



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour
Baring Cross Bridge
Little Rock – North Little Rock**

January 8, 2021

By Callie Williams

Special thanks to Michael Hibblen, Bill Pollard, Union Pacific



*The Baring Cross Bridge, seen from the Arkansas Heritage building in Little Rock.
Photo by Callie Williams, 2021*

Introduction

CALLIE WILLIAMS:

Hello, I'm Callie Williams with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, an agency of Arkansas Heritage. This month for our Sandwiching in History tour, we're going to be talking about the Baring Cross Bridge right behind me.

The Baring Cross Bridge is a really interesting historical monument in downtown Little Rock. Many people see it not necessarily as historical, even though its history stretches back to 1873.

One of the reasons we're excited to present the history of the Baring Cross Bridge is because this is our building right here—Arkansas Heritage—and every day we have a front row seat to commerce taking place as trains cross the Arkansas River, just as they have for nearly 150 years.

Origin of the Name “Baring Cross”

One of the interesting aspects of the Baring Cross Bridge's history is that we're not exactly sure where the name comes from. We know pretty well that Baring comes from the company that helped finance the bridge, but the Cross part of the name has several different reasons for being, according to local historians. Some think that it was based on the crest of the family that helped finance the building and had a cross in its crest. Others think that it was because it was very close to Cross Street, which is right here in downtown Little Rock, and actually the street goes to the foot of the bridge almost, and so it may have been a way to note its location.

Rail Traffic Across the River Before the Bridge

The bridge behind me has roots starting in 1873, when it was first opened to railroad traffic. In the 1850s, the Cairo & Fulton Railroad Company, or the C&F, established lines on the north and south of the Arkansas River. Before the bridge's construction, people traveled across the river between Little Rock and North Little Rock on ferry. That's also how the C&F linked up their railroads: by ferrying across items. But this could be a perilous and slow way to transport livestock, dry goods, and equipment.

Michael Hibblen, who has done extensive research on the history of railroads in Central Arkansas, shares with us some interesting stories about the Baring Cross Bridge.

MICHAEL HIBBLEN:

The key is that this railroad, originally the Cairo & Fulton Railroad (and it soon became the Iron Mountain Railroad) was essentially built in two parts. In this area over here in North Little Rock we had the shops, which were the main places that had the most workers, but over here on this side we had the Union Station. And initially when the railroad was first built there was no way to get across the Arkansas River.

But this bridge was built to finally have a way to get across the river. Before this bridge they had to use ferries to slowly move the rail cars back and forth across the river. And that was not at all practical for the railroad. It was time consuming. Cargo would quickly build up on either side. It was also inconvenient for passengers.

WILLIAMS:

So in the early 1870s, the C&F Railroad began plans for a bridge to cross the Arkansas River right here in downtown Little Rock. Financing was sought from Baring & Co. bankers of London, England, which became the namesake of the bridge. (As a side note, Baring is the world's second oldest merchant bank and operated until 1995, when it was bought out by ING.)

When it was completed, the bridge was reported to have cost \$349,277. Today that amount is valued at upwards of \$7.4 million.

The Grand Opening

HIBBLIN:

This was a huge deal for the people of Arkansas. The bridge was completed on December 20th, 1873, and the grand opening was the next day. It was described in the employee magazine as just a huge fanfare. There was a big crowd of people that came out here to see.

You had several fixed spans of the bridge, but you also had a center span that would move, and the final step in the process during this ceremony was to move this span that would spin—move it into position. And there's a great description of how, apparently once that span was finally moved into place and the bridge was all lined up, a woman emerged from the crowd and actually ran across the bridge.

There had initially been applause, but some woman just came out of nowhere and ran across from the south side of the bridge to the north side of the bridge, becoming the first person to ever cross the Baring Cross Bridge. It's thought that she was one of the bridge workers' wives, but even 50 years later no one knew who she truly was.

The next day, the first train trip was made across, and it was just to test it out. Charles Seymour was the engineer's name, and he took an empty freight train across it and then stopped and then came back across it. That was just to test it make sure it could indeed hold the weight of the locomotive.

The Early Years

WILLIAMS:

Later a small town cropped up adjacent to Argenta in North Little Rock with the name Baring Cross. You can recognize this area today from the historic Vestal Smokestack in the Rockwater neighborhood. Baring Cross, the town, has since been incorporated into Argenta and thus North Little Rock.

By 1877, a toll highway was built on top of the bridge for pedestrian use, but it only lasted about nine years before the company rebuilt most of the bridge with, the exception of the piers, and brought the highway deck to the same level as the tracks. So now we have trains, vehicles, and pedestrians all able to cross the river with relative safety.

Here's Michael Hibblen to share more of the story:

HIBBLEN:

There were a lot of people—railroad workers as well as residents—who would cross the bridge regularly; have to have pay a toll each time. There were toll booths on each side of the bridge, but you had some railroad workers who lived in Baring Cross and worked over here at Union Station and, vice versa, people in Little Rock who worked over here in the shops.

In 1917, the Iron Mountain Railroad was absorbed by the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1917. And the Missouri Pacific did a lot of work to upgrade the bridge. They made it so that they could withstand the heavier locomotives, the kind of steam locomotives that the Missouri Pacific used. They also made plans to widen the bridge. They said that this really needs to be a double-track bridge. And there were plans in place in 1924 to do this work, but then we had Mother Nature come in.

The Great Flood of 1927

WILLIAMS:

The history of the bridge wasn't without drama. April of 1927 was unusually wet for Arkansas and marked by major flooding. As the river valley became saturated, the Arkansas River rose to dangerous levels, and travel across the bridge was limited.

Still the curious would wander out to take in the flood waters just a few feet below the bridge. For public safety the bridge was closed on April 20th as word reached Little Rock of flood waters taking out bridges upstream. And so in a last-ditch effort to save the valuable Baring Cross Bridge, the railroad added weight to the tracks with cars loaded full of coal.

Walter Hussman, publisher of the Arkansas Democrat Gazette, relayed a story from Richard C. Butler, an attorney and banker who grew up in Little Rock. Butler told a group of businessmen, including Hussman, that he witnessed the bridge shake, and then suddenly it and the coal cars were gone. Although Mr. Butler did not remember that any of the coal cars were found, Michael Hibblen later reports that historical accounts show that coal cars were removed from the river later.

HIBBLLEN:

They described it looking like, almost like it was on fire. It was probably just the coal loaded in the cars building up so much dust. But the bridge just violently started to shake, made a lot of noise, and then—boom—instantly it was gone, and washed into the river.

Some sank into the water here, some were actually carried—some of the coal cars, maybe parts of the bridge—a couple miles down the line. Some of the debris was found just east of the Rock Island Bridge, which is the easternmost bridge of the bridges here in Little Rock. So if you could just think about how high the water was, how fast it was moving, and how it just tore down this bridge that had been here a little more than 50 years at that point.

MKARNS and Bridge Upgrades for River Navigation

WILLIAMS:

Today we still worry about flooding along the Arkansas River. It was in just June of 2019 when we saw flood waters rise to the top of the piers under the Baring Cross Bridge. However, this time we didn't have to worry about the bridge being taken out by the force of the water.

In 1967, 40 years after the devastating flood that swept the bridge away, the entire river was undergoing changes. The train line had transferred ownership by now from the C&F Railroad to the Missouri Pacific Railroad, who were busy making plans to comply with new federally mandated navigation requirements for the McClellan Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System (MKARNS).

Every bridge spanning the Arkansas River was now required to meet height and width requirements, so that river traffic would not be impeded. Like most other bridges, Baring Cross did not meet the standards, and so it was time for another update. Today, the modern steel double-track 12-panel bridge with a navigational lift span remains one of the busiest commercial railways in the country.

Again here is Michael Hibblen:

HIBBLLEN:

You can still see the original parts of the 1929 bridge here. That's the two northernmost spans, and you can tell they're much more weathered. The newer part, even though it's a half a century old, is the lift span that was completed in 1971. It's much shinier, even though the steel and the span was built in a very similar style as the other spans.

The lift span was added because in the 1960s there were plans put in place for what was called the McClellan Kerr Navigation project. This was to, number one, try to control the Arkansas River a little more in terms of flooding. There were dams and locks that were put in place, but

more important was making it navigable for barge traffic. And you had to have every bridge that was along the Arkansas River meet standards for height and width. And most bridges that were along the Arkansas River at that time did not meet those standards.

And in fact the three railroad bridges here at Little Rock all had to be retrofitted with lift spans. Before that all had swing spans that would swing open. And that was adequate enough for, you know, steamboats and other vessels. But to meet the requirements for this to be a fully navigable river there was the great expense with the Army Corps of Engineers putting in lift spans.

The lift span for this bridge was completed in 1971. And that's where the span actually raises up and will allow barge traffic to go underneath, and then immediately it comes back down. Most of the time you will see this lift span down. It's relatively rare that you look over and actually see it up. When it is, it's only for a short period of time.

But that's really been the only major change to this bridge since the new bridge was unveiled in 1929; technology hasn't changed much. In the first Baring Cross Bridge, it was a constant amount of work to upgrade it, to maintain it, and it was a major expense. But by the time this new bridge was rebuilt and reopened in 1929, the technology was so much more advanced, and it's pretty much the same today. A modern bridge in 1929 is a modern bridge, you know, here in 2021.

A Ride Across the Bridge with Union Pacific

WILLIAMS:

Union Pacific continues to operate this track today, and they were generous enough to allow us to get some footage from inside of one of their trains. They take great pride today in safely maintaining this line. What a spectacular canopy the trusses make as you pass through them traveling from one side to the other. And to think this is the spectacular view that engineers and crews have been enjoying for over a century. Let's just take it in.

Outro

Thank you for joining us for our January 2021 virtual Sandwiching in History tour of Baring Cross Bridge. You can check out our upcoming tours on our website at arkansaspreservation.com, and we want to thank our wonderful historians, Michael Hibblen and Bill Pollard, and Union Pacific for helping us to get across the bridge and sharing the history of this unique place with us.

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The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program is the agency of Arkansas Heritage responsible for the identification, evaluation, registration and preservation of the state's cultural resources. Arkansas Heritage is a division of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism.



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