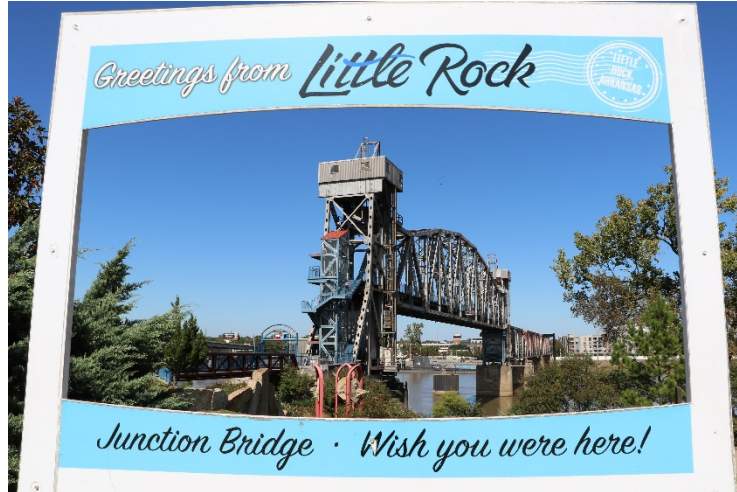


Sandwiching In History Tour
Junction Bridge, Arkansas River, Little Rock & North Little Rock
June 5th, 2020
By: Callie Williams



Introduction

Good afternoon, my name is Callie Williams, Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. Welcome to the June 2020 Sandwiching in History tour of the Junction Bridge in downtown Little Rock. This month we are presenting the history of the Junction Bridge over the Arkansas River between the historic Argenta community of North Little Rock and the downtown historic core of Little Rock. Much of the research for this script is based on previous work done by Bryan McDade, Curator of Collections at the Mosaic Templars Cultural Center in downtown Little Rock.

The city of Little Rock was named after a geological formation found along the banks of the Arkansas River known as “La Petite Roche”, or the little rock. This name was given to an outcropping of rocks near a low landing area by early French explorers of the area, including Jean-Baptiste Benard de la Harpe, who is the namesake of the nearby La Harpe boulevard. The little rock was in contrast to the much larger “Big Rock” bluff found just a couple of miles up the river along the northern riverbank. The big rock bluffs in North Little Rock were a large natural landmark for the area. The Native American tribes of the region used both the Big Rock and the Little Rock as prominent landmarks for travel through the area. The plateau along the top of the Big Rock eventually became the home of the former Fort Logan H. Roots military base and is now home to the Towbin Healthcare Center of the Department of Veterans Affairs. A remnant of the namesake little rock formation is still visible just beside the foot of the Junction Bridge in Riverfront Park in downtown Little Rock.

The central Arkansas region was home to the Quapaw people when the first European explorers reached the region in the early 1700s. Before the Quapaw living along the Arkansas River were forced to leave in 1824, there was a community of mixed Quapaw-French families that lived in the area of what is now Little Rock, which inspired the name “Quapaw Quarter” for Little Rock’s historic downtown neighborhoods. Early French explorers in the area referred to the small outcropping of rock along the south bank of the river as “le Petit Rocher” (the Little Rock) and the name appeared on maps of the area by 1800. The first immigrant settler near the Little Rock was William Lewis who built a cabin along the River in 1812. Although he didn’t stay in the area for long, but he did file a claim on the land. A permanent settlement was founded in the spring of 1820 near the rock, with a post office established under the name Little Rock at the site by March of the same year.

Soon, this new settlement drew the attention of land speculators who recognized the value of the site as an up and coming trade and political center. These speculators soon staked dubious claims to the town, even renaming its “Arkopolis”, and started selling lots. Another added issue was the planned move of the territorial capitol to Little Rock in June of 1821. The land claims were eventually settled, the town was renamed Little Rock, and the territorial capitol was moved from Arkansas Post in the Fall of 1821. The town was officially incorporated as town in 1831, and as a city in 1835.

By 1850 Little Rock was home to over 2000 residents and was an important economic, political, and civic hub for the region. The Arkansas River was the main transportation network for the area and Little Rock was an ideal port for a wide swath of central Arkansas. The population of the city would explode from over 3000 in 1860 to over 12,000 in 1870, and to over 38,000 by 1900.

