

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Michael Asbill

**Length: Approximately 29 minutes**

**Interviewer:** So just a few questions to start off, where did you grow up?

**Michael Asbill:** I grew up in Utah and Idaho, right on the borders of Utah and Idaho, you could throw a stone from Utah into Idaho from where I lived.

**Interviewer:** How long have you lived in the Hudson Valley?

**Asbill:** I've lived in the Hudson Valley for eight years, moved here in 2000 after leaving the San Francisco Bay area

**Interviewer:** And what is your current profession?

**Asbill:** I am a public artist, I create, I create site specific architecturally integrated, interactive public artworks that are based in history.

**Interviewer:** Ok do you have anything right now [speaks to someone another interviewer in the background]

[both interviewers switch]

**Interviewer 2:** What brought you to the Hudson River Valley?

**Asbill:** The very high cost of living in the San Francisco Bay area, my wife and I were looking for a place that we could move where we were relatively close to a big city but we could still afford to buy a house and in 2000 that was the case in the Hudson Valley.

**Interviewer 2:** What got you involved with the Walkway Over the Hudson?

**Asbill:** In 2006 I did a public work for the Poughkeepsie Train Station it was a project that was commissioned by the Dutchess County Arts Council with funding from the Dutchess County Industrial Development Agency as part of a revitalization project for Poughkeepsie and its train station. Part of my focus was the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge and I did enormous amounts of research and ended up contacting Walkway. Through the research process they were very very nice and helpful through my research and toward the end of my project they actually called and asked if I would be interested in joining the board and so I thought about it and said sure, it sounds like fun.

**Interviewer 2:** Do you, for the bridge that like the bridge is going to be turned into a park, do you think, what role do you think like, do you think your going to do like, I'm sorry what artistic role do you think the bridge can have?

**Asbill:** Well I think the bridge has enormous potential to, I should say really the most thing is to get the thing opened to the public so that there is access, boy I think there are so many

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opportunities it's a such as high profile, the sight and if at some point it's possible to commission a series of public artworks for the deck, or some sort of an architectural light scheme that is put together by an artist, there are so many possibilities. As I understand it we're also shooting at some point to have an interpretative center of some sort. So there is the potential for the kind artwork I do, probably be a conflict of interest for me but somebody else could come in and do interpretative works not just at the center but on the bridge itself, very innovative ways of seeing into the past from the deck of this kind of magnificent structure.

**Interviewer 2:** Have you ever been on the bridge?

**Asbill:** Oh I have, I have been on the bridge, I have, the first time I was up there was in 2005. I went up with a gentleman named Dick Coller from Walkway Over the Hudson and boy did it take my breath away, what spectacular place. When its open to the public, people are going to be blown away, you're really 212 feet above the water and you can see up and down the Hudson, you know right to the horizon essentially it's really just phenomenal especially in the fall when the foliage is out I think it's going to be an attraction.

[Switch again]

**Interviewer:** What do you find most interesting about the bridge?

**Asbill:** Well I find, boy that's a tough question, what do I find so interesting about the bridge I think it is interesting in so many levels. First of all I think the history of the bridge is, is a phenomenal thing to look into, its also just a beautiful beautiful structure It's one of these really pragmatic structures it's not a highly adorned structure but an amazing bridge that's all about engineering. I could be way off here but in some ways it's a little post-modern, in its form even though they built it in the 1880s because it just says bridge, you know it's all about bridgeness. I also think it is interesting because at the time and I think the future I'm not exactly sure what its status is in the present, but I think it's also iconic. I think it really stood in, something that really gave people in the area a rallying point in terms of regional pride. It's such a, it's such a feat, such an engineering marvel. I really think, the people from the region saw this and embraced it. I think that's going to come back once the bridge is opened again in 2009 and I think its boy its going to have impact on the Hudson Valley?

