



Horace King

From Slave to Master Bridge Builder
By Richard G. Weingardt, P.E.

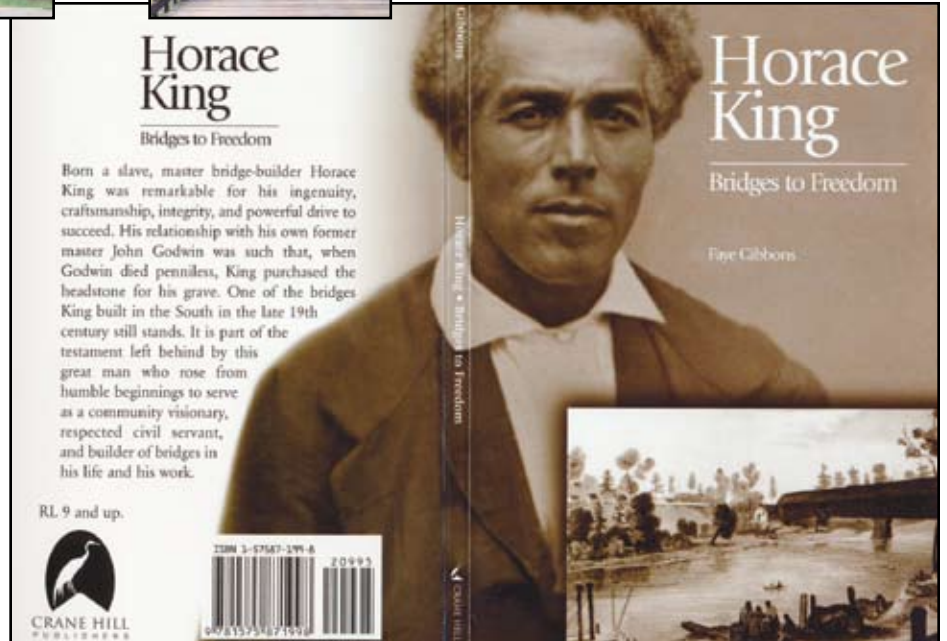
The oldest wooden covered bridge in the state of Georgia stands over the Big Red Oak Creek in rural Meriwether County. It was built by the extraordinary 19th century bridge engineer Horace King.

Raised in bondage in South Carolina, King steadily rose above the barriers of slavery to become the most respected bridge builder in west Georgia, Alabama and northeast Mississippi in the mid-to-late 1800s. Although only the Big Red Oak Creek Bridge has survived among King's 100-plus bridges, it is a tribute to this master builder's skillful workmanship and enduring contribution to engineering, which was recognized more than a century later when he was inducted into the State of Alabama's Engineering Hall of Fame in 1989.

Born September 8, 1807 in South Carolina's Cheraw District, Horace was the son of slaves Edmund and Susan King. Edmund had a mixture of Negro and European blood, while Susan had Catawba Indian and Negro ancestry. It would take King half of his lifetime to become free from the slavery into which he was born.



Timber roadway entrance. Photo Courtesy of Kim Foster Photography.



Cover of the book *Horace King: Bridges to Freedom* (by Faye Gibbons) with a photograph of Horace King in middle-age. The covered bridge shown is the City Bridge at Columbus, Georgia, one of King's 100-plus covered bridges. Courtesy of Crane Hill Publishers and Benjamin T. Gibbons III.

Although reading and writing were not encouraged or even condoned among slaves in the South, young Horace learned these skills early. Mixing them with diligence enabled him to become a highly skilled craftsman

– a carpenter and mechanic – in his late teens. Over his lifetime, King believed so strongly in the power of education that he became famous for the phrase, “Ignorance breeds poverty.”

In 1820, a Connecticut master carpenter and bridge engineer, Ithiel Town, patented a lattice-type truss bridge and built wooden covered bridges based on this design throughout the East. It included an historic bridge over the Pee Dee River in the Cheraw District near King's home. The 20-year-old King, an accomplished carpenter by then, was the ideal craftsman for building such structures. It is unknown whether he actually worked on the bridge, but it seems likely that he did. At the very least, he would have been a keen observer of this major undertaking. Anything he learned about how Town designed and constructed bridges – both hands-on and by observation – would prove valuable and ultimately shape the direction of his life.

When King turned 22 in 1829, his elderly owner died. King and his mother suddenly became the property of Jennings Dunlap, a South Carolina slave trader. In turn, he sold both of them to John Godwin, a building

contractor and Town's student. Godwin recognized young King's building talents and believed that he would be a great asset should Godwin go full out into the bridge-building business.

