

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Morelli Bridge

Other names/site number: Howie Street Bridge/24LC2780

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: Head of Reeder's Alley on Howie Street

City or town: Helena

State: MT

County: Lewis and Clark

Not For Publication:

Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended,

I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60.

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide X local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

X A B X C D

MT State Historic Preservation Officer

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

**State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government**

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ☐ entered in the National Register
☐ determined eligible for the National Register
☐ determined not eligible for the National Register
☐ removed from the National Register
☐ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private: ☐
Public – Local ☒
Public – State ☐
Public – Federal ☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

- Building(s) ☐
District ☐
Site ☐
Structure ☒
Object ☐

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing

Noncontributing

buildings

sites

0

structures

objects

0

0

Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular) = bridge

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular) = bridge

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER: Timber Stringer Bridge

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: STONE; WOOD

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Located on Howie Street, the Morelli Bridge crosses the upper end of Reeder's Alley near the edge of downtown Helena, Montana. The timber stringer Morelli Bridge was built in 1892 and listed in the National Register as a contributing resource to the Helena Historic District in 1972 (listed June 2, 1972, NR #72000737; Amended June 14, 1990, NR #90000934). The four-span bridge measures 96 feet long and 22 feet wide. Its distinguishing structural feature consists of rubblestone abutments and three rubblestone bents, with the stone quarried from a location adjacent to the bridge site. Although the City of Helena replaced the bridge's deck in 1975, the bridge retains much of its original appearance and physical and structural integrity, especially the monumental stone bents and piers. The bridge was designed and built by Swiss immigrant Carlo Morelli, who, according to local folklore, based the design on a bridge in Italy, though which bridge remains unknown. The setting of the bridge has been altered somewhat with the establishment of the nearby large upscale residential subdivision, Reeder's Village, in 1994. The bridge's association with historic Reeder's Alley and Howie Street, however, remains strong. The bridge possesses considerable integrity and is also significant as the oldest remaining timber bridge in Montana.

Narrative Description

Built in 1892, the Morelli Bridge is a four-span timber stringer structure oriented southwest to northeast along the tangent of Howie Street near the edge of downtown Helena, Montana. The

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bridge crosses Reeder's Gulch at the head of Reeder's Alley. The bridge would have served as a southern route to Hawthorne School. Originally constructed as a wagon bridge, it now serves to transport automobiles across the drainage. The bridge measures 96 feet long and 22 feet wide with a roadway width of 20 feet. Each span measures 24 feet in length. The structure's abutments consist of locally obtained rubblestone quarried adjacent to the bridge to the northeast. The three rubblestone bents display bases wider than their connection with the superstructure. The bents measure 33 feet by 38 feet at the base and approximately 25 feet in height. The City of Helena replaced the timber deck in 1975 though it remains similar in appearance to the original 1892 deck. The 1975 components of the bridge exhibit creosote treatment. Twenty-one 6-inch by 18-inch timber stringers with lateral timber spacers support the deck. Two horizontally stacked 5-inch by 12-inch timbers that run the length of the deck serve as wood curbs; the west side curbs have rectangular drains. The railings stand 30 inches in height and consist of seven 6-inch by 8-inch posts (14 total on both sides) that support 6-inch by 8-inch horizontal timber rails. Two unused metal pipe conduits attach to the stringers.

Integrity

The bridge retains excellent integrity. The structure retains integrity of location as it stands at its original site. The unique monumental rubblestone bents and abutments remain intact and unchanged and visually dominate the lateral views of the structure. Except for the timber deck, the design of the bridge presents little change since its construction in 1892. Routine maintenance has not appreciably changed the appearance of the bridge nor its function. The bridge looks much as it did when built. The bridge retains a high degree of integrity of workmanship, design, and materials in the craftsmanship of the bridge's substructure. The bents and abutments reflect the stonemason's craft and the stone used for their construction was extracted from a nearby quarry on Mount Helena by a quarryman who lived near the bridge site. Indeed, the builder of the bents and abutments lived only one hundred yards from the bridge in a stone house he also constructed about the same time he constructed the Morelli Bridge. A path still exists between his house and the north approach of the bridge. The bridge continues to exhibit integrity of feeling and association with adjacent Reeder's Alley and the stone retaining walls that line nearby Benton Avenue constructed around the same time as the bridge. Although integrity of setting has been compromised by a housing subdivision to the west and east, the view to the south down Reeder's Alley easily conveys the historic flavor of the area when the bridge was constructed.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- ☒ A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- ☐ B. Removed from its original location
- ☐ C. A birthplace or grave
- ☐ D. A cemetery
- ☐ E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- ☐ F. A commemorative property
- ☐ G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Engineering

Transportation

Period of Significance

1892

Significant Dates

1892

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Carlo Morelli/Designer-Builder

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Constructed in 1892 under the auspices of the City of Helena, the Morelli Bridge is associated with the economic boom experienced by the community following the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railway in 1883 and the Montana Central Railway in 1887. During that period, Helena transformed itself from a ramshackle mining camp into a modern metropolis. The bridge represents one part of the widespread infrastructure improvements made by the city as it

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developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The bridge, listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing resource to the Helena Historic District (listed June 2, 1972, NR #72000737; Amended June 14, 1990, NR #90000934), is eligible for listing individually under Criterion A for its association with that metamorphosis. The bridge is also individually eligible for listing under and Criterion C as it retains a high degree of architectural integrity as an exceptional example of a late nineteenth century timber bridge with unique and distinctive rubblestone abutments and piers built from locally quarried stone. Other than the replacement of the deck and original guardrails, no significant changes or modifications to the bridge have occurred since its construction.

