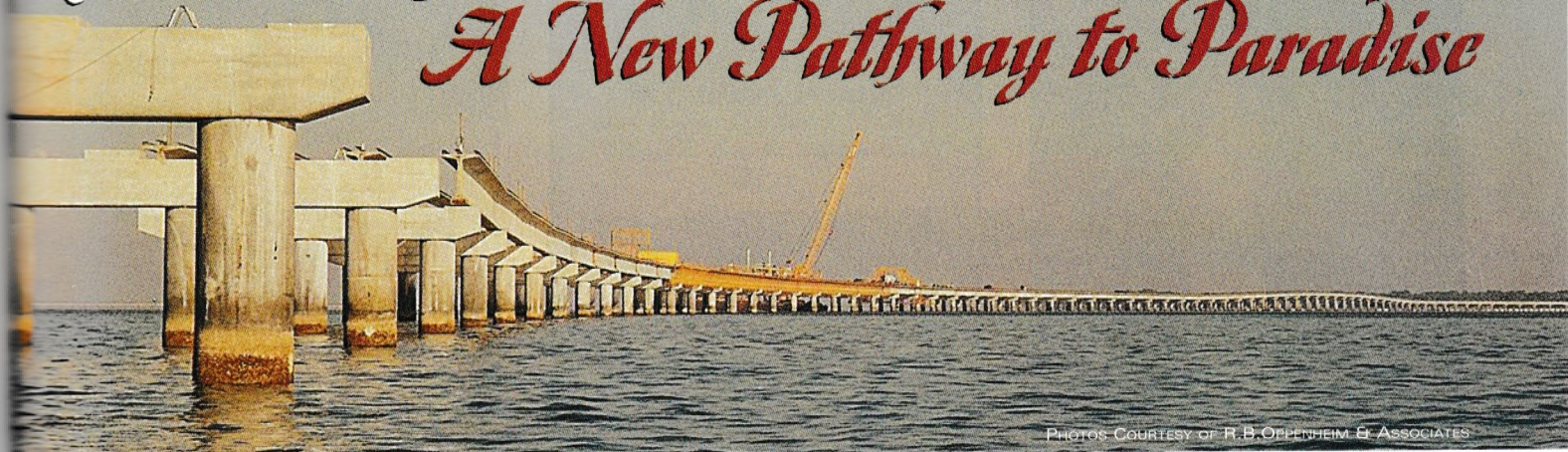


# St. George Island Bridge: *A New Pathway to Paradise*



PHOTOS COURTESY OF R.B. OPPENHEIM & ASSOCIATES

BY KRISTIN VALLESE

**W**hen traveling to St. George Island, it's easy to imagine you've journeyed to another place in time. Things move a little slower here, life seems simpler and neighbors smile and wave as they pass by.

St. George Island, part of the Forgotten Coast, is a place forgotten by time, but truly a paradise to remember.

And now, a reminder of a new era has appeared across the crystal waters of the Apalachicola Bay. The new St. George Island Bridge, once dubbed the "Millennium Bridge," is a state-of-the-art passageway that will soon connect the 28-mile barrier island to the mainland at Eastpoint. By the end of 2003, St. George Island's new modern marvel will replace the well-known and well-traveled Bryant Patton Bridges and connecting causeway, a modern feat in their own right in 1965 when they were constructed.

The three-year bridge replacement project, commissioned by the Florida Department of Transportation in 1998, is one of the largest "design-build" efforts ever undertaken by the DOT. In the design-build process, the contractor works with the designer during planning and design, and

provides input along the way. Typically, design-build projects are 33 percent faster and save about six percent in costs.

The design-build process proved beneficial for the new St. George Island Bridge, which is the longest bridge in north Florida at 4.1 miles long and the third-longest in the state behind the Seven-Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys and the Skyway Bridge in St. Petersburg. And like many projects of this magnitude, the new St. George Island Bridge has endured its share of controversy and resistance.

Yet, despite early opposition from concerned citizens, local fishermen, businesses, environmentalists and some county government officials – the bridge has come to stand as a symbol of what the future holds for the quiet Franklin County community, its visitors and its economy.

## *The Making of a Bridge*

In 1994-1995, a bridge repair project to restore the structural competency of the existing bridge revealed numerous structural deficiencies and massive corrosion. Realizing Apalachicola Bay's aggressive environment would make it difficult to maintain a bridge that had endured

years of erosion, and considering that the bridge no longer complied with current transportation standards, the DOT concluded it was time for a new bridge.

In April 1999, after a lengthy review process, the DOT awarded the bridge replacement project contract to the design-build team of Boh Brothers Construction and Jacobs Civil, Inc., at a cost of \$71.6 million.

The new bridge will have 12-foot lanes just like the current bridge, but it will also have 10-foot shoulders on either side for emergencies, bicycles and pedestrians – something the current bridge does not have. Additionally, the new bridge railing meets the current DOT crash-test standards. Another feature is the bridge's 65-foot vertical clearance at its highest point for watercraft, which is 15 feet higher than the existing bridge. The new bridge will also be better able to withstand the impact from pounding waves and saltwater corrosion.

