



Saunders Bridge Puts Accent on Access

The link is complete.

After two years of construction that prompted traffic delays and detours, and much curiosity, Saunders Bridge, the new entrance to Monticello, was opened July 3.

The stone-arch span over Route 53 realizes Thomas Jefferson's 1804 vision of "a bridge, open, under which the public road may be made to pass" at the site, known as Thoroughfare Gap. Although Jefferson never constructed such a structure, he was an admirer of stone-arch bridges. In 1787, he described the then-new Pont du Neuilly in Paris as "the handsomest bridge in the world."

In addition to providing motorists with safer access to Monticello, the completion of Saunders Bridge allows

pedestrians and cyclists to safely enter the grounds of Jefferson's home via the Saunders-Monticello Trail, a 2.2-mile pathway through the Thomas Jefferson Parkway, the linear greenbelt that begins at Kemper Park near the junction of Route 53 and Route 20.

A ceremony dedicating the Thomas Jefferson Parkway and its main components—Saunders Bridge, the Saunders-Monticello Trail, and Kemper Park—was scheduled for Nov. 2.

Work on the \$3.2 million Saunders Bridge project began in July 2000. The bridge was designed by Rieley and Associates of Charlottesville and the general

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

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Saunders Bridge over Route 53 was opened to traffic July 3.

This Issue's Other Stories

- 🐾 INDIAN DELEGATION
- 🐾 JULY 4
- 🐾 LEWIS & CLARK BICENTENNIAL
- 🐾 LEWIS & CLARK EXHIBITION
- 🐾 LEWIS & CLARK EXPOSITION
- 🐾 LIBRARY DEDICATION
- 🐾 NEWS AND NOTES
- 🐾 PRESIDENTS LETTER
- 🐾 SHADWELL MARKER
- 🐾 SLAVE HOUSE
- 🐾 SLAVE MEMORIAL
- 🐾 TWO NEW MONOGRAPHS
- 🐾 WEB FEATURE

MONTICELLO



Saunders Bridge

CONTINUED, PAGE TWO

contractor was W.C. English, Inc., of Lynchburg. Monticello's director of gardens and grounds, Peter Hatch, served as project manager.

The bridge was named in recognition of a leadership gift from Thomas A. Saunders III, chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's Board of Trustees, and his wife, Jordan.

The first visitors to drive across Saunders Bridge were Barry and Janice Adams of Roxboro, N.C., who were making their first trip to Monticello. They were greeted by Thomas Jefferson Foundation staff members and presented with complimentary tickets and a pewter model of the house.

Since then, what had been an active construction zone has been reclaimed as a site of both natural and manmade beauty. The former entrance to Monticello was blocked with an earthen barrier and a split-rail fence, and landscaping work on the surrounding area was begun. The bridge itself, with its distinctive fieldstone facing, stands as a striking landmark for local residents and visitors alike.

More than simply an aesthetic improvement, the bridge was built to provide greater safety and easier access.

The vast majority of Monticello's visitors reach the property by traveling eastbound on Route 53, a hilly, winding road. In the past, vehicles entering the grounds had to make a left turn at a curve on a hill and cross a lane of oncoming traffic. Those drivers often had to wait for westbound traffic to clear, which frequently created backups behind them. Together, these factors produced a high risk of both rear-end and head-on collisions.

Now, visitors traveling east on Route 53 make a right turn onto a cloverleaf ramp that carries them onto Saunders Bridge and over the increasingly busy thoroughfare. Additionally, the path of Route 53 itself



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A portion of the 2.2 mile Saunders-Monticello Trail.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

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Saunders Bridge

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**

was altered to reduce both the curve and grade, and a left-turn lane was put in place to accommodate Monticello-bound vehicles traveling west on the highway.

The pedestrian walkway on Saunders Bridge leading to Monticello will doubtless increase the flow on the Saunders-Monticello Trail, a popular attraction since its debut in 2000 despite the fact that it came to a dead end at the site of the new span. The backbone of the Thomas Jefferson Parkway, the gently graded trail runs between Kemper Park and Saunders Bridge through a mature woodland that includes an arboretum of native shrubs and trees, a two-acre pond, and Carter Overlook.

Guided tours of the Thomas Jefferson Parkway, offered every Sunday morning, were initiated in June and conducted through October. And the parkway will be further enhanced with the addition of a “winter interest” area to the arboretum and an amphitheater-style outdoor classroom.

The parkway’s popularity has often meant the presence of more vehicles than the 12-car lot at Kemper Park can accommodate. Work to alleviate the parking squeeze began in late summer with the construction of a pedestrian passageway under Route 53 that will eventually connect the existing parking area with an overflow lot.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org