The period of significance is 1892, the year of the bridge's construction. Significant dates also focus on the year 1892, reflecting the year when the Morelli Bridge was built.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Morelli Bridge is associated with the Helena City Council's efforts to improve the local infrastructure during the 1890s. The city sanctioned projects that included street grading and paving, sidewalk and sewer installations, and the construction of a massive cut on Lawrence Street in downtown in 1892. The city council intended the Morelli Bridge to provide a connection between the first and third wards and, especially, to a school and the city hall in the upper end of Last Chance Gulch. In the wake of several devastating fires in Helena's downtown, the city transformed itself from a mining camp where wooden buildings comprised most of the commercial district to a modern business district composed of modern brick and masonry buildings. The transformation was accomplished largely because of the presence of two railroads, the Northern Pacific and the Montana Central, and their transcontinental connections. The railroads sparked the economic boom that resulted in the metamorphosis of Helena from ramshackle mining camp to the "Queen City of the Rockies." Along with the conversion came the infrastructure improvements that included the construction of the Morelli Bridge. Because of the bridge's association with events significant to local Helena history, the structure is individually eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion A.

While displaying a relatively simple design, the Morelli Bridge presents features unique to timber bridges designed and built in Montana from 1864 to the early 1960s, features found nowhere else in Montana. The structure stands as the oldest surviving timber bridge in Montana. The distinctive locally quarried stone abutments and piers remain virtually intact since their construction in 1892. The city replaced the original timber stringers in 1975 but did so using sympathetic materials of the same type and dimension of the original stringers. The city also replaced the wood guardrails in 1975, though it is believed the replacements are sympathetic to the original guard rails. In addition, the guard rails are now approaching historic age. The

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bridge retains much of its original materials and association with other infrastructure improvements in its vicinity, including the nearby rubblestone retaining walls that support South Benton Avenue, just east of the bridge (and built shortly after the bridge with stone from the same quarry). The bridge retains strong integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association with adjacent Reeder's Alley and south Helena. The setting has been diminished somewhat with development of the Reeder's Village residential subdivision in 1994. The Morelli Bridge is eligible for listing individually in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C.

History

Meriwether Lewis provided the first written description of the Helena Valley on July 21, 1805 when he called it "a handsome and an extensive valley." Undoubtedly, a few Euro-American fur trappers and traders became familiar with the valley in the decades following the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In the 1850s, Lieutenant John Mullan of the US Corps of Topographical Engineers skirted the valley several times in search of a route for both a transcontinental railroad and wagon road in the northern Rocky Mountains and Pacific Northwest. In 1860, he completed construction of the wagon road between Walla Walla, Washington and Fort Benton, Montana on the upper Missouri River. The road skirted the valley to the west, but Mullan held great hopes for the future development of the valley as more Euro-Americans entered the area. In 1863, he reported that in the Helena Valley "will be found several small and choice localities for farms, and if the mines on the eastern slope prove successful, I look forward to much hope to see all these creeks settled and fine farms development under the hand of the Rocky Mountain farmer."¹

In July 1862, prospectors discovered rich placer gold deposits on Grasshopper Creek in southwestern Montana, about 150 miles south of Helena. The discovery caused a stampede to the new diggings and spawned the founding of Bannack on the bench adjacent to the creek. Word of the discovery came at just the right time. The placer mines in Colorado and Idaho had about "played out," with the result that large numbers of transient men roamed the region searching for new gold strikes with no real desire to return to the "States," then embroiled in the Civil War. As the good claims on Grasshopper Creek were taken, prospectors fanned out across the region in search of new bonanzas. Prospectors made even richer gold discoveries on Alder Creek in 1863 and Last Chance and Confederate gulches in 1864. The ensuing stampedes resulted in the establishment of Virginia City, Helena, and Diamond City.²

¹ Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Definitive Journals of Lewis and Clark: From Fort Mandan to Three Forks*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 412; John Mullan, *Report of the Construction of a Military Road from Fort Walla-Walla to Fort Benton*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1863), 42-43, 143.

² Merrill G. Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier*, (Helena: State Publishing Co, 1942), 85, 87-88, 90-91; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 65, 67, 233.

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In late July 1864, four prospectors, erroneously called the Four Georgians, discovered extraordinarily rich gold placers on Last Chance Gulch about a thousand feet northeast of the future site of the Morelli Bridge. The discovery generated a stampede to the new diggings, and by late 1864, hundreds of miners worked the winding gulch in search of gold. A mining camp sprang up south of the mines and on the benches on both sides of the gulch. At a meeting of the Miners' Court in October 1864, residents of the mining camp christened the new camp "Helena." Unlike remote Virginia City and Bannack, Helena sat strategically near the Mullan Road and the road that connected Fort Benton and Alder Gulch. It was also located very near two already established mining camps, Montana City and Silver City. The richness of the mines in the Helena area contributed to the establishment of new roads to Virginia City, Bannack, Butte, the Gallatin Valley, and, after December 1864, Confederate Gulch in the nearby Big Belt Mountains. Helena's central location on the territory's transportation network, proximity to good agricultural land in the adjacent Helena Valley and to other mining districts made it the preeminent settlement in Montana Territory by the early 1870s. In recognition of its ascendancy in the territory, the 1874 Montana legislature designated Helena the territorial capital and relocated it from Virginia City, whose fortunes had been declining for several years.³

As with other mining camps in Montana, fire represented an ever-present danger to Helena. Conflagrations periodically decimated the city in the 1860s and 1870s. Each time the camp rebuilt, oftentimes replacing the flimsy wooden buildings with more substantial structures constructed of stone or brick. The arrival of the Northern Pacific Railway in Helena in June 1883 sparked an economic boom in the city that continued until 1893. During that period, Helena morphed from a shabby looking settlement of wooden commercial buildings, shacks, and log cabins to a modern late nineteenth century metropolis. Locally quarried stone and manufactured brick replaced wood in both the commercial and residential areas of Helena. The building boom came to an end in 1893 when a nationwide economic depression ended most construction in Helena and elsewhere.⁴

Coincidental with the economic boom and transformation of Helena's commercial district and surrounding residential neighborhoods, the city embarked on a major infrastructure improvement program that enhanced the city. The Helena City Council approved the establishment and improvement of street grades, paved important city thoroughfares, and constructed concrete sidewalks throughout the town. Improvements also included the installation of storm drains, water mains, and sewers. A major project undertaken by the city occurred in 1892, when it approved the improvement of Lawrence Street, an east-west throughfare that bisected Helena's

³ Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier*, 387; Muriel Sibell Wolle, *Montana Pay Dirt*, (Athens, OH: Sage Books, 1963), 82; Ellen Baumler, *Helena, The Town That Gold Built: The First 150 Years*, (San Antonio: HPHBooks, 2014), 7-9.