**Interviewer 1:** Have you heard of any other ideas to recycle the bridge in a way?

**Asbill:** I've heard of a few, I have heard of a few other ideas to use the bridge in different ways, they're always a little kooky, there was one idea I think for a big shopping center where they clad over, you know, the existing superstructure, and you know, boy once again that would take an enormous amount of thinking to figure out how engineer that, you got all this wind shear problems. Another idea was for a bungee jumping company of some sort to buy it so people could go out and throw themselves off the bridge and bounce around and be retrieved I guess for another jump. I thought that was kind of a fun idea but I'm not so sure anything adds up to the practical nature of what we have here with the walkway.

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**Interviewer:** I was going to ask you a question but you pretty much answered that in a pre-discussion, the role that the bridge will play for the community?

**Asbill:** You know I could talk a little more to that in terms of the role the bridge will play. One thing I think is interesting is in the past the bridge was seen as a conduit from the coal fields of Pennsylvania to the consumers in, in New England this being the late 1800s and through the early 1900s. I really think the difference between the bridge then the bridge now is that in the present it's really being redesigned, I think not just for the use of the local citizenry, for the region but also for the benefit of the region. I believe they had in mind is that it was probably going to benefit the region when they were building the bridge but really the trains just flew right through and kept going, you know there just wasn't that much benefit for the local community. I think this time around it's a very different story. I really think the way in which this project is being put together, it's all about benefit for the community that exists here today both in terms of local business, people getting out and exercising, and the whole gamut.

**Interviewer:** That's great, is there anything else about the bridge that you feel is important that we haven't touched on? 935

**Asbill:** You know I think one other thing that I find really marvelous about the bridge is the little neighborhood that are defined by it that are underneath. I think in particular one, which at some point was largely an Italian neighborhood which is right under the bridge. I think it's the Mount Carmel Church area but right there at Dutchess and Delafield, right under the bridge there's this incredible little tight knit community that is literally in the shadow of the bridge and it defines the character of that neighborhood. I think you could say the same thing about some of the houses over on the Highland side. I've really been concentrating on Poughkeepsie, I guess and I think that those neighborhoods are so sort of unique and so distinctive and so eastern United States in a way. I also think of skylines and places like New York and Chicago where you really get a distinctive quality to a neighborhood based on the architecture that surrounds you and the bridge play into that in a really big in these neighborhoods. I think it's a really remarkable thing and it's going to be fantastic thing now that it's a walkway instead of a really, of course it hasn't always been this way for thirty years, but a noisy train line not only has this huge sort of historical feature right in your backyard but it's kind of place quiet, a linear park, I think is going to be fantastic for the people living under the bridge right there.

[switching again]

**Interviewer 2:** Speaking as an artist like personally, did you have any specific ideas, like artistically for the bridge, like any specific designs do you would like to see?

**Asbill:** Yeah I think about them every other day, I'm sorry let me back up and reframe that, do I have any ideas about what I would do if I were to create something for the bridge as an artist and the answer is yes I can think of tons of things I would love to do, I think though, this an opportunity for a bunch of other artists to participate but I do see really specific things that can happen in the near future on the west shore of the bridge anchor there's a big cement wall that essentially faces the Hudson right down by a road, right at the level of the river and it's a magnificent wall that is maybe a 100 odd feet long and sixty to seventy foot-feet tall that would

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be a remarkable site for even a mural that would be visible from Poughkeepsie clearly as long as there's a big graphic thing that stands out. I think boy with all of that amazing steel structure I could imagine all kinds of wonderful interpretations of that sculpturally that could fit right up on top of the bridge deck. I think there could be many lovely ways of interfacing. There's also the possibility of working within the framework I'd talked earlier about the neighborhoods that occupy some of the sites. I think there's the potential for a lot of community artwork that the bridge could become a kind of blank canvass for, yeah there's tons of stuff I think as long as its really durable in my personal opinion centered around history, it's a spectacular site for artistic endeavors.

