

Hudson River Valley Institute  
Walkway Over the Hudson Oral Histories  
Donald Pevsner: Worked on Bridge Preservation

POUGHKEEPSIE RAILROAD BRIDGE: WALKWAY OVER THE HUDSON STATE HISTORIC PARK

**Date: January 27, 2009 (Updated March 17, 2014)**

**Length: Approximately 37 1/2 mins)**

**Interviewer (Jason Schaaf):** Okay, could you just tell me your name and spell it for me please?

**Donald Pevsner:** Sure, it's Donald L. Pevsner: that's P-E-V-S-N-E-R.

**Interviewer:** Okay, let me just ask you a couple of brief questions about your past and who you are.

**Pevsner:** All right.

**Interviewer:** And, so, let's move to the Bridge.

**Pevsner:** Sure.

**Interviewer:** So, I believe I read in the Carleton Mabee book, "Bridging The Hudson" (2001), that you grew up in New York City?

**Pevsner:** That's right.

**Interviewer:** What was your first experience with the Bridge and could you just tell me about that?

**Pevsner:** Well, I collected railroad timetables as a kid and I was always intrigued by the New Haven Railroad's Maybrook line, which of course crossed the Bridge. The New Haven was a

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New England railroad, but they had this one main freight-only line that went like an isolated westward spearhead right into New York State, way out of its regular territory, crossing an incredibly-huge historic bridge, and I was always intrigued with it. Then, back around 1959, I got to ride over it in a special railroad excursion passenger train, which consisted of one or two self-propelled Budd Rail Diesel cars (“RDCs”), and we went all the way from the New Haven Railroad station in New Haven over the entire length of the Maybrook freight line, over the Poughkeepsie Bridge down to Maybrook Yard; a little time down there; then back the way we came. I was age fifteen at the time. We stopped right in the middle of the Bridge, and everybody got out on the catwalk for the view. That was enough to hook me on the Bridge.

**Interviewer:** What were some of the things that impressed you about the Bridge at that young age?

**Pevsner:** Well, it was the first bridge crossing of the Hudson south of Albany and it’s a stupendous structure. It’s 6,768 feet long; it’s 212 feet above the river; the views were incredible and it’s a big, black, spidery monster. You can’t fail but be impressed by it. You don’t have to be a rail buff to be impressed by it.

**Interviewer:** So what did you go into, what was your career--what is your career?

**Pevsner:** Well, I’m an attorney; I don’t really practice law anymore, other than free consumer advocacy work in the aviation arena. I was the leading charterer of the Concorde supersonic airplane for fifteen years, from 1985 to 2000, and ran numerous multi-million-dollar charters including the two Around-The-World official world air speed records in both directions: Westbound in 1992 and Eastbound in 1995, for THE GUINNESS BOOK OF RECORDS. I plan to make an attempt on the last of the “Big Three” official Around-The-World air speed records, which is “Around The World Over Both The Earth’s Poles”, in the autumn of 2016, chartering an Airbus A380 super-jumbo aircraft. I’ve also been a consumer advocate for my entire adult life. I actually became the leading aviation consumer advocate in the country in the 1970’s, donating a lot of my time to the public service like Ralph Nader, and I’ve had a pretty varied career. Right now, I am (2014) going to be 70 on April 19, 2014. I’m semi-retired, but I have a very exciting flight project coming up.

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**Interviewer:** That sounds like pretty exciting stuff.

**Pevsner:** Yeah, it's amazing, but I still haven't lost my love of railroading. I was a rail buff before I was anything else. Although there's nothing like steam locomotives: the last (Pennsylvania Railroad) steam disappeared when I was barely old enough to get to where it was in the New York area, in 1957, when I was thirteen. So, I grew up with New York Central steam in Riverdale, New York, and rode behind New York Central West Shore steam from Weehawken, New Jersey to summer camp near Kingston, but having said that and having watched it disappear in North America, I went to find it later in places like South Africa, India and Europe, and had a great time while it lasted. So that should give you a rough idea of my background.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, so from the time you were fifteen, and I suppose up until the time of the railroad fire on the Bridge...