In fact, Godwin did make serious plans to move southwest into wilderness area to seek his fortune as a bridge builder. Because of rugged roads and an absence of bridges, travelers depended on fords or ferries to navigate the river waters. Opportunities for ambitious builders like Godwin were limitless. They could make serious money constructing bridges and other buildings that new frontier towns required.

In 1832, the new town of Columbus, Georgia accepted Godwin's bid to build a bridge across the Chattahoochee – the river separating southern Alabama and Georgia. With King in his entourage, Godwin moved to Columbus and put the reliable Horace in charge of jobsite supervision and construction detailing. The pair completed Columbus' City Bridge quickly and, in 1833, moved to Girard on the Alabama side of the river, where they jumped into numerous construction projects, among them house building. First came Godwin's home, then King's, followed by speculative homes. In fact, early in its history, Godwin and King had built nearly every house in Girard.

Once they started erecting bridges and other structures together – first as master and worker, then as business partners – they developed a close, affable friendship that transcended slave-owner traditions of the 19th century South. Their design and construction projects grew in size and complexity. They keenly sought more education about the intricacies of the trade, reading everything they could. Rumor has it that Godwin sent King to Oberlin College in Ohio to expand his skills. In the early to mid-1800s, Oberlin was an integrated community far ahead of others in its anti-slavery views. Oberlin College was "the only place in the country where a black man could get a low-cost education, and the same time be respected as a man."

After King finished studying at Oberlin, he supposedly returned to Alabama prepared to design and construct more and bigger bridges.



Above: Interior view of a typical "Town Lattice Truss" covered bridge. Visible are the wooden pegs used to connect the diagonal members at their intersections. Courtesy of Library of Congress-HABS/HAER.

Right: Wooden pegs connecting diagonal members in the Big Red Oak Creek Bridge. Courtesy of Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc.



Godwin and King together felt capable of taking on any bridge project that came their way and often guaranteed it for five years – they replaced or repaired any of their bridges that sagged or suffered flood damage without charge within that time. This practice quickly firmed up their reputation as sought-after bridge builders in the South.

Known for City Bridge, the pair also built the famous 800-plus-foot-long Eufaula Bridge south of Columbus. At 70 feet above water – much higher than most bridges of its era – Eufaula was an awesome sight to behold.

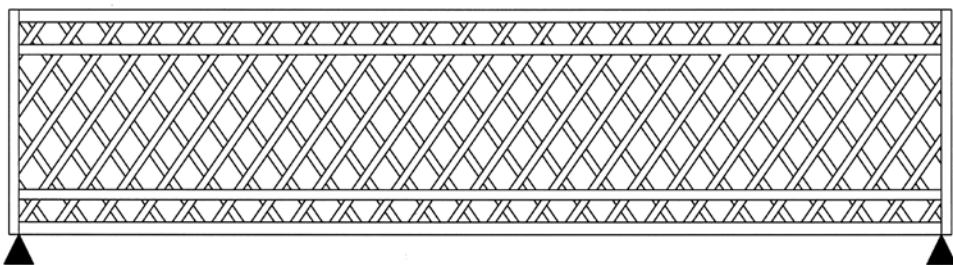
King became a master at prefabrication, building large sections of his bridges at or near the spot of crossing, then hoisting them into position onto already-constructed stone abutments and beam-pier supports. This technique reduced the amount of temporary scaffolding and construction time he needed, while speeding up his delivery time.

After several King/Godwin successes, Godwin left most of their bridge-building work to

King. This freed Godwin to construct commercial buildings and houses, his first love. In 1839, King won the contract to build a bridge across the Chattahoochee at West Point, Georgia. While working on the project, 32-year-old King met his future wife, Francis Gould Thomas. His junior by 18 years, beautiful Francis had Indian, Negro and white ancestry, and was a free woman. That meant any children they would have would also be free, based on the existing laws of many Southern states at the time. In fact, they had five children – sons Washington, Marshall, John and George, and daughter Annie Elizabeth. All five joined their father in the building industry.

Horace and Francis's marriage lasted 25 years until her untimely death in 1864 at the young age of 38. Francis lived to see her children educated and pointed toward promising lives, not to mention close to their father. By then, King had been free for 18 years, having received his freedom in 1846 at age 39.