⁴ Malone, et al, *Montana*, 215, 217; Baumler, *Helena*, 18.

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downtown. The major undertaking required the excavation of a major cut through the bluff bordering Last Chance Gulch. A chain gang comprised of prisoners from the city/county jail performed the work. Within a short period of time, Helena essentially transformed itself from mining camp to modern city between the arrival of the Northern Pacific Railway in 1883 and the onset of the economic panic of the early 1890s.⁵

The Panic of 1893 soundly ended the building boom Helena enjoyed since 1883. Other than at Fort Harrison, little significant construction occurred in the Queen City until around 1900 when the depression finally ended and construction witnessed an uptick. As Montana's capital city, Helena's development remained steady until economic depression and war again caused a curtailment in the city's prosperity. Helena boomed following World War II with the expansion of state government, the presence of the Veterans Administration hospital at Fort Harrison, increased military spending, and the construction of Canyon Ferry Dam.

Reeder's Alley Neighborhood

Prior to the construction of the Morelli Bridge, the nearby area witnessed an increase in population and settlement. On the heels of the July 1864 discovery, miners staked claims and built cabins. In the fall, Missourian Wilson Butts built a tiny one-room dwelling on his claim just down the hill to the south about 400 feet from the future site of the Morelli Bridge. Unpeeled pine logs with steeple notching, chinked with mud, served him through the winter. In the spring of 1865, his brother, sister-in-law, and their three small daughters arrived to build a second cabin adjacent to the east. This second one-room dwelling of hand-hewn cottonwood logs with both dovetail and lapped notching features significantly smaller flat hewn pine logs than those used to build the cabin, a difference in material suggesting the scarcity of wood as miners stripped the surrounding area. An enclosed porch on the south wall soon connected the two separate cabins. This building, known as the Pioneer Cabin, represents Helena's oldest documented dwelling.⁶

Tucked along the hillside, just northwest of the Pioneer Cabin, and 200 feet southwest of the Morelli Bridge, Louis Reeder's tiny tenements brought miners from their temporary cabins to better living arrangements. A Pennsylvania brick mason, Reeder arrived in 1867. The gold camp, by this time stripped of wood for building, offered Reeder lucrative employment. He invested his earnings in property up the hill to the west and behind the cabins. Between 1873 and 1884,

⁵ William C. Campbell, *From the Quarries of Last Chance Gulch*, Vol. II (Helena: Helena Independent Record Publishing Co., 1964), 46; Minutes of the Helena City Council, 1891-1892. City Commission Office, City-County Building, Helena, Montana, p.1ff.

⁶ Ellen Baumler, "We Are Learning to Do These Things Better: A Women's History of Helena's First Neighborhood." *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, Vol 64 no. 3 (Autumn 2014), 32-48; The Butts family reminiscence, written by daughters and granddaughters, describes this building history and other aspects of life in early Helena. While there are other local miners' cabins, only the Butts family's handiwork—thanks to the women of the family—has a recorded history.

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Reeder built more than 30 one-room tenements. These unique buildings, constructed of soft locally-made bricks and stone quarried from the nearby hillside, reflect the simple western vernacular style of Helena's earliest buildings although they nestle into the slope at various levels, presenting an irregular plan. Reeder combined the standard western style with the row house idea brought from Pennsylvania. Lower level apartments open directly onto the alley. Upper level doorways open onto a walkway. Two of the tenements include brick false fronts, reinforcing western influence.⁷

The Morelli Bridge

As Helena and the Reeder's Alley neighborhood grew, the need for better roads to serve the growing population increased. To this end, in 1892, the Helena City Council authorized the extension of Howie Street from a point about 230 feet south of the intersection of Adams Street 500 feet to the intersection of [Donaldson] Street. The project included the construction of a 96-foot long bridge across Reeder's Gulch at the head of Reeder's Alley with the intent to provide a connecting route between the First and Third wards and an alternate route to the First Ward School and the Helena City Hall at the intersection of West Main and State streets. The *Helena Independent* reported that "people who wish to drive up Last Chance Gulch will soon have an opportunity to do so without going through [Park] Street on the crowded part of Upper Main Street." Construction of the bridge represented the initial project effort, occurring prior to any actual road work. James E. Norris supervised both the bridge and the street improvements. The stone for the rubblestone abutments and bents most likely came from the Adami Brothers quarry on nearby Mount Helena. Swiss immigrant and stonemason, Carlo "Charles" Morelli built the abutments and bents. City crews built the deck and the "solid wood sides to prevent accidents by people falling off." First Ward Alderman Jacob Post "sent up a box of cigars to the workmen ... on the completion of the bridge" on October 22, 1892. City Engineer John Wade provided an estimate to the city council on April 11, 1893, to construct the approaches to the new bridge.⁸

With the completion of the bridge, work began in earnest on the 300-foot long rock cut north of the bridge and the surfacing of Howie Street with gravel. A tragedy, however, marred the otherwise to this point successful project. Just before quitting time on November 2, 1892, one of

⁷ Ellen Baumler, "We Are Learning to Do These Things Better: A Women's History of Helena's First Neighborhood." *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, Vol 64 no. 3 (Autumn 2014), 32-48.

⁸ The 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map indicates that work on the bridge was either about to start or in progress at the time the map was surveyed in 1892. The map shows a rock crusher at the bridge site along with a wood frame blacksmith shop. The proposed route of Howie Street is also shown on the map. Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (1892), Sheet 7. Research Center, Montana Historical Society, Helena, Montana; Minutes of the Helena City Council, 1891-1892, pp. 1ff, Viewed at Montana Memory Project at <https://www.mtmemory.org>; "South Side Improvement," *The Helena Independent*, October 23, 1892; US Census Records; The Montana National Register Sign Program, "Morelli Bridge," *Historic Montana*, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://historicmt.org/items/show/727>; Minutes of the Helena City Council, 1893-1896, p. 45.

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the timbers supporting the rock crusher's bin failed, dumping seven tons of rock onto Thomas Joyce, killing him instantly. A miner, Joyce began work for the city on the project on October 10th and had been employed on the rock crusher for only two days when the accident occurred.⁹

Work stopped on the project in December and January because of inclement weather and failed to resume by March 28, 1893, per the city council meeting. At that time, two aldermen represented each of the seven wards in Helena with the city mayor, Arthur Curtin, presiding over the meeting. At the meeting, the Howie Street improvements presented as the main bone of contention among the aldermen. Two weeks earlier, on March 14th, alderman Jacob Walker introduced a resolution to discontinue work on Howie Street until the street commissioner, Stephen Orr, provided the council with an estimate of the cost to complete the project. Despite the Morelli Bridge's completion four months earlier in October 1892, the 300-foot cut (20 feet deep) north of the bridge had not been completed and the road remained ungraded. The council passed Walker's resolution.¹⁰

The aldermen, however, remained somewhat indecisive about the resolution passed earlier in March and the discussion revolved around rescinding the resolution and allowing work to continue on the project. First Ward alderman Marcus Lissner argued that the "bridge and cut at Howie Street would open up a large portion of valuable territory in [his] ward. There were lots of people who wanted work and he was willing to stand his share of the taxes."¹¹ Aldermen Anthony Harrity agreed with Lissner but wanted a set limit on the project's expense. Mayor Curtin echoed the alderman's sentiment. Alderman Thomas Fuller also wanted to set a limit and stated the bridge was useless as it stood. He claimed that the tax revenues from the section opened by the road and bridge would more than pay for the project in three or four years. In the end, six aldermen including Lissner, Post, and Fuller, voted to continue the work on the project. Four aldermen voted against it and three missed the meeting. Work on the street resumed in the spring of 1893 after a months-long delay.¹²

Grading of Howie Street between Adams and Chatham streets, encompassing the new bridge, occurred during the summer of 1893 and was completed by the end of August. At the city

⁹ "Under Tons of Stone," *The Helena Independent*, November 2, 1892.

¹⁰ Evidence suggests that either city work crews or labor obtained from the city jail was used on the rock cut north of the bridge and the establishment of the Howie Street grade after the completion of the bridge. The city used "chain gangs" to construct the Lawrence Street cut in 1892. The use of convict labor might explain why the city council didn't hire a contractor to do the work on the street. "The Work Will Go On," *The Helena Independent*, March 29, 1893; Minutes of the Helena City Council, 1893-1896, pp. 36, 39-40.

¹¹ Lissner's comments were in direct reference to the Panic of 1893, a crippling nationwide economic depression that caused high unemployment rates throughout the country and ended the economic boom Helena had enjoyed since 1883.

¹² Minutes of the Helena City Council, 1893-1896, pp. 36, 39-40.

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council's September 12th meeting, the aldermen granted a citizen petition to construct sidewalks on Adams, Howie, and Jefferson streets. The city installed wood sidewalks later that year.¹³ The Morelli Bridge rarely appeared in the *Helena Independent* or its successor, the *Independent Record*, after its completion in 1892 until the early 1970s, apparently fulfilling its goal satisfactorily.

In April 1974, the city approved a \$1,500 contract for consulting services for improvements to the bridge. Local engineer Lowell Hanson obtained the contract. Nine months later, in January 1975, the Helena Department of Public Service advertised for bids to repair and upgrade the bridge. The city awarded the project, tied to Helena's Urban Renewal Program, to the Lee Reynolds Construction Company of Helena for work on the bridge and Reeder's Alley. The contract was subject to US Department of Housing and Urban Development because the bid amount was \$21,000 over the engineer's estimate for the project. It is not known exactly what work was done to the bridge other than the replacement of the timber deck.

In 2001, the city made modifications to Howie Street. Local teenagers referred to the steep grade of Howie Street as "Thrill Hill" because an automobile headed south at high speed on Howie Street could hit the crest of the hill and "catch air" as it went over the top, landing just north of the Morelli Bridge. To reduce such objectionable activity, work included lowering the crest of the hill, making the street one way, and placing a stop sign at the top of the hill.¹⁴

Architectural Significance

Timber Bridges, 1860-1915

Army civil engineer John Mullan built the first timber bridges in Montana in 1860. The prior year, 1859, Mullan and a crew of 230 civilians and soldiers began construction of a 624-mile long wagon road between Walla Walla, Washington and Fort Benton, Montana on the upper Missouri River. The first 100 miles of the road east of the continental divide in western Montana witnessed the company constructing 47 primitive log structures across the St. Regis-DeBorgia River; nearly all of them washed out during the spring run-off in 1861. The bridges all consisted of simple structures, log stringers resting on log abutments. Mullan did not provide specific information on the decking of the structures and a contemporary photograph of one fails to show the decking. Mullan diligently replaced all the washed-out bridges and added a six-span

¹³ Ibid, pp. 105, 110, 112.

¹⁴ "City Approves Pole Line." *The Independent Record*, December 17, 1956; Norma Tirrell, "City Approves Another Relocation Project," *The Independent Record*, April 23, 1974; "Legals." *The Independent Record*, January 2, 1975; "City Agenda Busy," *The Independent Record*, January 25, 1975; "Residents Not Thrilled," *The Independent Record*, October 9, 1991; John Harrington, "The Thrill is Gone," *The Independent Record*, December 15, 2001.

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structure to the system that crossed the Blackfoot River near present-day Missoula during the winter of 1862.

The stream had already become frozen at its edges; and when all the timbers were cut, hauled, hewn, and ready to be put together, we threw a boom across the river . . . By means of this boom we dammed up the floating ice, which in a single night became sufficiently frozen to allow horses to cross. Taking advantage of this ice, we cut an opening large enough to hold the piers and commenced their construction, sinking them, by means of rock placed in bottom . . . until they rested on the river bed. They were leveled by making a profile of the bottom and adjusting blocks under the larger set of ties. Rock for filling them was gathered from a bluff . . . on the left bank and by means of hand sleds run over the ice to the piers, were thus rapidly filled. Each was thus built and the entire framework and superstructure erected before the ice broke up. While this was being done, the whipsawyers were at work sawing out plank seventeen feet long and three inches thick ...; and by the 1st of March we had completed the entire bridge.¹⁵

The Blackfoot River Bridge served as an important component of the Mullan Military Road until 1868 when it too washed out and temporarily replaced by a ferry. Although Mullan's bridges were simple timber stringer structures, their basic design provided the model for the hundreds of timber stringer bridges that would be constructed in Montana over the next half century.¹⁶

In July 1862, John White and five prospectors discovered gold on Grasshopper Creek in southwestern Montana. The resulting stampede brought hundreds of newcomers into what had before been a sparsely settled area for Euro-Americans. Additional gold strikes in 1863 and 1864 caused even bigger stampedes to the region. By 1865, newly-established Montana Territory boasted a population of around 28,000 people. Transportation was critical to the prosperity of the new territory, so, in December 1864, the first territorial legislature licensed nearly two dozen companies to build toll roads and bridges. All of the bridges were log or hewn wood and none designed by an engineer. Surviving photographs show bridges not dissimilar in appearance to Mullan's bridges. Some, however, incorporated log king or queen post trusses into the design; it remains unclear if the trusses served any structural function on the smaller timber bridges. Because the bridges lacked professional or engineered design, they often failed or quickly degenerated to such a poor condition that users frequently complained to the legislature about them.

By 1872, the combination of user grievances and high tolls compelled the Montana legislature to abolish the toll road system. The dissolution of the toll system compelled the counties to assume

¹⁵ John Mullan, *Report on the Construction of a Military Road from Fort Walla-Walla to Fort Benton*, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1863), 32.

¹⁶ Malone, et al, *Montana*, 72; Mullan, *Report on the Construction of a Military Road*, 12-13, 18.

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control of the territory's roads and bridges and tax their residents for their maintainance. By the early 1880s, Montana was crisscrossed by a network of roads and timber bridges that were, for the most part, in deplorable condition. The remoteness of the territory, the nascent agricultural industry, and the decline of mining made improvement of the system impractical until the territory could be connected to the rest of the country by a better and more reliable means of transportation – the railroads.¹⁷

The completion of the Utah and Northern Railroad in 1881, the Northern Pacific Railway in 1883, and the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad (later the Great Northern) in 1887 significantly changed the way Montanans did business and how its residents traversed the territory. Instead of by road or steamboat as done previously, by the late 1880s most of the commercial freight moved through the state over one of those rail lines. The railroads caused Montana's road system to function more as farm-to-market routes that provided access to the railroads instead of as an inter- and intra-state system. With the presence of the railroads, counties expended little on roads and bridges during this period. Eventually, however, good bridges would prove critical to the economic prosperity of the territory. The railroads significantly changed Montana's transportation landscape and caused a profound change in the system by allowing the cheap importation of steel and other materials necessary for an evolving road network. The railroads allowed a boom in vehicular steel bridge building in the territory that began with the construction of the all-steel Fort Benton Bridge over the Missouri River at Fort Benton in 1888, the first all-steel bridge in Montana.¹⁸ The still-standing bridge had a substantial impact on the economy of Fort Benton, a former river port that transitioned into a major agricultural trade community because of the bridge and the community's location on the Great Northern Railway.¹⁹

The Fort Benton Bridge marked the beginning of a new era in bridge construction in Montana, one based on modern engineering principles and the use of structural steel rather than wood. Steel became the material of choice for bridges and the Northern Pacific and Great Northern railroads could easily haul it to Montana from fabrication plants in the East and Midwest.

Although the use of steel marked a turning point in bridge construction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially over major crossings, steel wasn't always the most appropriate or inexpensive alternative, especially for minor crossings. The immigration of people to Montana after the completion of the railroads put pressure on county governments to provide modern infrastructure for their constituencies, which included the construction of bridges. The majority of county-built bridges generally crossed the smaller obstacles, like

¹⁷ Jon Axline, *Conveniences Sorely Needed: Montana's Historic Highway Bridges, 1860-1956*, (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2005), 14.

¹⁸ Listed August 8, 1980, NR #80002406)

¹⁹ Fredric L. Quivik, *Historic Bridges of Montana*, (Washington DC: National Park Service, 1982), 24, 27.