**Pevsner:** Which was on May 8, 1974.

**Interviewer:** Yeah--did you still maintain interest in the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge?

**Pevsner:** I visited it numerous times. I was able, while the railroad was still operating, to walk right down the track out onto the Bridge. After the fire of May 8, 1974, when Penn Central put up a chain link fence, it was fairly easy to get around that chain link fence, and I walked across the Bridge at least a dozen times. On one of those times, the eminent trespassers with me included William F. Buckley, Jr., who was an old friend, and his old friend, the leading architect in Canada, Arthur Erickson, who designed Simon Fraser University in Vancouver and a lot of other landmark buildings worldwide. We were trying to find out what kind of a constructive adaptive reuse could be made out of it; again, the question was "who's going to fund it?" We went up there in 1976, which was two years after the fire; unfortunately, that was premature. Can you imagine the headlines had Bill Buckley or Arthur Erickson fallen into the river, 212 feet

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below, through one of the rickety catwalk grilles? (We all kept to the center of the track, on solid ties resting on solid steel girders, at my insistence.)

**Interviewer:** So what were some of the ideas that you came up with for reusing the Bridge; re-engineering it?

**Pevsner:** The idea focused on an option I obtained from Conrail for nine months in 1984, to buy the Bridge and the right of way from the western end of the Bridge all the way to the Thruway overpass, near New Paltz. It would have provided rail access with a self-propelled RDC car(s), put some sort of low-rise structure on the Bridge decking, with glass walls, with New York history and local railroad history exhibits, and that incredible view. I needed to find some foundation or similar to fund it, but, with just three three-month options given to me by Conrail during 1984, there wasn't enough time to pull it off.

**Interviewer:** The Mabee book says that you were having trouble or that there was trouble getting--I suppose--engineering firms to commit to it?

**Pevsner:** No, that wasn't my problem; let me give you a little bit of the history.

**Interviewer:** OK.

**Pevsner:** I kept track of things, and the last major event before the option was granted to me by Conrail was in early July, 1983. I was up there visiting the Bridge as part of a drive through New York State. (I lived in Florida from 1965 to 2005, when I moved up to the mountains of North Carolina to get away from the hurricanes and heat, and also had a second-home on a bluff directly overlooking the Hudson River, on River Road just south of Port Ewen, from 1995-2004.) I was amazed when I got there. The chain-link fence was open, there was all sorts of heavy equipment around out on the Bridge, and it turned out that the City of Poughkeepsie had successfully sued Conrail because pieces of rusted metal and other items--old spikes, grating plates, burned ties, cast-iron support beams and so forth--in the area of the fire, which was over

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the City of Poughkeepsie and US Route 9 and over the mainline railroad tracks of Metro North, were falling onto passing cars and trains. Conrail didn't want the Bridge in the first place, but was forced to take it by Abraham Ribicoff when he was Senator from Connecticut, as part of the "USRA Final System Plan" in 1976, even though the Bridge was out of service due to the May 8, 1974 eastern-viaduct wooden tie fire. Conrail was thus forced to spend \$300,000 for a contractor that removed everything above the girders from the east bank of the river to the eastern edge of that eastern viaduct, where it joins level ground. Conrail absolutely hated to spend that \$300,000: it added financial insult to injury. Senator Ribicoff had the goal of reviving the line and having faster through freight service into southern New England over the Bridge again, avoiding multi-day Selkirk Yard transit delays. Conrail predecessor Penn Central didn't want any part of it: they already had Selkirk Yard southwest of Albany, they had the old Boston and Albany main line into New England, and they were sending all but one freight train a day to New England over that route (by government order, only one daily round-trip train had to continue to operate over the Poughkeepsie Bridge) when the Bridge's eastern-viaduct fire occurred. Conrail basically would have been happy if the Poughkeepsie Bridge had just "gone away". Well, as it turned out, the pre-Conrail (Penn Central) fire took it out of service permanently. After that, I approached Conrail later in 1983, quite fortuitously after that summer's \$300,000 check-writing exercise on Conrail's part to clean-up the eastern viaduct. I said, "How would you like to sell me the Bridge for a dollar, including the right of way between the Western shore of the Hudson River and the New Paltz overpass of the Thruway, if I could find somebody responsible to adaptively re-use it: with adequate liability insurance, with proper maintenance, without having it become a dangerous derelict--what we call in legal terms an "attractive nuisance"? " Conrail was delighted, and I only learned then that it had already secretly requested bids for Bridge demolition, which started at about \$7 million (from Jet Research, a company in Texas that wanted to dynamite it into the river and fish the girders out: this right next to where the City of Poughkeepsie draws its drinking water, by the way; you can imagine what a toxic mess is lying on the bottom!). A high bid was about \$19.5 million for a conventional demolition. Needless to say, Conrail would have been delighted had I relieved them of that expense.

So I put the idea in their heads that getting rid of it to a private individual for a buck was a lot better than spending between \$7-19.5 million to take it down, and they agreed. On February 1, 1984, they gave me the first of three ninety-day options and I started beating the bushes to find a responsible developer. At the time, Conrail was very responsible. I dealt with a lawyer in its Real Estate Department named Lawrence J. Huff; my correspondence with him is in the possession of the Walkway Group, as is the massive deed from the project's inception in the late 1800's to 1984. Huff agreed with me that Conrail wouldn't sell the Bridge to anybody who wouldn't be a good corporate citizen, meaning an entity that would properly insure and maintain it into the long-term future. My second option came along, but after six months I still couldn't

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find a developer. Then, out of the blue, I got a call from Mr. Huff. He said, "I don't know how to tell you this; I feel extremely embarrassed, but our Chairman and President of Conrail, L. Stanley Crane (who was the very hard-charging former President of the Southern Railway who headed Conrail after his retirement there) just did a 180-degree reversal on the responsibility of any new owner of the Bridge. We just want to sell it to the first warm body and we don't care about future insurance or maintenance; and, if you don't buy it, we have somebody in the wings who will." This was a direct telephone statement from a top Conrail executive (Mr. Huff) to me, and I will never forget it.

Mr. Huff then apologized to me for the grossly-irresponsible order from his Chairman and President, Mr. Crane. So I told Mr. Huff that I was not interested in any way, shape or form in taking title to the Bridge in a shell corporation, without high-limits liability insurance and without long-term maintenance funds, which disgraceful conduct had just been defined as acceptable by Conrail. I had my third option by that time and I kept looking for a suitable developer. But I could not find anybody to fund the project. So, on November 1, 1984--remember, the first option began on February 1, 1984, and I had three three-month options thereafter--I sent Conrail's Mr. Huff a message: "I am not exercising my final option on the Bridge, so you are free on or after November 2, 1984 to do whatever you want with it. However, I am appalled by the conduct of your Chairman and President." In 1984, Conrail was a public corporation entirely owned by the U.S. Government. So, L. Stanley Crane, as Conrail Chairman and President, was the most irresponsible executive I've seen in my entire (2014) nearly-70 years on the planet.

But anyway, one day after my last option expired, Conrail sold the Bridge for \$1, including the right of way which I had negotiated out to the Thruway overpass at New Paltz, to a convicted bank swindler-felon named Gordon Schreiber Miller, who operated out of a taxicab office in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, which is a suburb a bit west of Philadelphia. He proceeded to start collecting \$25,000 a year from Central Hudson for rental access charges on its high-voltage power lines that then ran across the Bridge. Then, shortly after assuming ownership, he decided that he would gouge Central Hudson on these rental charges. He informed them that their rate of rental for each future year was going to be...I don't know the exact number, but he was going to double, triple or quadruple it. So, to its credit, Central Hudson told him to go to hell. It swiftly relocated its power lines under the river, abandoned the ones on the Bridge and cut-off all rental payments to Miller, which is poetic justice under the circumstances. Then, Miller and an associate wound up owning the Bridge from November 2, 1984, all the way up until June 5, 1998. That's unbelievable: nearly fourteen years of irresponsible ownership of a giant structure over a navigable river, two main railroad lines and a major US highway (Route 9). All of the navigation lights were out on the bridge; the Coast Guard kept fining Miller's shell corporation, which didn't pay anything to settle the fines or repair the navigation lights. There was no

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maintenance whatsoever done on it. It was a total “attractive nuisance”, meaning that anybody could get up on it and fall off it, or God knows what. Then, very fortunately, Miller decided that there was no upside in owning the Bridge any longer, so he deeded it to one of his cohorts down in Pennsylvania named Vito Moreno. Moreno owned it for awhile, and finally came to the same conclusion. Throughout this 14-year period, taxes had not been paid to either Dutchess or Ulster Counties, or their Towns. I personally contacted the heads of the Ulster and Dutchess County Legislatures, as well as the Mayors of Poughkeepsie and Highland, and strongly urged their Government entities (including the Towns) to seize the Bridge for non-payment of back taxes, and make sure that the Counties’ liability insurance, the City of Poughkeepsie’s insurance, the State’s insurance, the Towns’ insurance, whatever, cover it and get the navigation lights for Hudson River shipping traffic (which includes oceangoing freighters) back on and keep them on. All of them refused to even consider it; they were a pack of cowards on both sides of the river. “We don’t want the liability of owning it” was the uniform answer. So, they all sold their constituents down the river, particularly including former (2014) New York State Senator Stephen Saland of Poughkeepsie (whose wife had the gall to ream me out for daring to try to call him at home there).

Finally, Moreno decided to deed the Bridge to the non-profit New York corporation that Bill Sepe had set-up: The Poughkeepsie-Highland Railroad Bridge Company, Inc., a/k/a Walkway Over The Hudson. Conveyance was done on June 4, 1998, and the deeds were recorded on June 5, 1998. Now the Bridge was in the hands of, at least, not a former bank swindler, but of a non-profit corporation with almost no money: no money to maintain it, no money to insure it, no money to put the Coast Guard-mandated navigation lights back on. In other words, a nearly-identical situation: a financially-irresponsible owner, this time with good motives, but still not a proper “deep-pockets” owner at all. The proper owner for the Bridge after railroad abandonment was always the State of New York, and, very very luckily, nothing happened to cause a major catastrophe between June 5, 1998 and December 21, 2010, when ownership was belatedly assumed by the New York State Bridge Authority following appropriate mandating legislation in Albany. Little or no liability insurance existed on the Bridge for 12 ½ years under the Walkway group ownership, and for an amazing 14 ½ months between the Walkway grand-opening date of October 3, 2009 and the assumption of NYSBA ownership on December 21, 2010, during which period about one million visitors walked across it. I severely chastised Walkway Over the Hudson then-President Fred Schaeffer and his entire Board of Directors on multiple occasions for allowing this untenable situation to exist. None of them ever bothered to reply. Had a major accident occurred during the 12 ½ years of Walkway corporation ownership, all of them would now be living in homeless shelters and wearing flour sacks as clothing after all the litigation dust had settled and the “corporate veil” had been duly pierced by a myriad of injured plaintiffs’ lawyers. As a lawyer who should have known better,

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Fred Schaeffer should have been publicly excoriated instead of honored. Under his “leadership”, in particular, he placed a Sword of Damocles over the heads of one million Walkway visitors prior to NYSBA assuming ownership. Incidentally, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation also flatly refused to take title to the Bridge from the Walkway corporation, despite agreeing to manage the new Walkway Over The Hudson State Historic Park under continuing Walkway ownership. This deliberate agency nonfeasance and self-protective cowardice also resulted in over one million Walkway visitors being devoid of protective liability insurance and ongoing Bridge maintenance security between October 3, 2009 and December 21, 2010, as described above.

**Interviewer:** What do you think of the plans, the current plans for the Walkway Over The Hudson there?

**Pevsner:** I have reservations, unfortunately. The price of materials went through the roof when oil went up to \$147 a barrel. So they had to scale back the width of the concrete decking by about ten feet, as I understand. Now, the price of materials has gone way down with the 2008 recession, and oil is about \$37 a barrel at the moment (early 2009). I contacted Erik Kulleseid at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (2014: now a Senior Vice-President of the Open Space Institute), as well as Fred Schaeffer. I asked if there would be any change in restoring the original width of the Walkway decking because material prices had gone back down, and his answer was, “Well, we couldn’t do that but there will be periodic spots along the Walkway where it will be extended out to the original width plan,” which I think was thirty-four feet, but not for its entire length. I think that ought to be revisited, and it would be nice if they could go back to the original width: that’s Point One. (2014: never done.) Point Two is that the Bridge needs lighting on it for night-time: there’s no valid reason why people shouldn’t be able to walk across it after daylight hours and that, as I understand it, was also a casualty of the increased costs. (2014: never done.) Point Three: the eastern-shore access elevator from near the Metro-North station is still (2014) not completed. However, the above quibbles aside, the fact that the Poughkeepsie Bridge is going to survive, owned by a New York State Government Authority, and has now (2014) become a major tourist attraction is what governs my very-positive present opinion. It is a fantastic achievement, and has been since its opening on January 1, 1889.



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I have one comment on the prior management of the Walkway group, pre-Fred Schaeffer. Bill Sepe had good intentions when he founded the Walkway group. I met him several times and he is one of the most stubborn and doctrinaire guys I ever talked to on the phone. He decided by himself that his social policy is that government shouldn't fund something like Bridge restoration: his own personal philosophy, totally-libertarian. Government shouldn't fund something like this; we shouldn't go to government for hardly anything. His doctrinaire libertarianism was so severe that when the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation wanted to do a physical examination of the Bridge prior to agreeing to manage the Walkway Over The Hudson State Historic Park--the only major engineering study to be done on its condition under Walkway corporation ownership--he refused to give the engineering consulting firm's crews access to the Bridge. He didn't own the Bridge. He was President of a non-profit New York State corporation that owned the Bridge. His hand-picked Board of Directors never dared to challenge him for years, and finally their successors and other supporters of the Walkway realized that Bill Sepe had turned into poison. I helped Fred Schaeffer engineer a coup on the Board of Directors that got rid of Bill Sepe, and I celebrated when that happened. It's a definite pity that he did what he did because he started out with a good heart and meant well, but he was in way over his head. He never had the training in anything like this, or any legal background, to understand the economic realities of what he was dealing with and in the end he became a negative and incredibly-destructive influence.

If they know what's good for them (written on January 27, 2009), the Walkway group will convey the Bridge to the State of New York as soon as possible. In particular, make sure that those de-energized power lines and their 2,200-pound, rusting support brackets don't fall down onto the CSX River Division ("West Shore") railroad track in the interim, because that would be an absolute disaster if they did: hazardous-materials freight cars would most probably be dumped from a derailed freight train into the adjacent Hudson River, directly across from the City of Poughkeepsie's drinking-water supply intake. (Fortunately, the power lines and support brackets were removed later in 2009, as part of Walkway construction.)

**Interviewer:** I certainly hope so.

**Pevsner:** No kidding.

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**Interviewer:** Let me ask you a question about the local government officials.

**Pevsner:** They did not cover themselves with glory: they were cowards in Ulster, they were cowards in Dutchess and they were cowards at the State level, and these are or were the elected and appointed representatives of the citizens of New York State. If I had it in my power to do it, I would fire every last one of them who was still in office that refused to accept the Bridge ownership and maintenance responsibility: kick them out into the street as betrayers of the public interest.

**Interviewer:** Let me ask you a question about what some of the plans and proposals are that you had for the Bridge, in terms of its use.

**Pevsner:** I had a very simple one, people would drive up the Thruway, get off at New Paltz, park in the parking lot that would be set up there right by the track passing under the Thruway overpass, get on a rail diesel car or two and be taken out to the center of the river, and go into the entry bay (with some wind and weather shielding) of a linear, one-story glass-walled building. There, they would get off and there would be all sorts of displays of the history of New York, history of the local railroads, history of the Hudson River, going back to Henry Hudson, the building of the Bridge: the whole bit. It would also be a branch office of the New York State Department of Commerce's Tourism Division, because the traffic on the nearby Thruway is unbelievable and that would be such a magnet for this agency to promote overall New York State tourism. Again, it would have to have been funded by either the State or by the Federal Government, and/or by a big corporation that wanted to put its logo on it. In the nine months of my option period (1984) there was no way for me personally as an individual, particularly living in Florida, to find these funding sources. That was my idea. Edmond Loedy, a Poughkeepsie architect, had a much more grandiose idea. I saw his architectural drawings, and he wanted to put a multi-story structure, very gaudy, on top of the Bridge decking. I question whether the wind loadings would have allowed that to happen structurally, and it would have been highly non-aesthetic and detracted from the overall, original "look" of the Bridge.

There were a few people who actually wanted to re-start rail service back over the Bridge. That was grossly impractical from the moment that the fire happened, even though Senator Abraham Ribicoff in Connecticut wanted it, because freight railroads in the Northeast had had it