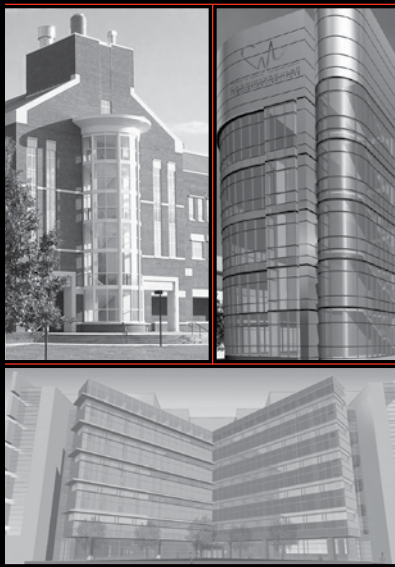
By the mid-1800s, King's talents and hands-on skills exceeded Godwin's when it came to covered bridges. As a result, business leaders began contracting directly with King, with no objection from Godwin. One was Robert Jemison, a wealthy Tuscaloosa planter, politician and entrepreneur. He hired King to manage his bridge-building projects in western Alabama and eastern Mississippi. King's association with Jemison, like that with Godwin, grew into a warm, trusting



Sketch of a typical Town Lattice Truss. Diagonal members were attached together at every intersection with wooden pegs, bolts or large nails. Courtesy of Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc.

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and profitable relationship. The patronage of the powerful Jemison proved a boon to King's stature as a respected engineer and businessman. Lucrative jobs and opportunities came his way. As his finances improved, so did his ability to invest in certain projects. One venture was Moore's Bridge over the Chattahoochee River, between Newman and Carrollton. King accepted stock as payment for building the bridge. It proved to be a profitable decision.

The South's secession from the Union dominated the talk when King's longtime cohort Godwin died in 1859. King continued to assist Godwin's sons in the family businesses. Once the Civil War brought them into service as soldiers, King ran the Godwin operations in their absence.

With Abraham Lincoln's election as president in late 1860, all talk by Southerners about going to war stopped. They knew it was time for action. By early 1861, the South's well-armed forces were making aggressive moves. In April, they captured Fort Sumter, sending the North reeling and launching America's Civil War.

With the war bringing an economic boom to Columbus, King and other contractors capitalized on the times. However, they were frequently pressed into service against their will to work for the Confederacy building fortifications. In 1863, the governor of Alabama sent a telegram to J.F. Bozeman, wartime mayor of Columbus, demanding that King work on projects crucial to the South. Then the Confederate navy hired him to build a rolling mill for producing iron plates for its warships.

As the deadly war wrapped up in 1865, the American Union suffered a momentous blow – the assassination of its president, the Great Emancipator. Lincoln, born in poverty only two years after King, had been poised to unify and rebuild the country in his second term. Without Lincoln's leadership, the country strained under the immense task. At the forefront of this rebuilding phase were those skilled at engineering and construction, including daring and ambitious men like Horace King.

Following the Civil War, the thriving King Brothers Bridge Company, managed by Horace's five children, kept constructing new facilities and replacing those destroyed in and around Columbus. Over its lifetime, the company designed and built numerous public and commercial buildings, schools, warehouses, factories and houses, as well as bridges. The company rapidly completed major postwar projects, including replacing the Columbus City Bridge, which had been burned during the war.



Historic designation Plaque for the Big Red Oak Creek Bridge.

In 1868, King, a Republican, was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives, where he served until 1872. He was also a magistrate in Russell County and a registrar in the city of Girard, helping compile the 1870 census.

After being widowed five years, 62-year-old King married Sarah Jane McManus in 1869. They had no children. In 1872, King and his family moved to LaGrange, Georgia, where the company continued to excel. Its most notable projects there included the chapel for the Southern Female College, the parsonage for Warren Methodist Church and LaGrange Academy (the first black college in the area).

Ten years after moving to LaGrange, the aging and prosperous King gradually let his children take charge of the business. One of his great passions became raising and riding fine horses. When in public, the master bridge builder often dressed up in velvet-lapel suits. Even in his last days, King stood ramrod straight and moved with grace – a strong, silent man satisfied with his accomplishments.

Horace King died on May 28, 1885, at age 78 – still noble, handsome and proud. Hundreds of people lined LaGrange's streets to pay their respects when his funeral casket passed by. His obituary in the LaGrange Reporter praised King's accomplishments as a builder and engineer, saying, "He had risen to prominence by force of genius and character." ■

*Richard G. Weingardt, P.E., Chairman,
Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc.
Denver, CO. He is the author of eight
books. His latest Engineering Legends,
published by ASCE Press, features numerous
great American structural engineers.
Weingardt was the 1995-96 national
president of ACEC. He can be reached at
rweingardt@aol.com.*