

# HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF KENT COUNTY

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## THE OLD CHESTER RIVER BRIDGE

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The planned closing in 2016 of the Chester River bridge at Chestertown for repairs to the draw brings to mind its 19th century predecessor, which during its 109 year history had quite a few closures, both planned and unplanned.

A toll ferry connected Chestertown and what is today Kingstown beginning in 1800. The crossing was slow—up to an hour—and sometimes perilous. Replacing the ferry with a bridge across the Chester began in 1805 with the incorporation of the Chester River Bridge Company, but raising the necessary funds was a slow process. Stock was issued at \$50 per share to raise an initial \$10,000, and then the company resorted to a lottery. The contract to erect the bridge was finally let in December of 1819, but the bridge

was not fully operational until 1821. By that time, the cost had risen to \$20,000. Tolls provided the funds to maintain the bridge, employ a bridge keeper, and pay a dividend to stockholders.



Old Chester River Bridge, C. 1869

Charles Gill Private Collection

The bridge was built on wood pilings and was paved with heavy wooden planks. The original raised draw was changed to a hand operated turnstile in 1846 and the draw widened to 40 feet on either side of the central platform in 1861 to accommodate the new steamer



"Chester." This draw was a primitive wooden affair that was replaced in 1872 with a heavier iron one that moved on a pivot. The draw had to be replaced in 1884 after a series of accidents and replaced again in 1903 when it became nearly impossible to crank open.

The bridge keeper was responsible for opening the draw on command, collecting tolls, and attending to maintenance. The task required carpenter's skills as well as physical strength and endurance when replacing planks and other bridge parts, and the various keepers probably employed helpers. It is unlikely that wheelwright John L. Ringgold, who became bridge keeper at age 56 in 1862 and retained that position until his death in 1880, did all the physical labor himself. The task of bridge repairs was also dangerous. Ringgold's predecessor was fatally injured in 1861 while working on widening the draw.

As close proximity to the bridge was necessary to attend to the draw and to collect tolls, the bridge keeper was given a house at the north east end of the bridge on what is today Maple Avenue — officially called "Fish

Street" but informally dubbed Bridge Street. Two images of the original bridge keeper's house (built circa 1820) survive from about 1869. It was a storey-and-a-half cottage with a central chimney and an overhanging roof. The photos show two doors on the front with adjacent windows. On the gable end there was a single window on each storey. The north (or Chestertown) side of the house had a high board fence connecting to a shed. The bridge side of the house adjoined the toll gate, a tall structure that may have slid open. Stockade-style fencing covered the bridge railings well out into the river; nothing could escape the toll!



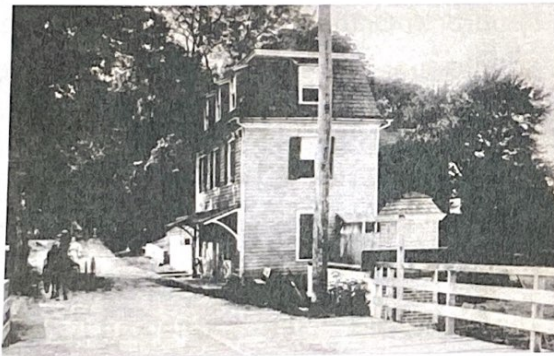
Bridge Keepers House, C. 1869

Courtesy Kevin Hemstock

Fish Street, as it was called, was a narrow lane, with the home of G.W. T. Perkins at the intersection with Water Street the sole house on the east



side of the 100 block. It wasn't until the 1880s that the area became fashionable, hence the name change to Maple Avenue. The old bridge keeper's cottage may have appeared to be quaint but a report on its condition in 1888 called the house unfit for use and said a new one was an immediate necessity. A new house in the mansard style, designed by noted local architect Walter Pippin, was erected in 1901. The 16 x 30 foot three-storey house with a privy on the river side cost \$948. It was removed after the present bridge was opened in 1930.



Bridge Keepers House, c. 1902  
Col. John South, Pippin Collection, HSKC

Necessary maintenance and accidents could close the bridge for several weeks at a time, requiring use of a ferry. In all between 1861 and 1913 there were at least twenty-two recorded closures. Thirteen were for repairs and nine the result of accidents. