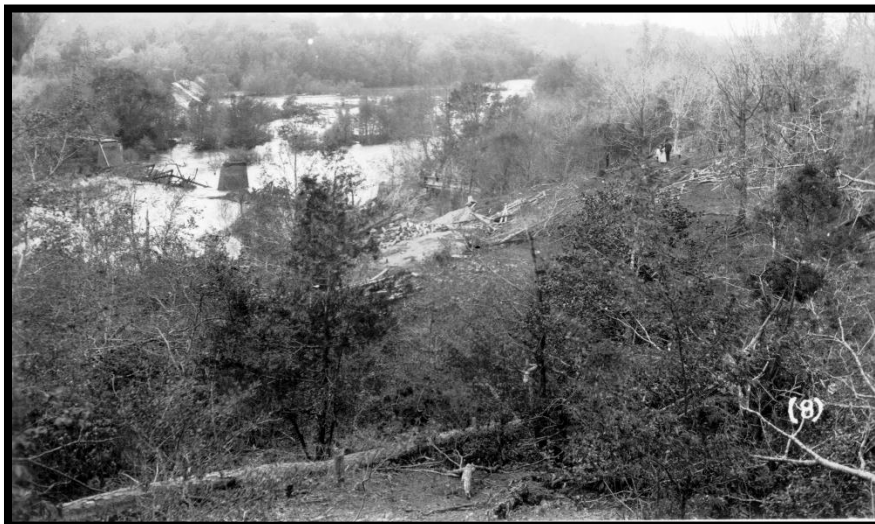
Baldwin's bridge, 1954, after chicken truck accident and additional damage from Hurricane Hazel. Closeup shows daughters of Dee and Eura Thompson — Chris, Mary, and Elizabeth. Photos contributed by the L.D. and Eura Carr Thompson Family.

Subsequent articles report that "...work is being pushed by the contractors Messrs. Hanford Bros."² The following February, E.A. Thompson is repaid \$7,034.23 he loaned to the project.³ E.A. Thompson owned the land on the west side of the proposed bridge; his brother and sister-in law owned the east. E. A.'s land had been acquired in 1918 from Luther Baldwin,⁴ deceased in 1922. E. A.'s sister-in-law, Eura Carr Thompson, on the east, was Luther's daughter and sole heir. It may be the bridge was named Baldwin in Luther's memory. Baldwin Township was named for Luther's uncle Joseph.

The land on both sides of the river, with islands in the middle, included Baldwin's Mill, the old Jones ferry tract on the west, and the Baldwin homeplace with its large acreage on the east. Long known as Baldwin lands, travel between the two sides had been limited to a ford about three quarters of a mile upstream from the Baldwin/Chicken Bridge site. Known at the time as Love's old dam (recently as Baldwin's Crossing), the ford offered only a low-water crossing and a memory of washed-out lattice bridges; otherwise, the trip meant the long way around by Pace's Mill. Now with Pace's gone, crossing the river meant a trip down to the new bridge at Bynum. It is not hard to imagine why E. A. Thompson was eager to see that new bridge.



Dee and Eura Carr Thompson house. Photo courtesy of L.D. and Eura Carr Thompson Family.



As this old photograph shows, not much was left downriver at Pace's Bridge after the 1924 tornado, but newspaper accounts indicate that some truss spans remained intact.⁵ Hanford received \$250 for hauling two truss spans from Pace's old bridge,⁶ and \$30 was paid to T.M. Bland, by Hanford Bros., for helping with hauling.⁷ It is tempting to speculate



Remains of Pace's Mill Bridge and Pace's Mill after 1924 tornado. Photos from the CCHA collection, contributed by Britt Norwood.

that perhaps some of Baldwin's Bridge was recycled steel from the destroyed Pace's Bridge. One can only wonder if the span that collapsed in about 1951 was one of those spans salvaged from Pace's a quarter century prior.

That Pace's steel bridge was the fourth bridge we find record of. It is stated in Henry Armand London's "Report on the Revolutionary History of Chatham County" that a flood in 1865 destroyed every bridge on the Haw in Chatham.⁸ And we see a ford, not a bridge, on the 1870 Ramsey map of Chatham. London goes on to state that the Pace's bridge had been rebuilt by the time of his report in 1876. It appears that bridge was itself swept away. In 1888, a new bridge was contracted to W.D. and John R. Bright.⁹ A covered bridge on Brick piers, it was soon destroyed by a windstorm, in the fall of 1892,¹⁰ to be replaced, in 1901,¹¹ by the steel bridge. Four bridges we find record of—two lattice-wooden, one covered-wooden on brick, and one steel truss on the still standing brick piers. That final steel bridge was stated to be one of two steel bridges across the Haw in Chatham, the other being at Haywood.¹²

You might see the stonework of the Pace's Bridge abutment on the west side. Legend has it that a pair of rogue soldiers of the Federal occupation after the Civil War were gunned down

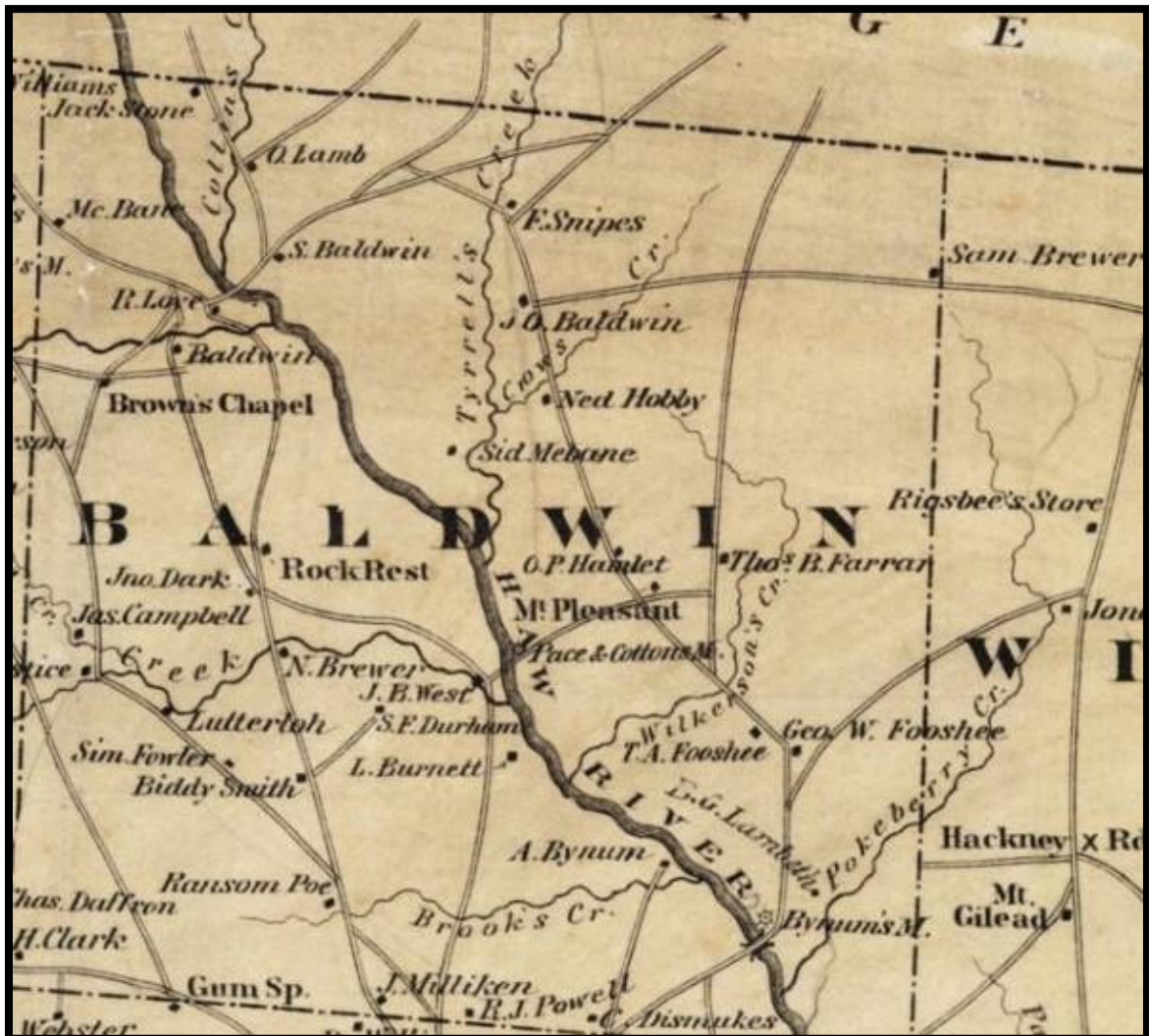


*Pace's bridge brick piers viewed from Rock Rest, 2021.
Photo by Marcia Herman.*

Two miles up the river, in the quarter century of its life, Baldwin Bridge became a recreational destination, and the location remains so to this day. The gentleman you see on the truss in the photograph is Charles Shorty Johnson, one of the drivers involved in the collapse that renamed the bridge. Here he is enjoying an outing at some time before that unhappy event.



Shorty Johnson on Baldwin Bridge.



