

The Griggstown Bridge Tender's House & Its Tender Legacy

Written by: Vicki Chirco – D&R Canal State Park

The bridge tender house at the Griggstown Causeway is one among many that were built during the canal's construction. The first phase of canal house construction occurred during the latter half of the canal's initial build period in 1833-34. When the canal opened in June of 1834 only 12 houses were completed; by 1839, 33 houses were on the rolls – 14 lock houses and 19 bridge houses. Eventually the D&R Canal house inventory would come to a count of 67 along its 66-mile length from New Brunswick to Bordentown and from Trenton to Bulls Island (road/farm bridge and lock houses). **Today only 17 canal houses survive!**

The typical canal house on the D&R Canal was a two-story vernacular structure typical of modest homes in New Jersey in the first half of 19th century. At first, these houses were unadorned and painted white. In the later 19th century, doors and window frames on some were painted a darker color, and porches, shutters, decorative brackets and corbels were introduced. Most of the decorative elements used were of the same size and design, indicating they were probably standard Canal Company additions. While most of the houses looked similar to each other, each eventually developed its own peculiar individuality, from its setting, additions, and the changes made by successive occupants.



Griggstown Bridge Tender's house, station and A-frame swing bridge; c. 1910

The majority of the houses were of two basic styles – stone and clapboard. The canal house at Griggstown is of stone construction much like those built in other flood prone locations such as Kingston, Rocky Hill, Blackwells Mills, East Millstone, Weston, Zarephath South Bound Brook and Bogan's Lane near New Brunswick. Many of these still stand. They varied somewhat in layout and size but these were, generally speaking, two-story with a gable roof, stucco stone exteriors with two end chimneys. Most, though not all, had a center door on their façade and a second door on side or rear as is the case at Griggstown. Often there were roofs or porticos over doors and/or porches which were added later. The interior plans consisted of a simple layout with four rooms (2-over-2 with enclosed center stairway) and many had lean-to kitchen additions added towards the end of the 19th century. The Griggstown bridge tender house never included the additional lean-to kitchen found on many of the surviving canal houses. Lock houses were generally larger with more substantial additions.

When the canal officially opened in the summer of 1834 the bridge tender assigned to Griggstown was Hugh Blaney, an Irish immigrant who was born in Ireland in 1793. He was listed in the 1840 census with his wife Elizabeth Perrine (born in Somerset County, NJ sometime between 1809 – 1811) and five children under the age of 15 (Daniel, Hugh, Charles, Catherine and John). Hugh and Elizabeth would have two more children, Mary (b. 1843) and William James (b. 1852) before he passed in 1853. By the time of his death his two eldest sons, Daniel and Charles were 23 and 19 years old and likely assisted their mother with the bridge tending duties for a time. Neither the 1860 or 70 censuses specifically assigned the occupation “bridge tender” to anyone in Griggstown but

Elizabeth appeared on both censuses as did Daniel Blaney who resided in town with his large family; his was listed as a “laborer” and “farm laborer.” Elizabeth Blaney passed sometime in the 1870s. While it is not clear if she and/or her children tended the bridge and lived in the house until her passing, it is clear that by 1880 Daniel Blaney is officially listed in the census as “bridge tender.” His death in 1887 seemingly marked the end of the Blaney bridge tender legacy in Griggstown although it is possible that another family member took on the post for a time after his passing.

Unfortunately, the records for the 1890 federal census were lost so we don’t pick up the trail for the occupancy of the bridge tender house again until the next available census in 1900. By the turn of the 20th century the Slover family began its legacy of Canal Company employment in Griggstown. Both the 1900 and 1910 census indicate that Aaron Slover was stationed at the bridge tender’s house while Enoch Slover (Aaron’s father) and John Buchanan held the post at the Griggstown lock (lock 9) in 1910. By 1920 and 30 Aaron had taken over the duties at the lock. The 1930 census lists Frank Carr as bridge tender in Griggstown and Sandor Fekete as “gate tender.” It is suspected that Mr. Carr (a single man from France) was perhaps working the bridge at the lock along with Mr. Slover as it is clear from the census that Sandor Fekete was living in the bridge tender house on the Causeway. However, by the time the canal closed in 1932 Harold “Happy” Slover was tending the bridge in Griggstown while Sandor was reassigned as the bridge tender for Blackwells Mills.

Today the Griggstown bridge tender’s house has been restored with grant money from the National Scenic Byway program and serves the public as the Millstone Valley Scenic Byway Visitor Center. The building is open to the public during the spring and summer months on Saturday and Sunday for limited hours. Here visitors will find a variety of information about the Millstone Valley Scenic Byway, the D&R Canal State Park and the many natural and historic resources to be seen along the corridor. Of particular interest is the interpretation of the canal era kitchen. With the help of an inventory that was taken in November of 1853 after Hugh Blaney’s passing, this room is interpreted to the period of the family’s occupation during the mid-19th century. Make sure stop at this historic canal home the next time you are on the towpath in Griggstown!



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|------------------------------|----------|------------------------------|-------|
| 1 Horse | \$ 25.00 | Am. Bed w/ | 97.00 |
| 1 Hayrack | 15.00 | Wardrobe | 10 |
| 1 Cow | 25.00 | bed cloth | 20 |
| 1 Set Smp. Hampr | 1.00 | 20 yd Carpet in large Room | 3.00 |
| 1 Cooking Stove | 15.00 | Clothes Basket | 25 |
| 1 clock | 1.00 | Table & Beam cover | 50 |
| Pot & Kettle | 25 | Bedstead | 1.50 |
| 1/2 Saw on chest | 25 | Feather Bed | 3.00 |
| Shovel & Trough | 13 | Red. cord | 25 |
| cutting knife & Drifting Saw | 50 | 1/2 yd Boots | 4.00 |
| Pot & Kettle | 20 | Peening Apparel | 4.50 |
| Set Crockery & like cut 75 | | 1/2 yd Carpet | 35 |
| 3 Lamps | 30 | Lean place Stone | 50 |
| Churn & Table in kitchen | 1.25 | 3 New feather Beds & bedding | 12.00 |
| 2 Pots & Wash Basin | 35 | 1 Good feather Bed & bedding | 7.00 |
| Churn & Coffee mill | 1.20 | 3 Bedsteads & covers | 3.50 |
| Tray Pot & | | 1 Cot | 1.00 |
| 1 Basin | 6.00 | Large Spring Wheel | 50 |
| Coal Stone & Pipe | 5.00 | 20 yd Carpet in Stair | 2.00 |
| Table | 75 | 1/2 yd Carpet | 1.50 |
| Looking Glass | 1.50 | Scrap Shovel | 50 |
| 6 Chairs | 90 | Shovel & Iron Rod | 1.00 |
| Stove | 12 | Wheel Barrow & Wrench | 1.00 |
| | | 1/2 yd | |
| | | | 97.00 |

Hugh Blaney’s 1853 house inventory includes chairs and a table in the kitchen as well as a pot and kettle, 3 lamps, knives, forks, crockery, a churn, coffee mill, cooking stove, oil cloth among other items.