# *The Somesville Bridge*

By Roc Caivano

This is the story of a bridge and how it connected more than two sides of a stream.

In 1974, Helen and I rented a little house on the Beech Hill "Cutoff Road," owned by the sculptor Rudolph Condon. We had moved from upstate New York to Mount Desert Island to help build a curriculum in environmental design in the early years of College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor. The college was new, the students were few, and it was very important that we made every effort to validate our credentials in the world of academic and environmental thought. This meant long hours in meetings and classes searching for effective ways to understand the human population's impact on the planet and to teach it to the young people who came to study at our young institution. Big stuff—a lot for a young group to tackle—and our two-room cottage on the Cutoff Road was a welcome refuge when things got a bit overwhelming. We often went up to the AV Higgins Market in the heart of Somesville for groceries and a bit of human contact during those times. Victor and Ruby Higgins were a kind, older couple who hid a small chuckle in their short responses to our long questions. After a visit at the market, I would wander down to the old selectmen's building, rest on the rail, and watch Somes Brook disappear beneath the Route 102 bridge on its way to the sound. In every type of weather and at every time of year, this spot always brought a quiet clarity back to my thoughts. I did not know then the history of that place nor the impact it would play on our lives in the future. I just liked being there.

In the intervening years, I have learned that Somes Brook was likely one of the primary carrying trails used by the Native people in their 10,000-year association with Mount Desert Island.[1] Abraham Somes, the area's first English settler, built his homestead among

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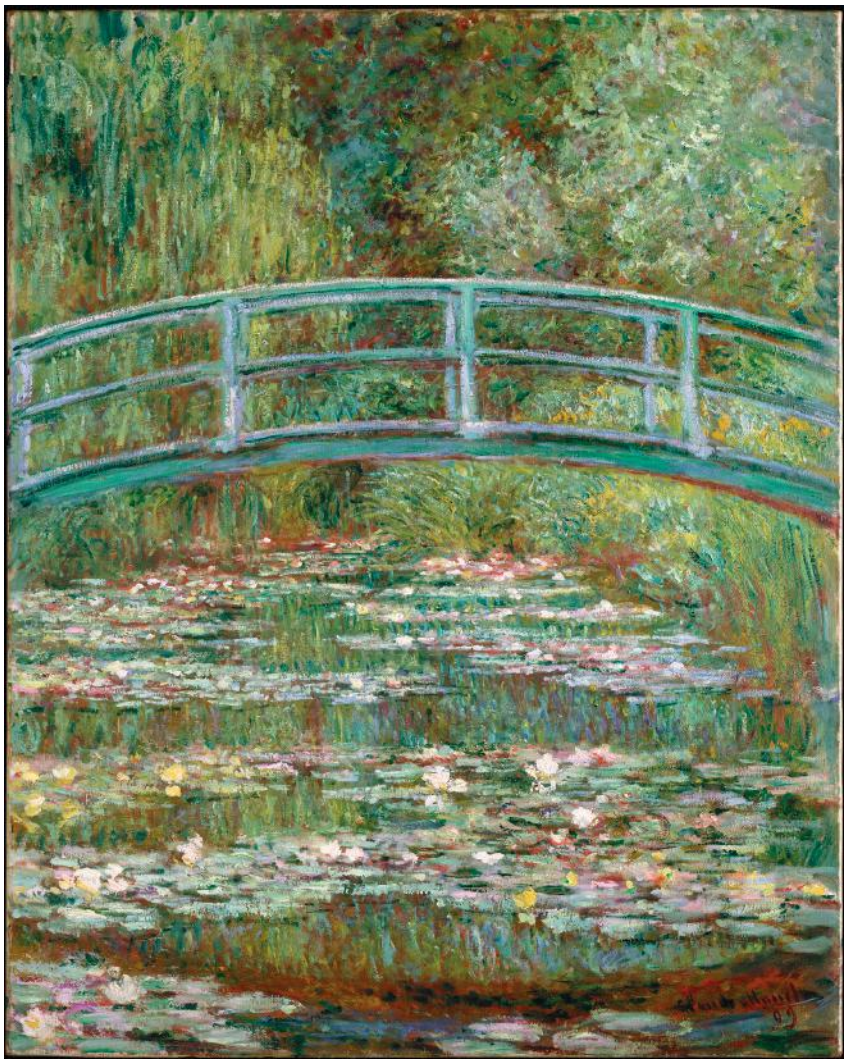
*This article was written with the help and encouragement of a number of friends, including Tim Garrity, Barbara Sassaman, Harris Hyman, Erin Early Ward, Willie Granston, Brad Emerson, Gerry Vasisco, Alan Baldwin, Ralph Stanley, Dick Cough, Ron Beard, Marla O'Byrne, Emily Bracale, Jeannie Smith, and Helen Caivano.*



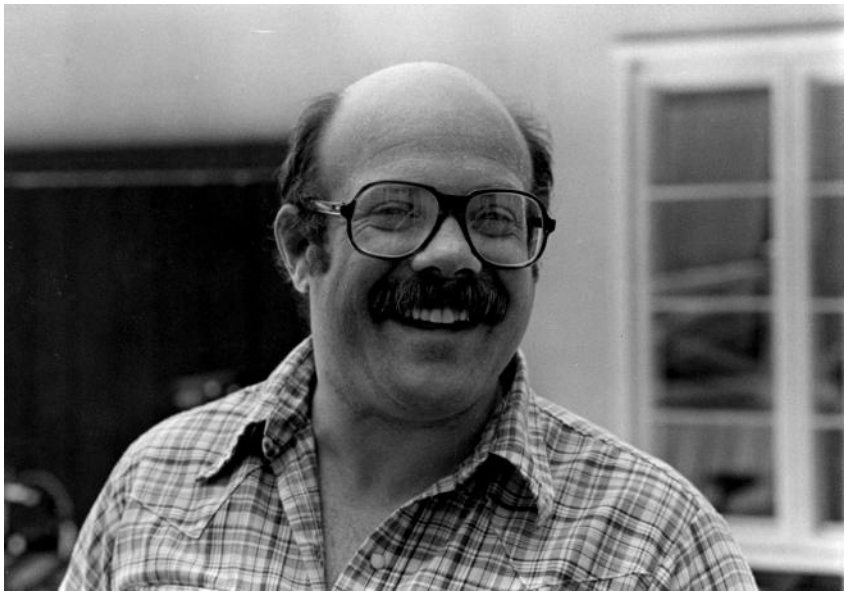
"Bridge over a Pond of Water Lilies," oil on canvas by Claude Monet, 1899. *Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org*

sturdy oaks near the freshwater of Somes Brook as it tumbled into the sound.[2] Even the attractive little selectmen's building with its diminutive scale and elegant details had a historic impact on the Mount Desert Island Historical Society[3] and would have an unpredictable connection with the curriculum I was trying to develop in those early years.

College of the Atlantic (COA) was imagined by Les Brewer and Jim Gower in the late '60s as a stable, year-round institution. Like The Jackson Laboratory, they hoped it would add economic and cultural balance to the eccentricities of Mount Desert Island's seasonal tourist industry. They chose Ed Kaelber as its first president, and with an excellent group of local trustees, it was decided that the colleges' focus would be on the evolution of thought in the area of environmental responsibility. After a series of false starts in the development of the new campus, the early administrators realized that, while they had built an excellent faculty capable of teaching and analyzing and protecting our valuable natural resources, they had no one who was trained in acting on that knowledge. They needed a builder, and in 1973, an ad was placed in *The New York Times* seeking a person to help them develop a program in environmental design.

Helen and I were designing and building buildings in various parts of the country and had developed an affinity for the unique requirements of each landscape and a desire to build more thoughtful structures. When we saw the COA ad seeking help in a field that was barely in the vernacular, I applied and was hired. During those early years, with the help of Dick Reinhardt, Bob Patterson and a number of local trustees, we developed a unique program that included courses in math, physics, botany, ecology, art, history, basic design and architecture. We received a federal grant that allowed us to add courses in engineering and solar design, as well as building classes, including carpentry, masonry, and blacksmithing. It was important to us to provide our students with a thorough classroom education and to allow them to become part of the useful present by giving them firsthand experience with real clients in the real world. The students and college staff took to this approach, and within a few years, we developed a pro bono workshop where Harris Hyman (the licensed engineer that our grant made possible), Tinker Bunker (our construction instructor), and I worked with groups of students on real projects in various locations on the island. We built school bus shelters on windy corners, completed an environmental impact study and welcome center design for Acadia National Park, and designed and supervised the construction of a kitchen and small apartment in Westbridge, a home at the end of West Street in Bar Harbor. We

The first Somesville bridge as it appeared around 1983. Can you spot the subtle difference between this bridge and the one that replaced it in 1995? *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*



Harris Hyman, the engineer who designed the Somesville Bridge, circa 1980. *Courtesy of College of the Atlantic*

designed and built a small solar greenhouse, and measured, analyzed, designed, and built the first renovations to The Turrets on COA's campus. The students involved in these projects came in every size and shape. Many of them went on to successful professional careers in the design, building, and alternative-energy fields. I remember them as a motley crew of good-natured scalawags. One student insisted on straightening the bent nails that dropped to the ground during a day of construction so as not to waste them. Another went to a small village in Korea, built an indigenous house with local materials, then gave it to an old woman in the village whose house had burned down the previous winter. They were priceless.