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streams and dry gullies, locations appropriate for timber or steel stringer and reinforced concrete structures on important farm-to-market roads. Timber bridges were simple to construct, inexpensive, and could be built by people working off their annual road taxes or county road crews.²⁰

Timber bridges in eastern Montana were built of sawn wood components tailored to individual building sites. No standardized design existed. Instead, county surveyors designed bridges specific to a location from materials acquired at local lumberyards. In western Montana, however, building materials were often obtained from near the construction site. Photographs taken of county-built bridges in northwestern Montana during this period show log stringer or log King and Queen post truss bridges. All of the wood components consisted of untreated timber (no preservatives) that resulted in a limited service life before they required replacement by either another log or timber structure or a steel bridge.²¹

Bridge construction and engineering grew exponentially in 1913 when the Montana State Legislature created the Montana State Highway Commission and two years later, in 1915, directed it to form a bridge department. The department, under the leadership of Charles A. Kyle, developed standardized plans for steel, reinforced concrete, and timber stringer bridges. The basic timber stringer bridge design developed by the department in 1915 was utilized by the state and counties, with some modifications as traffic demands changed, for the next 45 years. Because of their simple design and inexpensive cost, the state and counties built hundreds of timber stringer bridges across the state. In many ways, they harkened back to the simple timber bridges that crossed streams and gullies in Montana since the gold rush days of the 1860s.

Timber bridges in Montana represented a utilitarian and ubiquitous structure at one time. The passing of years, however, has reduced the number significantly and only a few, like the Morelli Bridge stood as distinctive in their construction. As the number of timber bridges across the state dwindles, most commonly through replacement, the Morelli Bridge, the oldest timber bridge in the state remains, representing early city-sponsored bridge construction in Helena.²²

²⁰ The counties assessed an annual road tax on its property-owning residents. The property owner could either pay the tax or work it off by doing a specified amount of road or bridge work during the year. Fredric L. Quivik, "Montana's Minneapolis Bridge Builders," *IA: The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, 10 (1984), 39, 42; George R. Metlen, *Report of the Montana State Highway Commission for the Years 1915-1916*, (Helena: State Highway Commission, 1916), 4-5.

²¹ Jon Axline, *Monuments Above the Water: Montana's Historic Highway Bridges, 1860-1956*, (Helena: Montana Department of Transportation, 1993), 26-27.

²² Jon Axline, *Taming Big Sky Country: The History of Montana Transportation from Trails to Interstates*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2015), 40.

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Carlo “Charles” Morelli, Designer/Builder

Carlo “Charles” Morelli built the Morelli Bridge reputedly based on the design of a similar structure in Italy. An ethnic Italian, Carlo “Charles” Morelli was born in southern Switzerland in February 1858. He received his training as a stonemason in Switzerland. Morelli immigrated to the United States in 1891 and the same year married Virginia Vassalli, also a Swiss immigrant. The couple lived in a stone house about one block northeast of the Morelli Bridge site. Morelli first appears in the Helena newspaper, *The Helena Independent*, in early October 1892. The number of projects Morelli participated in around Helena remains unknown though his prodigious masonry skill was noted in his funeral announcement stating, “well known and popular stonemason laid to rest...”²³ His skills were obviously such that the city valued his capabilities for the construction of the bridge’s abutments and bents. Morelli’s other masonry accomplishments likely include his nearby stone house and the nearby retaining walls east of Reeder’s Alley. Morelli passed away in September 1910.²⁴

²³ “Many Attend Funeral,” *The Helena Daily Independent*, 22 September 1910.

²⁴ US Census Records; “Sheriff’s Sale,” *The Helena Independent*, October 6, 1892; “Well Known Man Called by Death,” *The Helena Independent*, September 20, 1910; “Mrs. Chas. Morelly, Long-time Resident of Helena, is Taken,” *The Helena Independent*, March 14, 1937.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
☒ previously listed in the National Register
☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
☐ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☒ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other
Name of repository: Montana Department of Transportation

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 0.5

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Latitude: 46.585798 | Longitude: -112.044603 (north end of bridge) |
| 2. Latitude: 46.585530 | Longitude: -112.044680 (south end of bridge) |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

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Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary for the Morelli Bridge consists of a rectangle that measures 30 feet by 150 feet. The rectangle encompasses the bridge and approximately 50 feet of Howie Street, 25 feet north of the bridge and 25 feet south of the bridge. The boundary is centered on the bridge. The structure is located in the NE¼ NE¼ NE¼ of Section 36, T10N, R4W. See attached aerial map under "Additional Documentation" below; page 25 confirms this boundary.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

The boundary is determined by space occupied by the bridge and its approaches and a small amount of land around the bridge's physical presence.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Jon Axline/Historian
organization: Montana Department of Transportation
street & number: 2701 Prospect Avenue
city or town: Helena state: MT zip code: 59620-1001
e-mail: jaxline@mt.gov
telephone: (406) 444-6258
date: April 2022

Property Owner:

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Helena
street & number 316 North Park Ave. telephone (406) 447-8000
city or town Helena state MT zip code 59623

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A USGS map or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

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Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log, All Photographs

Name of Property: Morelli Bridge
City or Vicinity: Helena, Montana
County: Lewis and Clark State: MT
Photographer: Kristi Hager and Jon Axline
Date Photographed: 2015 and April 2022 (color)
Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:
1 of ____.