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economically. The bankruptcies of seven major northeastern railroads, including the New Haven, the Penn Central, the Erie-Lackawanna, the Reading, the Lehigh Valley, the Lehigh and Hudson River, and the Central Railroad of New Jersey, which resulted in the Federal Government's 1976 creation of Conrail, had all occurred during or prior to 1976. This was only two years after the 1974 fire. The reason for the non-interest in the Bridge by the railroads is that most rail freight traffic to and from New England had evaporated; the trucks had taken most of the traditional business away. You had a parallel railroad route through Selkirk Yard that was only about sixty miles farther north: a reasonable routing detour. There was even an additional railroad route to New England on the old Boston and Maine, which is now Pan Am Railways, through the Hoosac Tunnel in northwestern Massachusetts, near North Adams. So, transportation "progress" happened: traditional freight railroading in New England became ancient history. Maybrook Yard, which was once one of the biggest railroad yards in the world, became totally defunct. It now has a single track running through its former site to Campbell Hall for some local freight customers. Yellow Freight, the large national trucking firm, built a 43-acre trucking terminal on a portion of the former Maybrook Yard site, because of course it's very close to Interstate 84, the Thruway and Stewart International Airport: it's a perfect trucking logistical setting. Also, the Lehigh and Hudson River Railroad, which had fed a tremendous amount of traffic to the New Haven's Poughkeepsie Bridge route, was one of the bankrupts in 1976. The southern half of that railroad was duly torn up. The Erie-Lackawanna Railroad was also part of the bankruptcies, as was the Lehigh Valley. The western halves of both lines were torn up, and all of the remaining traffic feed from the west disappeared. Even if the 1970's-era freight traffic had still been in existence, though, the Poughkeepsie Bridge was no longer necessary to serve it. So, running revived freight service across the Poughkeepsie Bridge was one of the stupidest ideas that I, as a railroad historian if you like, have ever seen. I've saved several historic rail-oriented properties. I also personally saved the Catskill Mountain Branch of the former New York Central between Kingston and Bloomville from being torn up, and 57 track miles of that between Kingston and Roxbury is now the Delaware and Ulster Rail Ride and (in small part) the Catskill Mountain Railroad. If it hadn't been for my 1974-1979 personal crusade, all 80 miles of this ultra-scenic and historic (1872) line, abandoned by Penn Central on October 4, 1976, would probably have become a rail-trail 35 years ago, or the abandoned right-of-way left to be obscured by trees and foliage. I also helped with the conversion to pedestrian use of the former New York Central Wallkill Valley Branch's landmark Rosendale Trestle (built of wood in 1872; rebuilt of steel in 1895), over Rondout Creek, as a key part of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail by "lobbying" the Ulster County Legislature, which ultimately acquired the northern 13 miles of the trackless right-of-way via condemnation for nonpayment of a paltry \$13,716 in back taxes, in April, 2009. Conrail had sold this 13-mile parcel to yet another convicted felon with very little money, John E. Rahl of Rosendale, for \$1 (including the landmark Rosendale Trestle), in 1986: again, the unscrupulous hand of Conrail Chairman and President L. Stanley

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Crane at work. At the moment (2014), I am trying to preserve the landmark 1875 former Erie Railroad Portageville Trestle across the Genesee River in Letchworth State Park. Anyhow, I didn't really see any realistic future for the Bridge other than adaptive reuse. It made no sense whatsoever for freight trains; passenger trains would have been even more ludicrous, even though the Mid-Hudson (automobile) Bridge is admittedly inadequate. You don't take a structure like the Poughkeepsie Bridge and run a couple of freight trains a day across the river; where are you going to go on the other side of the river? It was built as an integral part of a through freight route, finished about 1889. That route has been as dead as ancient Rome since 1974. There was also once a large New Haven Railroad freight yard on the route's eastern end, Cedar Hill Yard in New Haven: now virtually defunct as well. Today's freight railroad successor has a few container trains that are unloaded there, and that's it. It was an absolutely-rational business decision when Conrail tore-up its Maybrook freight line between Maybrook Yard and Hopewell Junction, beginning in the Spring of 1983. You know, this is not 1942-45, when they had US Army sentries on the Poughkeepsie Bridge twenty-four hours a day, to guard against German sabotage during World War II. Back then, when this was one of the key freight routes in the entire eastern United States, it was almost as vital as the Pennsylvania Railroad's Horseshoe Curve, which is now on the Norfolk Southern mainline west of Altoona, Pennsylvania. As of the 1974 fire, it had outlived its time and its design purpose. What it's going to do now is give people an incredible view of the river, a tremendous amount of railroad history, a visually-incredible structure: and all for relative pocket change of (as of 2014, about \$42 million), thanks primarily to New York State, the Dyson Foundation of Millbrook, and the Federal Government (in order of their cash contributions to the project).

**Interviewer:** Let me ask you, what kind of resistance did you find when you were first coming up with your ideas and your proposals?

**Pevsner:** Well I didn't find resistance; it's just that everyone thought it was fairly far-out as an idea, you know: "boy, that's interesting, but gee whiz...you know, we're just a little too conventional for this." That was the basic response I got. New York State, which I think should have taken title no later than 1984, didn't do it. They just didn't do it: either they didn't want the ownership responsibility, couldn't have cared less (paraphrasing William H. Vanderbilt's famous statement, "The public be damned"), and/or I couldn't get access high enough. Lack of money was certainly not a factor: the Bridge could have been purchased from Conrail for \$1, hundreds of millions of dollars in blanket liability insurance already existed at the New York State level, and maintenance on a non-operating, former railroad bridge would have been far less than on a

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structure that was continually being stressed by heavy, moving freight trains. Also, as an individual, you know, I don't associate with the Speaker of the Assembly, the President of the Senate and the Governor of the State of New York in Albany or elsewhere, and I certainly didn't in 1984 when this was all going on.