None of this would have happened without the encouragement and oversight of a great number of older local people. The architects Bob Patterson and Tommy Thomas took part in class critiques, and Richard Hill would travel from Orono to teach us about solar heat. Keith Miller "hired" us to help him analyze Thompson Island for the park. Buzzy Beal and Alida Camp and Betty Owens sat in on a number of student presentations. Those older community members seemed to stand quietly in the wings, watching over our efforts, and would add a note of encouragement when needed. A memorable example of this was when Bob Patterson and Ralph Stanley asked our students to help them solve a storage problem that the Mount Desert Island Historical Society was wrestling with at Somes Brook.

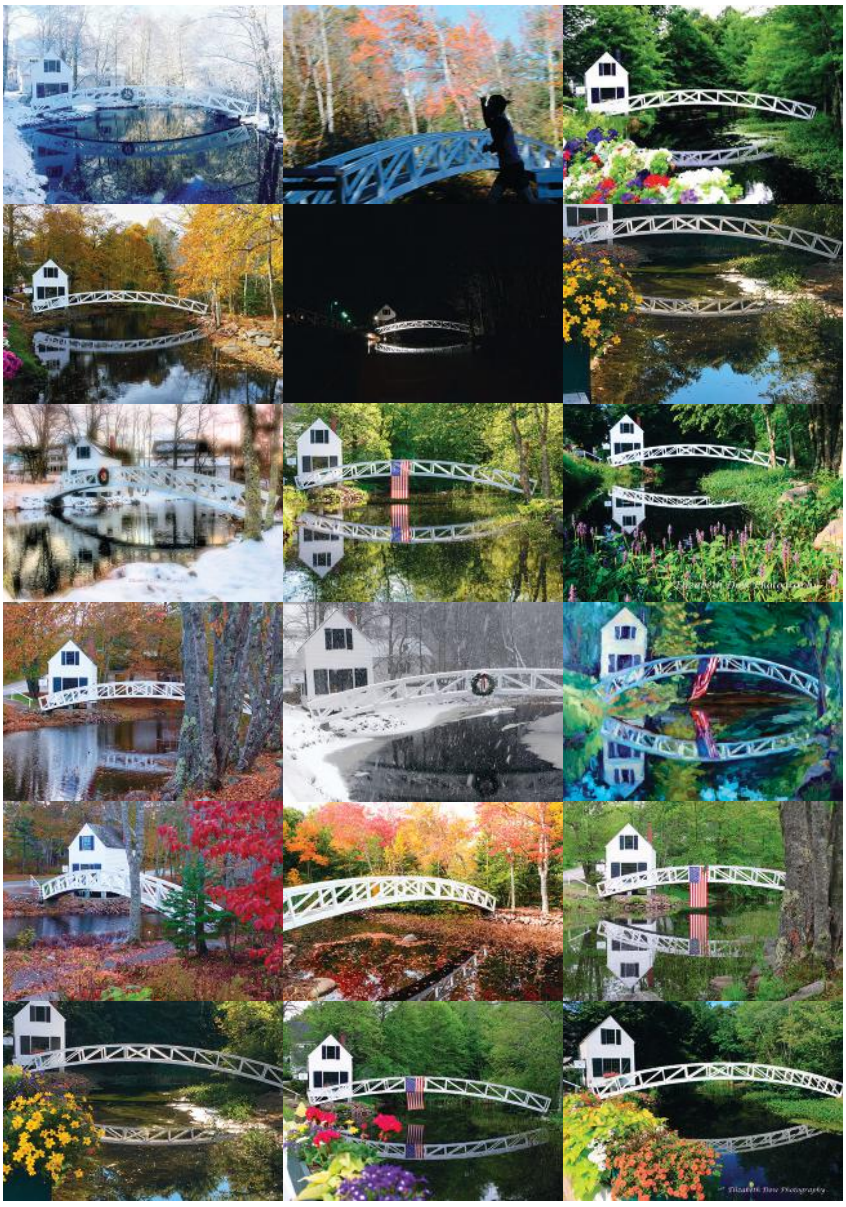
It seems the historical society was given the little selectmen's building and the property on either side of Somes Brook by the estate of John Allen Somes in 1931.