Please see Continuation Sheets

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

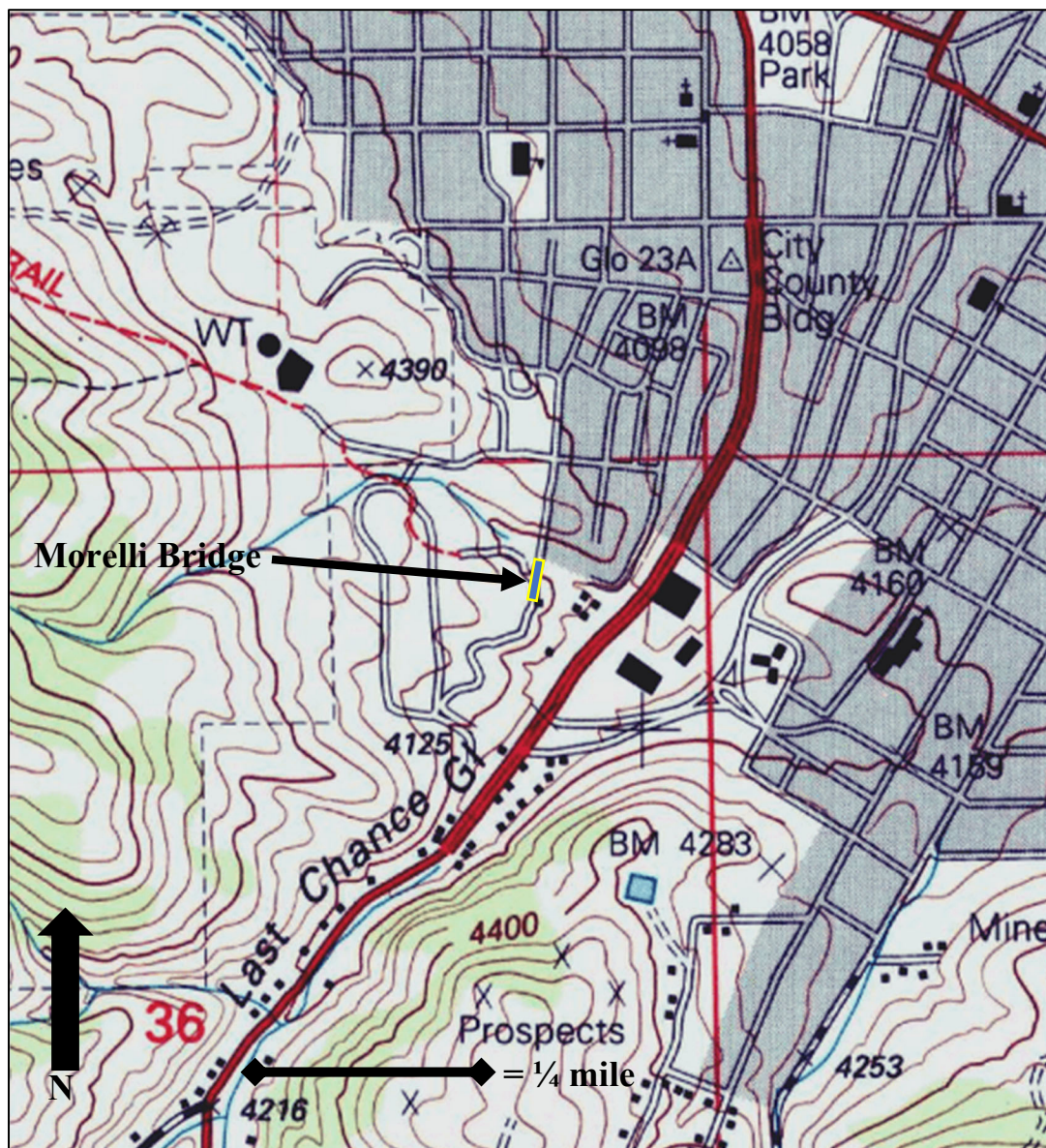
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Location of the Morelli Bridge. Found on the USGS 7.5' Quadrangle map: Helena (1985).
North end of bridge = Latitude: 46.585798 Longitude: -112.044603, South end of bridge =
Latitude: 46.585530 Longitude: -112.044680

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Aerial view of the Morelli Bridge (circled in black box). North end of bridge = Latitude: 46.585798 Longitude: -112.044603, South end of bridge = Latitude: 46.585530 Longitude: -112.044680

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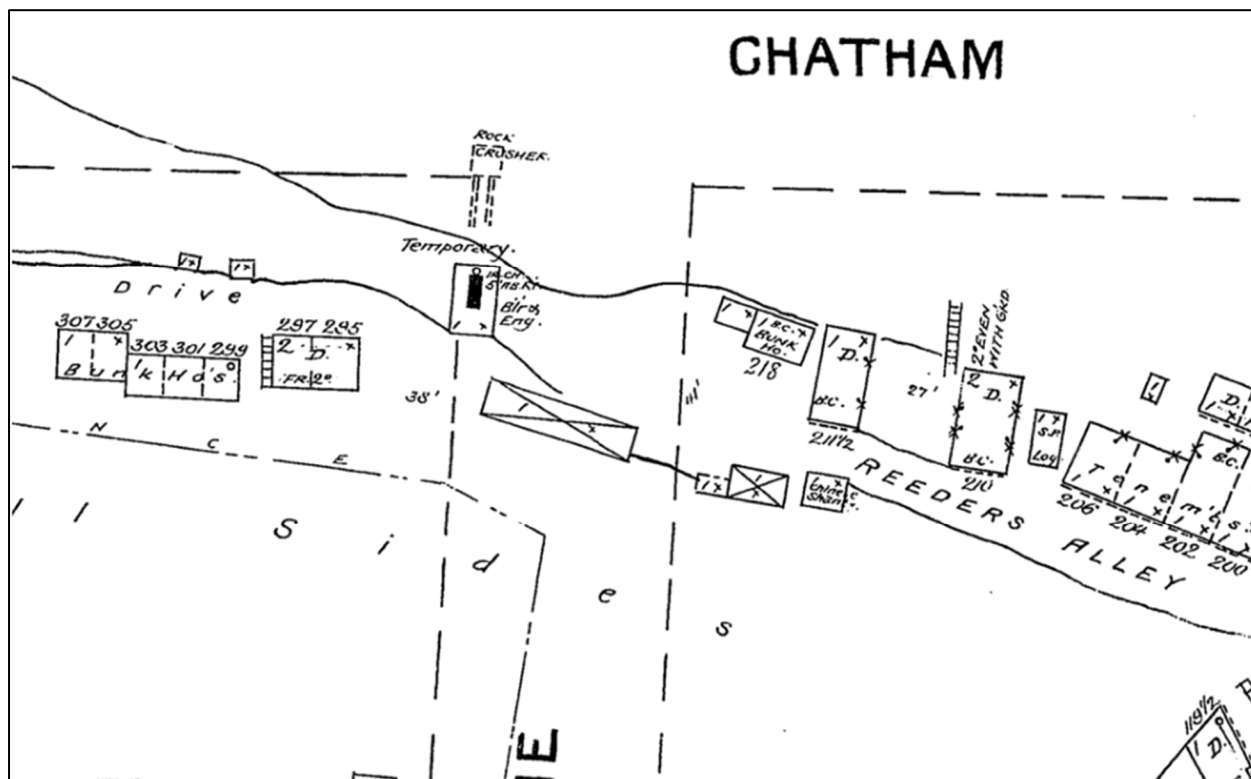
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Detail of 1892 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (sheet 7) showing the Morelli Bridge construction site.