**Interviewer:** So would you enjoy coming out and seeing this thing when it gets done?

**Pevsner:** Yes. I'd love to do it (and did it in 2012).

**Interviewer:** Let me see--it looks like I've covered everything that the Mabee book had spoken of and some other stuff. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the Bridge?

**Pevsner:** I really can't think of anything else, except that it's an incredibly unique survivor of the industrial age of the late nineteenth century. Mostly built in 1888, that's (2014) 126 years ago, it opened to traffic on January 1, 1889. So the fact is that you've got this structure that was formerly a key part of the railroad network in the country, and they don't build bridges that look like this anymore, in case you're wondering: they're ugly concrete structures for the most part, or very-utilitarian steel. This one is a mind-blower, and it takes people back to what it was like in our booming, technology-adopting nation in 1888, twenty-three years after the Civil War ended. For that kind of an historical structure to survive against all odds is really an incredible boon to the area that it's in, and indeed to the whole State and nation as well as to the entire railroad-history community, of which I'm happy to be a part.

**Interviewer:** How would you think--how would you envision celebrating this bridge twenty, fifty, a hundred years from now?

**Pevsner:** I hope it's still standing 100 years from now, and I think that it will be even more historic than it is now. I'm just glad that neither Gordon Schreiber Miller, Vito Moreno nor the Walkway group owns it any longer, for painfully-obvious reasons.

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**Interviewer:** Great, great, I can't think of anything else to ask you, you've given some fantastic information here.

**Pevsner:** Yes: somebody finally named the bad guys here; there are very few people who were ever well-informed enough to do that. I was in the middle of this saga from 1983 all the way up to December 21, 2010 (the NYSBA ownership acquisition), and I saw who the bad guys were and personally dealt with most of them. I even talked to Gordon Schreiber Miller once.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Pevsner:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** What was that like?

**Pevsner:** Very strange: the telephone number that he gave me--this was in 1983-84, in pre-computer days--was answered as the St. Davids Taxi Company. It was a taxi company in the Philadelphia suburbs. I asked for him and he called me back from somewhere; he himself wasn't listed. He was a shadowy, mysterious figure. I must say, I find it absolutely outrageous that Conrail's Chairman and President would even consider selling the Poughkeepsie Bridge to a guy like that. L. Stanley Crane should have been fired for his scandalous conduct, but the key regional newspapers (including THE NEW YORK TIMES and the POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL) did not report one word assigning the ultimate responsibility to him, despite my own best-efforts to alert them. He died in Florida on July 15, 2003: 19 years after completely betraying the public trust by selling the Poughkeepsie Bridge to Gordon Schreiber Miller on November 2, 1984. It's just incredibly fortunate that no major accident occurred with the Bridge between then and December 21, 2010, when the NYSBA assumed ownership of it.

Imagine: over 26 continuous years of near-zero insurance and maintenance!

**Interviewer:** One thing that has always puzzled me and maybe you can offer opinion on it.

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**Pevsner:** About what?

**Interviewer:** Something always puzzled me about the selling of the Bridge to Gordon Schreiber Miller.

**Pevsner:** He was waiting in the wings, as Conrail's Lawrence J. Huff told me by telephone. He obviously had a contingent option, and one day after my third three-month option expired, Miller told Conrail, "I will now exercise my option". Conrail gave Miller the foot-high document pile of the deed (now in possession of the Walkway group), took Miller's \$1 purchase price, and "got it off the books". That was what L. Stanley Crane ordered in late 1984, as quoted to me verbatim by Lawrence J. Huff: "I just want to get it off the books; I'll sell it to the first warm body; I just want it off the books." After the \$300,000 Conrail eastern-viaduct cleanup expenditure in 1983, the Bridge under Conrail ownership was just a stuck chicken bone in Crane's throat. So Miller, who frankly I don't even think should be fit to own a working automobile, wound up as the owner of this incredible, landmark structure. In this case, the truth is stranger by far than fiction. And public officials have a hell of a lot to answer for by allowing this to happen.

