

HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION  
CITY LANDMARK DESIGNATION  
STAFF REPORT

RATTLESNAKE CANYON BRIDGE  
1819 LAS CANOAS ROAD, SCOFIELD PARK  
SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA  
APN 021-040-024

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**Background:**

Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge was constructed in 1919 with a closed spandrel 25-

*Above: View of the Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge from the road facing east. April 2016.*

foot span arch made out of ashlar, rectangular cut sandstone. The bridge was designed by master engineer Owen Hugh O’Neill Jr., who designed the majority of the masonry arch bridges built in Santa Barbara County and was also a civic leader in the community. The bridge represents the outstanding attention to design and engineering of Owen Hugh O’Neill. The bridge is a testament of the work of master mason Peter Poole, whose talent gave the bridge high artistic value and excellent craftsmanship with the unique rectangular cut arch with uncut rubble spandrel walls that blend the bridge into its natural environment. Peter Poole was a local mason who built much of the sandstone infrastructure of Santa Barbara. This was one of Peter Poole’s more significant contributions to Santa Barbara’s stonework in one of Santa Barbara’s most popular hiking and recreation areas.

The bridge is on Las Canoas Road over Rattlesnake Creek in the northwestern corner of the City by Skofield Park. It opened a new road connection between Mission Canyon on the west and Sycamore Canyon on the east and also provided access for the City’s expansion into Santa Barbara’s backcountry. The bridge is at the base of Rattlesnake Canyon, one of the most popular hiking and recreational areas in Santa Barbara. The Spanish first “developed” the canyon in the early 1800s, evidence of which can still be seen today. The Spanish called it Las Canoas (The Canoes) and in the second half of the 1800s, the canyon came to be called Rattlesnake. Supervisor Sam Stanwood

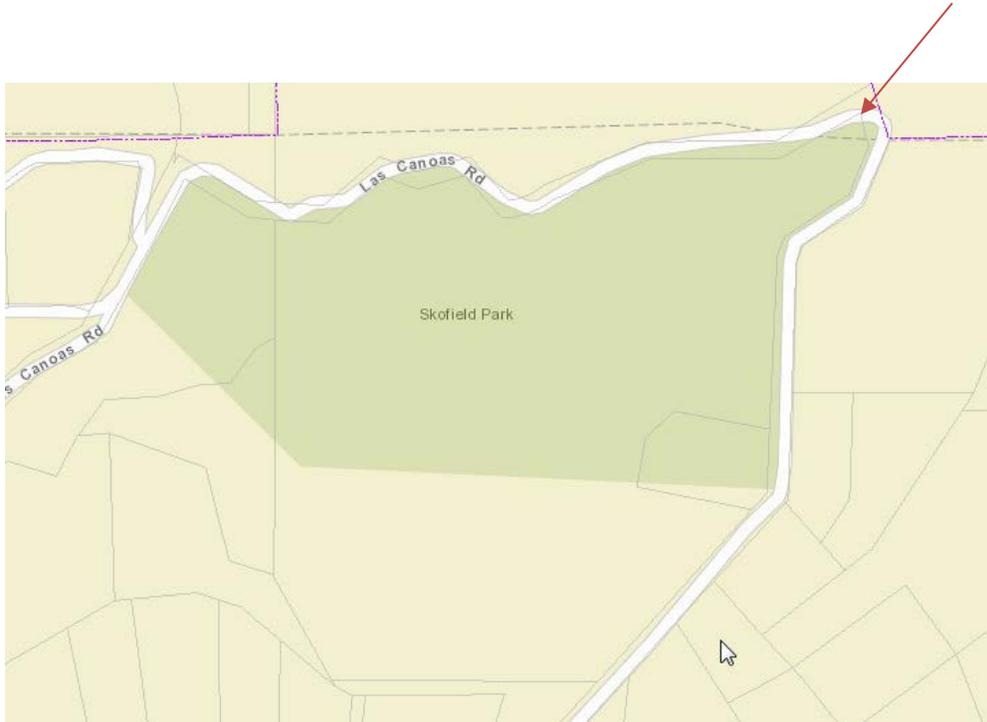
suggested the bridge be built of rounded stream stones to better harmonize with the environment. Although Rattlesnake Creek has been subject to numerous floods over time, the bridge still stands solidly over the creek above Skofield Park.

The nomination of the Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge for listing in the National Register of Historic Places and designation as a City Landmark was required by the City of Santa Barbara Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC) as part of its acceptance of the demolition of the Montecito-Yanonali Street Bridge in the Historic Structures/Sites Report on December 16, 2016. As the Montecito-Yanonali Street Culvert was one of only a few remaining examples of a masonry stone arch structure in the City but was not highly visible, it was concluded that the preservation of another similarly eligible masonry stone arch structure with greater public access would provide mitigation for the loss of this rare resource type. There were three masonry arch bridges either listed or previously determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places in the City of Santa Barbara. The Mission Creek Bridge is listed under a multiple-property documentation package. The Sycamore Canyon Creek and Rattlesnake Canyon bridges have not been listed but were determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The Sycamore Canyon Creek Bridge is located on State Route 192, is on an active thoroughfare, and only provides one lane of traffic. This bridge will likely need to be replaced/upgraded in the near future, resulting in the loss of another such structure. The Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge, however, is located in Skofield Park and is one of only two remaining unmodified masonry arch bridges made of uncut rubble in all of California. The bridge's location in the park provides greater accessibility to the public compared to the visually restricted location of the Montecito-Yanonali Street Culvert that is to be demolished. To further enhance recognition of the rare masonry bridge type and its historical significance to the public, it was a condition of approval of the demolition of the Montecito-Yanonali Street Culvert that the bridge be nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and as a City Landmark. Because the Bridge meets the City Landmark eligibility criteria for its historical significance, it is the opinion of the HLC Designations Subcommittee that the building is an excellent candidate for City Landmark designation.



*Left: View of the North façade of the bridge with spandrel walls. April 2016.*

*Vicinity Map*



*Vicinity Map/topographic map, City of Santa Barbara Mapping Analysis and Printing  
Summer 2015*





**Historic Context:**

This section was excerpted from *Survey and Evaluation of Masonry Arch Bridges*, a thematic study prepared by Stacie Ham

and Andrew Hope (2003) for the Caltrans State and Local Historic Bridge Inventory update.

Use of masonry for construction in the Santa Barbara area dates back to the time the Spanish arrived. Since it was necessary to travel some distance into the woods to obtain lumber, but rocks were found scattered on the ground, stone became the preferred building material. Stones were cut and incorporated into the original Santa Barbara Mission structures, although most of the early buildings and walls of the mission were made of adobe. In 1811, stone arches were erected the length of the main corridor. After the mission was badly damaged in the earthquake of 1812, thick walls of sandstone were incorporated into the towers (Santa Barbara News-Press 2 March 1975). The tradition of building with stone continued in Santa Barbara County through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This method of construction was often chosen because local brown sandstone was readily available and easily transformed from round or shapeless boulders into symmetrical smooth faced stone for building purposes. A local stonemason explained in July of 1883, “When a quantity of it is wanted, a blast of powder is drilled into the heart of one of the large boulders and

*Above: View of the bridge going east on Las Canoas Road.. April 2016.*



exploded and a number of square edged building stones are produced”

*Above: North elevation of the arch. April 2016.*

(Santa Barbara News-Press July 1883). Many residences, walls, bridges, and commercial structures were constructed out of local sandstone during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Immediately after the First World War, Santa Barbara began a concerted effort to revamp its visual image. During this time, city planners carefully monitored all construction of any new structure to make sure it was consistent with the master plan that was based on a Hispanic/Mediterranean streetscape mode (Conard and Nelson 1986:14). The use of a traditional building material, sandstone, in the construction of the many new bridges and culverts built during this period was in line with Santa Barbara’s planning and design efforts.

The majority of the masonry arch bridges built in Santa Barbara County were the result of designs by county surveyor Owen Hugh O’Neill, Jr. O’Neill was born on February 8, 1873 in La Graciosa in Santa Barbara County. His father, O.H. O’Neill Sr., was born in Ireland and educated at Trinity College in Dublin, and upon coming to the United States, he found work in a company of engineers. The younger O’Neill spent time in Mexico where he worked from 1905 until 1909 at various companies including the Canarea Consolidated Copper Company and Guerrero Plantation and Investment Company. He returned to Santa Barbara County in 1909 where he worked as a draftsman for both the city engineer and county surveyor. He was elected county surveyor in 1914 and held that position until 1946. While serving as county surveyor, he



also maintained a private practice until the surveyor's position became a full-time job in 1931. He served as president of the California County Engineer's Association and was a life member of the American Society of Civil Engineers. After retiring, he was elected to the Santa Barbara City Council for one term in 1949 and then became planning commissioner for Santa Barbara County until 1961. An important local figure in the Santa Barbara community, O'Neill edited a history of the county in 1939 and also lectured on California history (Israel 1980:197–199). (11–14)

*Above: View of the form concrete interior of the arch of the bridge from the south side of the arch, with date of construction in the keystone. April 2016.*

In the years from 1870 to 1940, when Santa Barbara was quickly evolving into a vibrant, growing city, the period witnessed an extraordinary explosion of stone construction made possible by the abundant supply of sandstone, cadre of expert masons, and financing by private citizens. This period provided an atmosphere conducive to the building of public and private spaces of all kinds, bridges, walls, gardens, and an assortment of other stone works and encouraged some exceptional expressions of the masons' art. Among the most apparent expressions of the beauty in stone that give the region such distinction are the bridges. While serving a functional purpose, they are artistic expressions. Santa Barbara is cut through by a number of creeks and their canyons, which drain from the mountains to the sea. All east-west roads are forced to span these sometimes steep canyons and always volatile streams, dry during the summer but occasionally raging torrents in the winter rainy season; these

crossings demand seriously engineered bridges. Local masons were imbued with the tradition of the arch, the constructive power of which liberated stoneworkers from the constriction of post and lintel.

In the early 1900s, as Santa Barbara was developing this important infrastructure, masons took advantage of the opportunity to display a variety of styles and approaches. In doing so, they created and maintained a high standard for excellence in stonework, one that has lasted over a century. At the behest of the County Supervisor, Sam Stanwood, rounded stones were used for the Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge façade over the rectangular cut arch, as Stanwood believed it would better blend the bridge into its natural surroundings. Designer O'Neill put a unique signature on the



*Above: The sandstone plaque crediting Stanwood, Poole, and O'Neill for the bridge design and construction. April 2016.*

Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge by placing large rounded rocks, in keeping with the bridge's theme on the top of the end posts. Less information is available regarding the stone mason Peter Poole. A Scottish stonemason, he was responsible for a number of stone buildings in Santa Barbara; Poole is considered by Santa Barbara historians to be local significance in the stone building tradition.

Ray I. Skofield, a New York City stockbroker, purchased the canyon in 1927. In the mid-1920s, his family moved to Santa Barbara, hoping climate would help his ailing wife. Skofield, a founding member of Rancheros Visitadores, set aside part of his property for the group to use in their annual trek over the Santa Ynez Mountains. His son sold his 35 acres to the group in 1950; the group then sold the land to the City of Santa Barbara in 1964. Towards the end of the 1960s, Skofield's daughter and son offered the balance of the family holdings to the City of Santa Barbara as parkland, and in 1970, with a combination of city, county, and federal funds, the transfer of more than 450 acres was given as part of the park, a gift to the thousands of hikers who enjoy the area annually.

### **Significance:**

The City of Santa Barbara defines historic significance as outlined by the Municipal Code, Section 22.22.040. Any historic building that meets one or more of the eleven criteria (Criteria A through K) established for a City Landmark or a City Structure of Merit can be considered significant. Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge meets the following four criteria:

***Criterion A. Its character, interest or value as a significant part of the heritage of the City, the State or the Nation***

Constructed in 1919 out of sandstone with an ashlar, rectangular cut arch with uncut rubble spandrel walls laid in irregular courses, this closed spandrel arch has a 25-foot span. The mason of the arch was John Poole, and it was designed by Owen Hugh O’Neill, Jr. This was one of Peter Poole’s more significant contributions to Santa Barbara’s stonework in one of the City’s most popular hiking and recreation areas. The bridge qualifies as a City Landmark because it is a significant part of the heritage of the City.



*Above: View of the Bridge railing walls from Las Canoas Road. . April 2016.*

***Criterion C. Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the culture and development of the City, the State or the Nation***

The mason of the bridge was Peter Poole, a local mason who built much of the sandstone infrastructure of Santa Barbara. The bridge was designed by engineer Owen Hugh O’Neill, Jr., who designed the majority of the masonry arch bridges built in Santa Barbara County and was also a civic leader in the community.

***Criterion G. Its embodiment of elements demonstrating outstanding attention to architectural design, detail, materials and craftsmanship***

The bridge’s unique rectangular cut arch with uncut rubble spandrel walls that blend the bridge into its natural environment demonstrates outstanding attention to design. The bridge is made of Santa Barbara sandstone, demonstrating outstanding attention to materials. The excellent masonry craftsmanship is demonstrated in the rectangular cut stone under the arch.

***Criterion I. Its unique location or singular physical characteristic representing an establish and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood***

The bridge is at the trailhead for Rattlesnake Canyon, where thousands of hikers see the unique sandstone bridge and have done so since 1919 when it was constructed. Thus, the sandstone bridge is a familiar visual feature to Rattlesnake Canyon.

**Historic Integrity:**

Since 1919, the bridge’s location at the base of the Rattlesnake Canyon hiking trail, a natural setting between two canyons in the hills of Santa Barbara surrounded by native, natural plantings, has not changed. Since the design of the bridge relates directly to its function as a transportation crossing, it is also important that the bridge still accommodates a road situated over the creek, and thus, the bridge has high integrity of setting, location, feeling, and association. The essential features of its design,



including the arch, abutments, spandrel wall, parapet railing, and piers are intact, and it retains integrity of design, workmanship, and feeling. The historic sandstone materials, with the exception of the large stone cap on the southeast pier that is missing, are present, giving the bridge a high integrity of materials. Evidence of the craft of the ashlar cut stone masonry technology remains as seen around the arch of the bridge; thus, the bridge has high integrity of workmanship. The building has retained a high level of historic integrity so that the building conveys its original 1919 appearance.

*Above: View of one of the large sandstone piers. April 2016.*

**Recommendation:**

Staff recommends that the HLC adopt a resolution to recommend to City Council that the Rattlesnake Canyon Bridge be designated as a City Landmark. Staff recommends the proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation include the 1919 bridge itself and no other features in the Canyon.

**Works Cited:**

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