**Interviewer 2:** Is there anything else you would like to discuss like from personal experience or anything at all?

**Asbill:** You know, I will, there are a couple of other things on my mind. First of all Carleton Mabee wrote a book and I don't know if you folks are going to have him in here for an interview or not but he was a gentleman who was asked at one point to write, you know a book on the bridge called *Bridging the Hudson* and he's just done a spectacular job laying out the entire historical scope of the project and in there he really concentrates on some individuals that played a part or we part of the bridge construction in some form, you know families that were tied up in the building or in the engineering but there were a couple of people I met doing research for my project for the train station that really struck me as really very interesting and not just because of their relationship with the bridge but their relationship to Poughkeepsie that really sort of the spirit of what this city was about, this instance in the 1900s and there's one person I'm thinking about in particular whose name was Anthony Di Rosa and he's a really wonderful story of someone coming to Poughkeepsie and interfacing with it including the bridge he came to this country like when he was fourteen or fifteen. He was Italian but he was coming from Argentina where his family lived at that point in time and he came alone, just imagine this boy showing up on a boat in New York City and trying to find work and gravitating towards Poughkeepsie because there was so much going on, there was a lot of work on the railroad lines at that point in time so he became a water boy and was riding across that bridge all the time. Anyway he is so worth looking into and I hope you would look up his family because they still live in Poughkeepsie his brother I mean son and his daughter and they had, the father, Anthony DiRosa, the one I'm talking about had encounters with FDR, he had multiple business in the city all of them backbreaking work, you know he's kind of the epitome of someone coming from another country jumping into the melting pot and finding his way in the United States in the toughest of all circumstances and coming out of this thing being just this charming wonderful gentleman so that's something worth pursuing. I think he's an amazing story.

[Switch again]

**Interviewer:** I think I have maybe two questions, how do you think Walkway will work with the New York State Parks Association on this, like with the project and after?

**Asbill:** Right, how the walkway will work, what role Walkway will play once the bridge becomes a linear and a state park? Gotcha, yes. You know I think the Walkway organization will transition to a friend's like organization. I think they will take on a lot of the interpretive and

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interpretative work with the bridge helping people understand its historical significance as well as becoming really a historical steward of the bridge, not sure something that the state is so interested in. I also think Walkway will show up in whatever capacity that they could maybe is minor as opening and closing the gates at night, who knows but really I think the most important role will be its historical stewardship because it is just such a landmark and I think somebody needs to stand on the roof tops and yell about its significance not just to the area but the country in general.

**Interviewer:** Do you have any suggestions for a name for it for like all the artwork?

**Asbill:** Do I have any suggestions for a name for the bridge. I thought about it a little bit but I'm not sure that I'm going out on a limb [laughs] and make any recommendations because there have been so many great people who have played a really significant role in the project during its inception, you know in the 1870s, 1860s I think maybe even the first idea for a bridge was in the 1850s. There were people like Harvey Eastmen, John Platt, you know the list goes on and on of early Poughkeepsie founders and businessmen that had really something at stake in getting the bridge built. I also think, you know the new face of the walkway is really due in large part to a few individuals who have put a lot of effort into making this happen, people like Bill Sepe who I've never met, who really founded the Walkway movement, Fred Schaeffer who became chairman a couple of years back and has worked tirelessly there's a whole list of names of those who you know, of people who would be great, who would really represent the bridge well but I'm a little nervous about picking one whose that, everyone's so good. The other thing that crosses my mind there's just thousands of people who worked on the bridge who, was a part of their lives everyday. I like the idea of somehow having a working class naming the proposal; I don't know what exactly that would be. I hope in some way there's a reflection of the people who have put their whole lives into, you know, the railroad, in the coal industry and even the construction of the bridge and, there are so many I think it'd be nice that it reflected those people in some way.

**Interviewer:** That's a really good idea [turns to interviewer 2] Do you have anything else?

**Interviewer 2:** No

**Interviewer 1:** Do you have anything else to add, I know we touched a lot of stuff?

**Asbill:** You know maybe, I'll just say a little about not, about the history of the bridge but about the historical repositories of information about the bridge in the area because I think that's interesting as well. There's a whole bunch of people stewarding materials that are relevant to this project. When I was working on the project in the Poughkeepsie Train Station which features a whole lot of historical images of the bridge, I had to go and track these images down and there are a couple of places where they house these historical documents and images. One of them is the Adriance Memorial Library Local History room and they have a spectacular, spectacular collection of photographs and they're nothing to sneeze at. The photographers who were in the day were obviously using large format cameras which were high resolution and in later years creating really large beautiful elegant prints of the bridge throughout the construction process so there's just a real rich resource out there of historical materials. There's also the Dutchess