Junction Bridge

During the early settlement decades of the town of Little Rock, the only way to cross the Arkansas River was by ferry. Travelers and traders would arrive along the Arkansas River and would use the steamboats that plied the Arkansas River to transport their supplies and goods. The first steamboat to travel up the Arkansas River to Little Rock was the Eagle, which arrived on March 16, 1822. Those wishing to cross the river would need to use the various ferryboats to transport themselves and any cargo. By the 1870s, various railroad lines across Arkansas allowed for faster and easier transportation, but all cargo and passengers still had to be ferried across the river at Little Rock. In 1873, The Baring Cross Bridge railroad bridge was started by the Cairo and Fulton Railroad. This wooden truss railroad bridge opened in late 1873. In 1877, a wooden highway deck was added above the tracks and operated as a toll bridge for the transport of people, wagons, and animals. The success of this elevated highway bridge soon prompted a local ferryman to build a pontoon bridge, also operated by toll, at the river level in

competition. By the mid-1880s, the Baring Cross Bridge was in shambles due to deterioration. The Union Bridge Company of New York state was hired to rebuild it with steel camelback trusses, a new lower highway deck alongside the tracks, and new electric lights. It was reopened in January of 1886. This new bridge eventually fell victim to the flood of 1927 despite the railroad's attempt to safeguard the bridge by trying to ballast it with fully loaded coal cars. It was rebuilt after the flood and still operates, with some 1970s modifications, as the main railroad bridge across the Arkansas River today.

As the Baring Cross Bridge was under constant use in the early 1880s, it became clear that another bridge was needed across the Arkansas River at Little Rock. During the early 1880s, The Little Rock, Mississippi River & Texas Railroad partnered with the Little Rock & Fort Smith Railroad to complete a line of track stretching from the Gulf Coast to Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma. A new bridge at Little Rock was needed to achieve this goal. In 1883 the Little Rock Junction Railway and Bridge Company was formed. The first load of timber for the construction project arrived at the little rock on the Arkansas River on March 3, 1884. After the timber arrived, the construction workers shared a bottle of wine to toast the new bridge project.

The newly formed bridge company hired Major Sickles, a consulting engineer, to oversee construction of the bridge and soon preparations were made to start to build the piers in the Arkansas River. By April, construction workers started assembling the caissons, large water-tight chambers, that would be used to build the bridge's piers at intervals across the river. The first, two hundred-ton caisson was sunk into and under the river all the way to bedrock. The water inside the chamber was then pumped out and the muddy river bottom was dredged using a large system of pressurized air pumps. This process was witnessed firsthand by an unidentified reporter for the *Arkansas Gazette* who reported on the construction in an article published on June 28th, 1884. The reporter visited the bridge company office, near the construction site, where he was provided with a full set of rubber overclothes, including long boots, pants, coat, and a rubber hat. The reporter was then taken by flatboat to the caisson where he saw the water and mud being pumped from the riverbed. The reporter was led on to the top of the iron caisson, a worker soon emerged from a hatch and the reporter descended into the dark confines of the metal cylinder in the middle of the river. After climbing down into a small compartment that was then pressurized, the reporter witnessed the system that allowed for water and mud to be pumped from the bottom of the river. The reporter then followed the workers into the larger chamber of the caisson all the way to the bottom of what had been excavated, at a depth of 58 feet below the surface of the river. They ended up standing almost six stories from the surface, and over 20 feet below the surrounding riverbed, as they excavated toward bedrock. The men inside worked by candlelight to push mud toward pipes that would pull it out of the bottom of the caisson. After the reporter's journey to below the bottom of the river, the reporter returned to the surface and returned his rubber suit, likening it to a journey to the bottom of the sea. Once the workers

reached bedrock at the bottom of each of the caissons, they began filling the negative space they had created with concrete, creating the structural piers for the bridge's superstructure. Interestingly, in newspaper reports of the time, it was noted that during construction of the bridge piers at least 3 "Arkansas toothpicks" or large knives had been found on the riverbed.

During the construction of the upper superstructure of the bridge, there were two major accidents that caused injuries among the workers. In September of 1884, a boiler exploded at the construction site, injuring several workers. Also, in November of the same year several workers were injured while working assembling parts of the superstructure with a battering ram. Vibrations from the process of pounding in assembly bolts caused a supporting plank to fall, which was supporting a team of workers, who fell onto a derrick. Although a few workers escaped with only minor injuries, one worker, unfortunately, later died due to injuries sustained in the fall.