Baldwin Township from N. Ramsey's 1870 map of Chatham County. Shown are the Baldwin lands, Pace & Cotton's Mill, and Bynum's Mill along the Haw River.

at that place. Escaping pursuit after a plundering raid, they were confronted with a washed-out bridge at the end of the road.¹³ Six decades later, when the tornado struck, those killed were George and Maggie Blalock, their son Charley, and an infant granddaughter.¹⁴

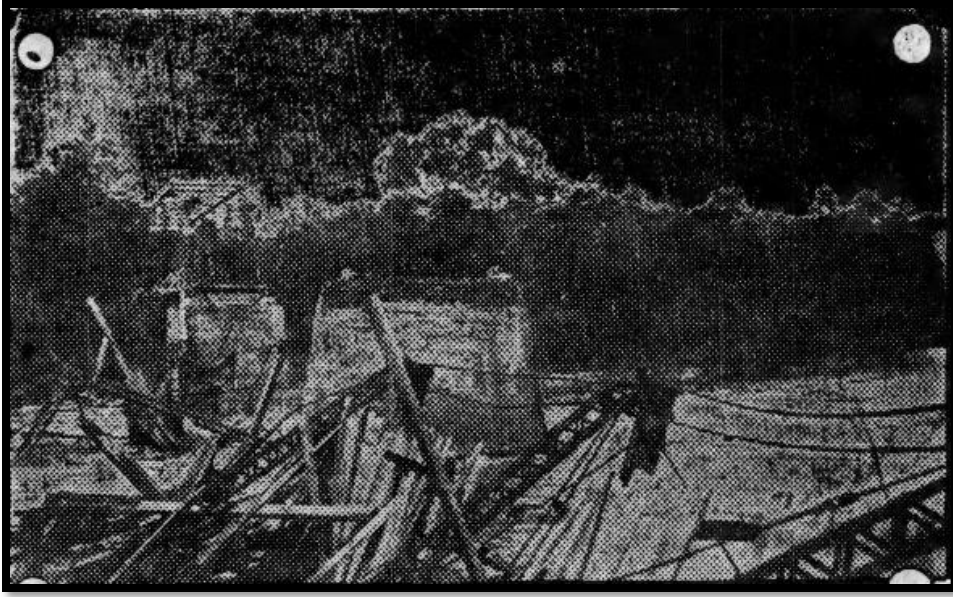


Photo of destroyed Pace's Bridge from 8 May 1924 Chatham Record

The True Workers class of women, with their husbands, had a picnic at Baldwin's Bridge Thursday evening, about one-half of us showing ourselves in bathing. Over forty were present. After the bathing and swimming, all assembled for a watermelon cutting, nine fine ones having been furnished by the ladies and six donated by N. B. Nixon. After a few remarks by the class president, Mrs. O. W. Mann, Supt. C. H. Lutterloh, by request, spoke for us.

From the Chatham Record, 14 Aug 1930.

1989: Alice Nickerson, age 91, spoke to Lois Ann Hobbs about crossing the ford:

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- "I got in there one time, me and my husband and the two children in a one-horse wagon. We had a big old high mule named Tobe. I never will forget that, and the wagon had one of those spring seats so you could sit up in the wagon, and I could rest my foot on the board or whatever you call it, I forget. I took both my young'uns, one on one arm, and went to praying that the river would pass fording, and—woooo!—we was sitting there in the river and all I could hear Pete say was, 'Tobe. Tobe,' and his tail was laying on top of the water, and the fodder went out the wagon and the corn went, and I said, 'Lord is it us next?' I went to praying. I'm sitting there and I can hear him saying, 'Tobe. Tobe.'" And that mule just swum us around. I said when we hit the bank, 'Lord, I'm not going here no more.' And I didn't, no sir; I thought we all was gone. Everything went off the wagon but us."
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Comment about Baldwin's Ford, also known as Collins Ford and Love's Old Dam. Interview transcribed by Doug Berg.

Notes:

- ¹ Barbara Clark Pugh "The Day Chicken Bridge Got its Name," 2004. <https://chathamhistory.org/resources/Documents/PDFs/ResearchArticles/TheDayChickenBridgeGotItsName.pdf>
- ² *Chatham Record*, November 20, 1924
- ³ *Chatham Record*, February 9, 1925
- ⁴ Chatham County Deed Book, FT, p.202
- ⁵ *Chatham Record*, May 8, 1924
- ⁶ *Chatham Record*, November 20, 1924
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Henry Armand London "A Report on the Revolutionary History of Chatham County," 1876, p.10
- ⁹ *Chatham Record*, July 16, 1888
- ¹⁰ *Chatham Record*, June 1, 1893
- ¹¹ *Chatham Record*, April 4, 1901
- ¹² *Chatham Record*, December 22, 1904
- ¹³ *Chatham Record*, March 28, 1928
- ¹⁴ *Chatham Record*, May 8, 1924

The photo of Shorty Johnson on the bridge and the photo of the truck on the collapsed span are courtesy of Barbara Pugh, who got them from Mr. Johnson.