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County Historical Society that holds a whole lot of materials that are incredibly valuable as well as Walkway Over the Hudson, they hold a collection of images and varieties of other things that pertain to the bridge [clears throat] and much of this material [clear throat] also held at the Clinton Historical Society in Clinton Corners, New York. I also want to, just once again say a little something about Carleton Mabee who wrote the book and I encourage anybody to go out and find the book and read it, it's written by a man who won a Pulitzer Prize for writing a historical book about Samuel Morse, the guy's brilliant and is wonderful and has done a through through documentation of the bridge, I think it's a really wonderful read, and just a real treasure when it comes to indentifying a local icon for the Hudson Valley.

[Pause]

**Interviewer 1:** [addresses the interviewer] Is there anything else?

**Interviewer 2:** No I don't think so

**Interviewer 1:** You did say that you were a member of the Clinton Historical Society or did I read that wrong?

**Asbill:** I've done some work with the Clinton Historical Society. I think the main connection there is Dick Coller who is also on the board of directors with Walkway. Dick is on the board of the Clinton Historical Society and I got, I was connected with them because of my interest in the bridge's history. They just hold a lot of the Walkway's information, in fact they all of the research that Carleton Mabee did on his book so there really the repository for a lot of bridge history. I have done some work for them; I created a few exhibits for them over the last couple of summers. In fact our last exhibit won an award with the Lower Hudson Conference that was very nice as well, but they are one fantastic regional sources as well, but I don't know if I'm a member. [laughs]

**Interviewer 1:** [addresses interviewer 2] Do you have a question?

[Interviewers switch]

**Interviewer2:** So could you tell me you r experience as being a board member of Walkway over the Hudson?

**Asbill:** Yeah, my experiences as a board Member of Walkway Over the Hudson you know it's and an interesting group of folks. We have people really form all walks of life we have our board president whose a local lawyer in Poughkeepsie we have a retired engineer who is fascinating to talk to about the bridge, we have someone who owns and operate a bakery, a guy who is a construction worker down in New York City, we have just some of the most diverse group of folks, artists, if your counting me, a really diverse for folks and with one really clear goal which is just to get this thing opened by 2009. It's been a pleasure, it's been a real learning experience especially coming from an art background, your talking about sitting in a room with a whole lot of people who have business backgrounds, and so you know not that we don't have anything in common, but [laughter] it's been very very wild, just to get a sense about how other people think

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about a project like this its just such a sophisticated and complicated process. There's so much community outreach involved its been really exciting to see how the various people in this organization really stepped forward and make a contribution that advances the project in ways that are totally unexpected. You know a sample of this is one of our board members David Rocco who like, he is gentleman who was a construction worker in New York City and retired early and became very very active in the project and nobody knew that this guy had these incredible community outreach skills, I mean he'd just called everybody and we was so fearless and so committed and in some ways was really the guy who, is one of the guys who just really got the ball moving in a lot of ways just so much commitment, so much dedication. He even wrote Walkway Over the Hudson on the side of his van in a big graphic. So you really got a bunch, a bunch of very very dedicated individuals. Also fun to work for somebody and I've mentioned his name a few times already is Dick Coller who is a retired engineer and sits around and contemplates things like how board feet are involved in, you know, you know this part of the construction in pier three which sounds like its kind of dry but when you really start to think about the scope of what he's discussing is wow you're absolutely right, breath taking that's like three forests, you know right there in one pier so you know it's so interesting in working with this group of people, there are so many, it's just a variety of people, its been a real blast.

**Interviewer 2:** I think that's it, thank you very much.

**Asbill:** Thanks for having me I'm glad to have a chance to tell a little about it, yeah thank you [proceeds to leave].

**Interviewer 1:** Thank you so much.

**Asbill:** [as he leaves the chair and shakes hands with both interviewers] my pleasure nice meeting both of you.

**[End of Interview 29:00]**

**Transcribed by Paul Contarino**