The building had gone through many iterations before and since its inheritance by the historical society, and in the late '70s, it was being used for the storage and display of items of local interest. There were many more items of interest than the little structure could hold, and a committee was formed to suggest a solution. One committee member suggested they erect a prefabricated garage to house the inventory overflow on their property across the brook from the selectmen's building. That's when Ralph Stanley suggested that our COA team take a look at the problem. It was important to our class that we suggest a better alternative, and the students worked hard to analyze the site and the program and to suggest a responsible solution.

College of the Atlantic students celebrate their graduation, 1981. *Courtesy of College of the Atlantic*

The downside of giving young people experiences outside the classroom is that things don't always run smoothly. In that instance, some of the members of the historical society board became quite testy during the formal presentation of our suggestions. One still wanted the prefabricated garage. Another thought the porch we designed for sitting and looking across the brook looked "shacky." And then there were some heated discussions that seemed to have nothing to do with the students' design, but harkened back to older internecine debates. As a professional architect, this was not the first time I had seen civic groups squabble. The democratic process does not guarantee smooth sailing, and experience suggests that cranky behavior is often seen among people with an emotional investment in their task, like historic or religious committees. The students were disappointed that no decisions were made. Harris and I regretted that our efforts had ended in confusion but found the students proud to have had the opportunity to present their work in a public venue, and we all looked forward to a well-earned summer break.

A few weeks after the term ended, Ralph Stanley called and said the group was still looking for satisfactory building plans to house their ever-growing collection of historic treasures. This was Ralph Stanley, the wooden boat guy. One doesn't say no to Ralph Stanley. I told him that the class was dispersed and that I was not



The Somesville Bridge has become one of the most photographed places in Maine. *Bridge montage images courtesy of Jan Brandt, Claire Daniel, Liz Dow, Don Hudspeth, John Kaznecki, Renee Lammers, Virginia Mellen, Brendan O'Keefe, Wendell Perone, Michele Shea, Susan Silverman, Isaiah Soll, and Wade Walton*

sure how to proceed. In his unassuming way, he said, "I guess you're just going to have to do it." So, I went back to the office I shared with Harris Hyman and Barb Sassaman on the second floor above Buzzy Beal's icehouse on Beal's Wharf and drew a simple, wood-framed, clapboard building that met the budget and requirements of the historical society. It was affordable and simple enough in appearance that there was not much for the committee to squabble about, and they agreed to build according to the plans as presented. The building had a steep-pitched roof and white clapboard siding that was tightly spaced at the bottom and gradually opened to a wider exposure at the top. This was something we found common in old homes on the island. It put extra protection close to the ground, where a wood structure is vulnerable. We used old-fashioned multi-paned windows and doors, painted exterior white, and dyed the concrete floor slab brick red. I remember Bruce Hamor of L.E. Norwood and Sons sifting the concrete dye powder through a flour sifter onto the curing concrete slab because that was the "only way to get the color consistent," and we all went home in brick-red boots that evening. Our building was well received. The Mount Desert Island Historic Society was finally happy. And the selectmen's building had a new neighbor on the opposite shore.

Not long after the building was completed, Bob Patterson said that Virginia Somes Sanderson wanted to speak with me. I was invited for tea. Her house was a lovely, old Colonial building that sat on the western shore of the Mill Pond and looked south over Somes Harbor. It was late afternoon in the early fall. The light was low and golden as her companion showed me into the library. Mrs. Sanderson appeared to me to be a substantive and regal lady. I knew she had written a well-received history of the town and that she was a direct descendant of the first Englishman to colonize Mount Desert Island. She was gracious and offered me a seat and some tea. Our conversation was easy and to the point, and I felt welcome in her home.

She said how pleased she was to see our little structure on the town site that, until that point, had been used to store road salt and maintenance equipment. She was a member of the historical society's board and asked what I thought we might do next. I repeated a suggestion that one of my students had made while working on our

project months earlier and said it might be nice to build a bridge across Somes Brook connecting the selectmen's building with the new storage structure. Mrs. Sanderson sat up beaming and said, "I think that is a marvelous idea young man. Let's do it." We discussed possible costs, and she said she would like to pay for the design and construction of the new bridge. I will never forget the dappled afternoon light as I left Mrs. Sanderson's home, amazed by what had just transpired.