**Interviewer:** That's amazing.

**Pevsner:** It's beyond amazing: it's malfeasance and misfeasance in the executive suite of Conrail, then-owned by the Federal Government, in the person of L. Stanley Crane, former president of the Southern Railway, and L. Stanley Crane has been lauded by many railroad professionals since then as a true railroader, a true professional. Looking at him as a lawyer, I see somebody who was an amoral, hidden corporate villain who betrayed the citizens of the United States and of New York State, just to "get it off the books". This is the kind of executive that should be put out to pasture and not let near anything dangerous again. I'm sorry he's not alive; I'd tell him that to his face, and a lot more besides. The same goes for all of those public officials in New York State who self-protectively turned the other way while the ultimate "attractive nuisance" prevailed in their back yards for 26 straight years.

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**Interviewer:** The Mabee book mentions that you approached several developers such as James Rouse and Donald Trump. What were their opinions?

**Pevsner:** Donald Trump is the last guy on earth I would want to do business with. He's not my type. He's a flamboyant, self-promoting egotist and exhibitionist and basically uses other people's money and makes it look like it's his own. I wouldn't have anything to do with him. I did approach Maryland developer James Rouse and famed broadcaster and newsreel icon Lowell Thomas, who was still alive at the time and living in Pawling. Thomas thought it was a fantastic idea, and had piles of stock in Capital Cities Broadcasting of Albany at the time, but, you know, between thinking that it's a great idea and finding somebody to put up the money to adaptively re-use the Bridge, maintain and insure it are two very different things. I gave that letter from Lowell Thomas to me to the Walkway group. He wrote me not long before he died. I also spoke very briefly to Frank Wells, President of Disney, whom I didn't trust not to steal the idea absent a non-disclosure agreement, which he refused to sign. He was killed in a Canadian ski-helicopter crash not long afterward.

**Interviewer:** Okay, what were some of the assessments from Rowell and Associates of North Syracuse? What did they think of the project?

**Pevsner:** Well, Rowell and Associates were railroad civil engineers, and they volunteered to donate a little time to see what the project prospects were.

**Interviewer:** What'd they think of it? How did they assess it?

**Pevsner:** Again, "who's going to pay for it?"

**Interviewer:** Right.



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**Pevsner:** That's the answer with everything: "who's going to write the check?" I couldn't find anybody over a nine-month period in 1984 to write the check.

**Interviewer:** Did they look at how structurally-sound the Bridge was at that point?

**Pevsner:** No, because Central Hudson had commissioned an engineering study not long before that time.

**Interviewer:** Right.

**Pevsner:** The study had to do with their Bridge-mounted power lines, first installed in 1949, and the question of whether or not Central Hudson should itself buy the Bridge as a platform for them. It would have been conducted about 1982, before I got involved and before Conrail secretly called for demolition bids, when Conrail was trying to sell the Bridge to Central Hudson. The consulting bridge engineers, DeLeuw, Cather and Company, recommended against Central Hudson buying the Bridge for this sole purpose, citing future costs of doing so versus locating the existing lines under the Hudson River. That relocation was speeded-up to 1985 as a direct result of Gordon Schreiber Miller's attempted price-gouging on access rental for crossing the Bridge. Central Hudson's outside engineering studies were provided to me by it, and, as I remember, the Bridge was in fairly good condition. I see from the Walkway group's website, by the way, that the piers are in good condition. I had heard years ago that there was some scouring on some of the piers that might have required some underwater repairs. The way they built them was with wooden and stone underwater cribs, which, fortunately, located down that deep in fresh water, preserves the wood. As of the 2009 renovation, both Bergmann Associates of Rochester and Albany (the general contractor) and NYSBA (via its [2014] 121-year-old, prominent bridge engineering consulting firm of Modjeski and Masters, of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania) have doubtless inspected everything, and the \$42 million current total of renovation costs includes some major structural renovations, made in 2009. I must assume that the current (2014) condition is very good.

**Interviewer:** Well great, I think that covers everything.

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**Pevsner:** Well it's good talking to you. If you need any updates on this, just give me a call at the same number.

**Interviewer:** One thing that I'm going to do, is shoot you over, I guess I'll fax it over, a release form and that basically is just a standard form that says I can use this recording.

**Pevsner:** Either email or fax it.

**Interviewer:** Okay great. Great, I'll get that off.

**Pevsner:** Make sure you have the fax number on it.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah, OK. Thank you very much, sir.

**Pevsner:** You're very welcome; it's been good talking to you.

**Interviewer:** All right, bye-bye.

**Pevsner:** Goodbye.

[End of Interview 37:22]

**Transcribed by Paul Contarino.**

**Updated by Donald L. Pevsner March 24, 2014; for further information, see the Wikipedia article "POUGHKEEPSIE BRIDGE."**