Construction on the Junction Bridge was completed on December 8th, 1884. A test train was sent across the bridge early in the afternoon, followed by the ceremonial hammering in of the final "golden spike" by Mrs. Grimes, the wife of one of the construction contractors. Afterwards, there was a formal train crossing by an engine, decorated with winter foliage, pulling two flatcars with railroad officials and special guests as passengers. After unloading the passengers in Argenta, the train was loaded with cotton bales which were then transported back to Little Rock. This event was watched by hundreds of spectators who lined the north and south banks of the river. The original bridge included four full spans across the river with an approach span at either end. The largest section was the span that rotated 90 degrees to allow for the passage of boats up and down river. This pivoting pier, or swing bridge, was a common solution for railroad bridges at the time, having already been used at the Baring Cross Bridge just down river.

In January of 1885, floating ice in the Arkansas River caused the ferry services still working on the river to be suspended due to the hazardous conditions. This inspired the Junction Bridge company to quickly add a floor to the bridge for pedestrian and public traffic. This service was operated as a toll bridge, with wagons costing 23-35 cents for a round trip. Also, in January of 1885, an electrical generator, referred to at the time as a dynamo, was installed on the bridge to provide electric service so that the span could be illuminated at night for safety. The pedestrian and local traffic use of the bridge would only last until 1898, afterwards the bridge was used exclusively for railroad purposes.

Although a portion of the "point of rocks" known as the little rock was used as the base for the northern approach and foundation for the new Junction Bridge, it soon became apparent that the nearby land was now much more valuable for commercial purposes. By early 1886, several legal proceedings had been initiated over the current ownership of the land surrounding the foot of the bridge. While most agreed that William E. Woodruff had originally owned the property as

early the 1840s, a snarled tale of sales, mortgages, liens, and auctions left the current ownership undecided. With the taking of the land for the bridge, this also meant that whoever was the legal owner of the property was due compensation from the railroad. By the 1890s the ownership questions had been resolved and in 1906 the bridge became part of the Missouri Pacific Railroad company.

In 1917, the Junction Bridge was again under renovation to provide for pedestrian and auto traffic across the river. This was due in large part to the increased need for vehicular capacity as the traffic on the nearby Free Bridge needed to be diverted while it was repaired. The Free Bridge had opened in 1897 and would soon be replaced by a new Main Street Bridge. Broadway Bridge also allowed for more traffic over the river when it was completed in 1922. The Junction Bridge survived the flood of 1927 and served as the main railroad bridge for the Missouri Pacific's main line while the Baring Cross Bridge was rebuilt.

In the 1960s, it was determined that the original swing span of the bridge, now over 75 years old, needed to be replaced in order to be compatible with the new McClellan-Kerr Navigation Project along the Arkansas River. This new river navigation project would allow for the passage of larger tugs and barges up and down the river with a new series of locks and dams as well as provide additional flood protections and the bonus of promoting the development of recreational areas. As part of this new navigation project, the Junction Bridge's swing span was replaced with a new lift span, which provided more space for larger vessels travelling along the river. In 1983, Union Pacific took over control of much of the Missouri Pacific system and the bridge's ownership was transferred. The bridge continued to be used for local commercial railroad customers until the late 1990s. In 1999, the bridge was given a new lease on life when Pulaski County, and the cities of North Little Rock and Little Rock banded together to turn the structure into a pedestrian and bicycle bridge. The rehabilitation project, which cost 5.8 million dollars, fixed the lift span at 38 feet above the river, added stairs and two glass enclosed elevators, and renovated the deck of the entire span and the bridge approaches for pedestrian access. The newly renovated bridge was opened to the public on May 17th, 2008.

Today the bridge and the Little Rock at its foot continue to be a symbol of the history of central Arkansas from its earliest settlement through the growth of the city and its industries during the 19th and 20th centuries.

More information on the bridges that span the Arkansas River can be found at the Central Arkansas Library Encyclopedia of Arkansas online. Additional information on all of the sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places in Arkansas can be found on the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program's website at arkansaspreservation.com. You can also check out videos of past tours on our YouTube Channel under Arkansas Preservation.

Our next Sandwiching in History tour will be of the Winchester Auto Building in downtown Little Rock. This tour will take place as a virtual tour, premiering on our Facebook page on Friday, July 10th at Noon. (Please note, this is a week after our usually first Friday date due the July 4th holiday). Please check our Facebook page and our website at arkansaspreservation.com for the most up to date information on our tours and programs. We will continue to provide Virtual Tours until it is safe to return to in person tours in the future.

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