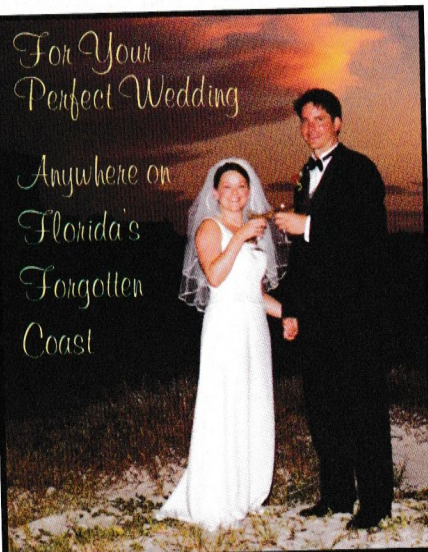
"Not only will the new bridge be structurally superior, it will provide better access to U.S. Highway 98," says DOT District 3 Secretary

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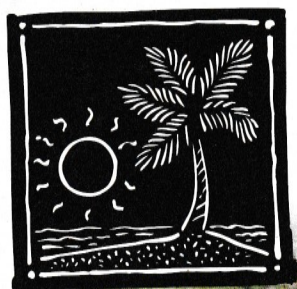
Edward Prescott. It will also serve a safer evacuation route and will avoid the flooding that has been a problem with the current causeway.

### *The Real Work Begins*

In order to build the new pathway to paradise, Boh Brothers and Jacobs Civil employed more than cranes, barges and high-tech building techniques. Equally important to the project's success were economic and environmental considerations, preservation of the surrounding natural habitat and addressing the concerns of island residents, local government and businesses.

"It was important to us to build a bridge that would be safer and stronger," says Jacobs Civil Area Construction Manager Garrett Martin. "But we also worked hard to keep the community involved and informed, and to minimize the impact on the surrounding natural environment. We have been diligent in our efforts to both preserve and enhance the area."

Once the bridge team was given permission to proceed with construction, one of the first orders of business was to initiate a series of "Town Hall" meetings that would inform residents and local leaders about the project, allow them to ask questions and voice concerns. Discussions ran the gamut from salvaging portions of



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the old bridge for fishing piers to protecting the causeway that is home to a variety of native and endangered bird species.

### *Environmental Impact Considered*

As the largest National Estuarine Research Reserve in the United States, the Apalachicola Bay

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demanding careful study and analysis before the first bridge pile would ever touch the bay floor. The bridge team worked in concert with key environmental groups, permitting agencies, government officials, fishermen, and the local Seafood Workers Association to develop plans for bridge construction.

Experts were brought in to conduct a profile of the bay floor (Bathymetric Survey) and a Preliminary Oyster Reef Survey along the proposed alignment of the bridge. Wetland areas were also flagged and surveyed. Additional surveys for potential sea grass impact and spot checks for oyster reef "hardiness" were also completed.

To minimize bay floor disturbance during construction, the bridge team developed an engineering solution that is not commonly used. By constructing and using 54-inch, pre-cast (concrete) cylinder piles, the new bridge design required only three piles per pier compared to the six square-shaped piles per pier used on the existing bridge.

The bridge piles are expected to last the life of the new bridge, which is projected to be 100 years. The bridge will also be the first one warranted by the contractor for a 10-year period, with complete inspections every two years.

### *Economic Impact Assessed*

Closely tied to the environmental concerns for Apalachicola Bay was the economic impact on nearby fishing towns. As an area that accounts for a large percentage of the oyster harvest in Florida, with approximately 10,600 acres of oyster beds, the Apalachicola

Bay serves as a vital contributor to the local economy.

In an unprecedented move, the St. George Island Bridge team sponsored an "Oyster Relay" to relocate the productive oyster beds to new homes out of harm's way. Hoards of local fishermen showed up for the relays to dredge up potentially endangered mollusks and deliver them to safer ground. In return, the fishermen were paid for each crate of oysters moved.

### *Preserving the Island's Natural Habitat Areas*

Protecting St. George Island's feathered inhabitants was another issue that required special attention. Members of the bridge team worked closely with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to ensure species such as laughing gulls, least terns, royal terns, sandwich terns, and American oystercatchers would have a place to call home long after the old bridge was demolished.

Together with the DEP and FWC, the bridge team devised a plan to transform the bird nesting area on the current bridge's causeway into an isolated nesting ground after the new bridge was opened and the old bridge demolished. Portions of the old bridge will be used to bolster the causeway and provide added protection from natural predators. Currently, the birds' No. 1 predator is vehicle traffic as they are hit by cars passing through the nesting grounds on their way to and from the island.

The demolition of the old bridge will also mean a new place to live and breed for the area's aquatic inhabi-

itants. Working together with the Organization for Artificial Reefs, the bridge team will help to create a new stretch of reefs along the Florida coast by hauling off portions of the old bridge and dumping them in designated areas offshore. Eventually, fisherman from near and far will be able to enjoy the newly inhabited reefs. And for the land-loving anglers, the north and south ends of the existing bridge will be preserved and transformed into fishing piers by the middle of next year.

### *A Bridge to Tomorrow*

Scheduled for completion in December 2003, the new bridge is more than 80 percent complete. The remaining work will entail connection of the north and south ends at the bridge's highest point over the channel of Apalachicola Bay. After that, the bridge team will add traffic rails, as well as other finishing touches before opening it to traffic.

"This new bridge will enhance the link between Apalachicola and St. George Island, making it easier for visitors to enjoy the many resources our area has to offer," says Anita Gregory, executive director for the Apalachicola Bay Chamber of Commerce.

And while the new path to paradise will look and feel different, it will still lead to the same unforgettable place so many people escape to year after year to remember the simpler pleasures in life. Some things will never change.

*Progress reports on the construction can be found on the web at:*  
[www.stgeorgeislandbridge.com](http://www.stgeorgeislandbridge.com).

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