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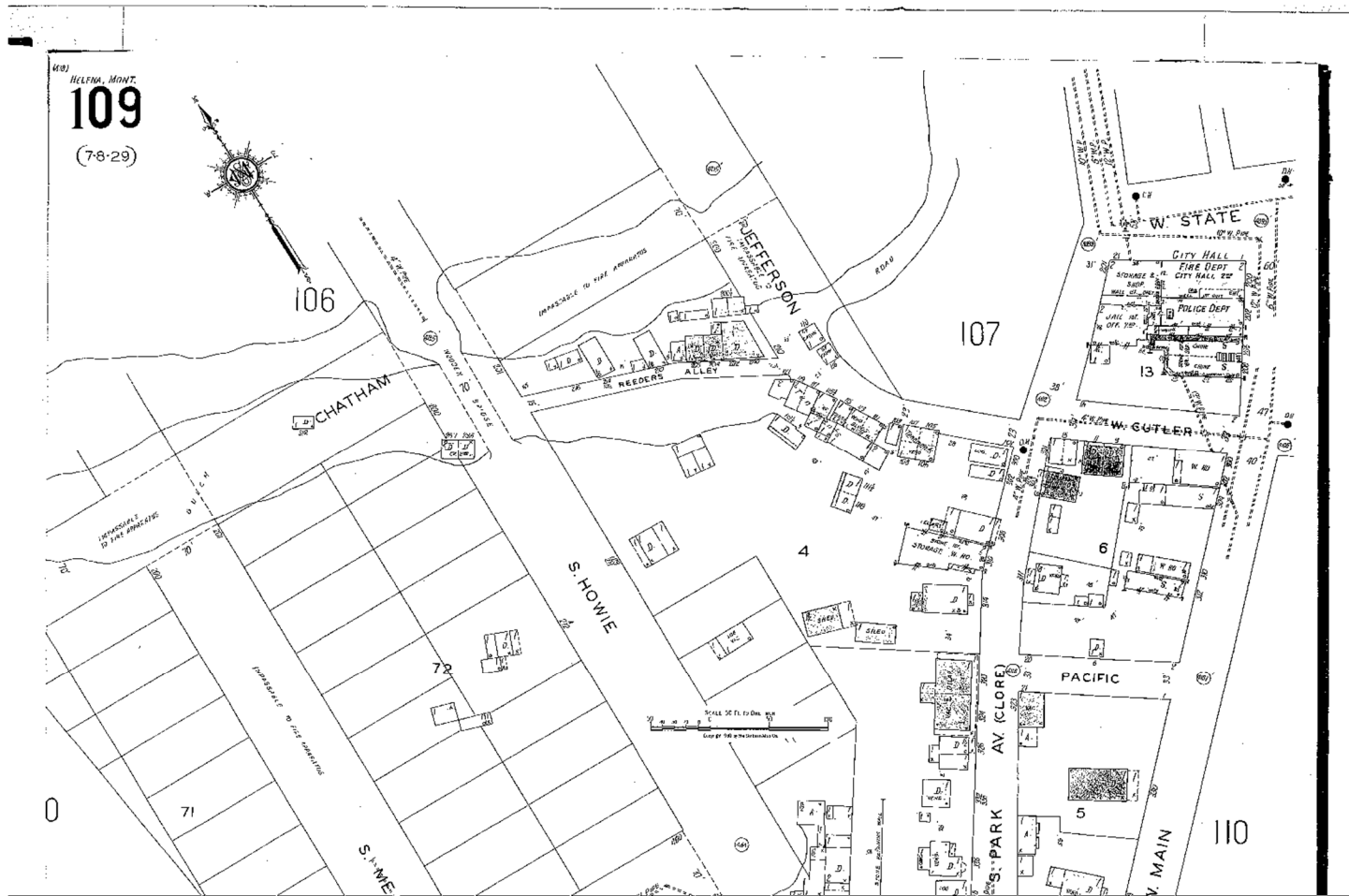
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1930 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map (sheet 109) showing the Morelli Bridge (upper left-center).

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Photo Log, All Photographs:

Name of Property: Morelli Bridge

City or Vicinity: Helena

County: Lewis and Clark State: MT

Photographer: Kristi Hager and Jon Axline

Date Photographed: 2015 (black and white) and April 2022 (color)



Morelli Bridge. West side. View to east.
MT_LewisandClarkCounty_MorelliBridge_0001

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Morelli Bridge. East side. View to the west.
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**Morelli Bridge. East side. View to southwest.
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**Morelli Bridge. North approach. View to south.
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**Morelli Bridge. North approach from top of "Thrill Hill." View to the south.
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Morelli Bridge. West side. View to east.
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**Morelli Bridge. West side. View to the northeast.
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**Morelli Bridge. South approach. View to north.
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**Morelli Bridge. Detail of rubblestone bents. View to west.
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Morelli Bridge. Detail of rubblestone bents. View to the northwest.
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**Morelli Bridge. Detail of north abutment and deck. View to northeast.
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Morelli Bridge. Detail of bents, underside of deck, and guardrails. View to northwest.
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**Morelli Bridge. Detail of deck and guardrail. View to northwest.
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**Morelli Bridge. Overview. View to the southwest.
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