Back at the office, Harris, Barb, and I set about designing a wooden footbridge to cross the brook. We realized our first task was to locate the logical and stable anchoring points on each shore. Harris manned his transit, and Sass waded into the stream as they tested the soils and measured the depth. They located the best anchoring points on each shore, and the final span proved to be fifty-eight feet long. Harris thought a bridge that long warranted hefty support. He sketched up suggestions, and Sass or I called out "nope" or "terrible" or "belongs on the interstate," and he crumbled up the rejects and threw them on the floor. Piles of discarded tracing paper grew larger at the base of his desk as the tide moved in and out of the harbor below. We decided to permanently anchor the bridge's railing structure to its floor beams to form one continuous truss support and railing system on each side of the walkway. This was a system similar to the gangways that connected the docks to the floats at the wharf outside our studio window. I suggested that we make the bridge arch over the stream to provide clearance for a person in a boat below, and the arched form would celebrate the flow of water moving beneath the bridge, which was similar to the one in Monet's garden. We came up with a number of design options and settled on a plan with railing supports radiating out from the bridge's center of curvature. This not only strengthened our truss-railing system, but it also reinforced the appearance of the bridge's curved effort to span the brook.

When we presented our design to the historical society board, there were a few skeptical comments about its strength. One older member suggested it might not even withstand the amorous activities of island youths. While I thought this an odd remark, Harris took it seriously, and the next morning, we discussed the problems of "dynamic loading," the engineering phenomenon that



A replacement bridge, built with pressure-treated lumber, is installed in 1995. *Mount Desert Island Historical Society*

causes marching soldiers to break stride when crossing a bridge. Harris ran the numbers and found our design to be more than adequate to the task. Inspired by this, we then checked its ability to withstand a half dozen of the heftier local boys celebrating with a case of beer and jumping up and down, or a large wedding party posing for photographs, or a fourth-grade field trip. These were all situations that we thought would never occur but ultimately did. We returned to the historical committee and assured them that our design was structurally sound. To assuage the remaining skeptics, Ralph Stanley showed them how they might add a simple metal "x" brace from the arch to the bottom of the stream if our calculations proved to be wrong. With his assurance, the committee allowed us to proceed.

Bob Patterson and Mrs. Sanderson asked us to find a builder. Brian Hamor was an excellent builder who lived near the site. Harris and I knew him to be a bright and easy fellow to work with, so we scheduled a meeting to discuss construction. Brian liked the ideas Harris showed him, and he added a few of his own. We decided that the only way to complete the project within the budget was to use lumberyard spruce and pine and treat the structure with multiple coats of penetrating weather-protecting stain every few years. We presented the plans, budget, and contractor's schedule to Mrs. Sanderson and were given permission to proceed. The concrete landing piers were poured with integral steel anchoring plates. Brian built the bridge off site, and on a warm summer day in 1981, a great crane lowered it into place. I don't think there was much fanfare at the time, and it was just as well, as we were not sure how the greater community would receive this bold, new object in the center of the village.

It became clear that our project was successful in the ensuing months as the number of people stopping to photograph the bridge increased, and that January, a bank calendar arrived in the mail with a photograph of the "Historic Old Somesville Bridge" on its cover.

The lumberyard lumber did not hold up without annual maintenance, and when that faltered, so did our bridge. In 1995, Harris Hyman reissued the same plans he had drawn fifteen years earlier, detailing the now-popular landmark. This time, he specified pressure-treated yellow pine, and the second generation now sits on

its site, supporting wedding parties, family groups, visitors from around the world, and likely a few amorous couples as well.

I have been thinking about the components that go into creating a strong sense of place. Of course, dramatic natural landscapes capture our hearts. The ancient history of that little brook in Somesville surely must help as well. But what is it that makes a project made by human hands attracting and memorable? There are definable geometric relationships that do just this. Some of these are evident in our bridge: an arched form that graces the stream it crosses, balusters that radiate outward from a center point, a big white bridge that connects two little, white buildings. But we all have seen buildings with elegant lines that just don't make it. Why is that?

I think people have to breathe life into the objects that they create for those objects to become memorable. All those wonderful old-timers, even the cranky ones, watched and encouraged and mentored us, and helped us create a connection between their history and our enthusiasm.

The little bridge in Somesville connects not only two opposite shores, it also connects the encouragement of a past generation to the dreams of the next generation. Always a thing of beauty.

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*Roc Caivano taught at College of the Atlantic from 1974 through 1981. He became a registered architect, and then worked on buildings in New England from an office on Mount Desert Island until he retired in 2013. He has been a member of the boards of a number of island nonprofit organizations, the Bar Harbor Planning and Design Review boards, and the Bar Harbor Fire Department.*

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[1] Margie Coffin Brown and Jim Vekasi, *Pathmakers: Cultural Landscape Report for the Historic Hiking Trail System of Mount Desert Island: Acadia National Park, Maine: History, Existing Conditions & Analysis*. (Boston, MA: Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation, National Park Service, 2006), 13.

[2] Virginia Somes Sanderson, *The Living Past* (Mount Desert: Beech Hill Publishing, 1982), 35.

[3] Ibid., 245–246.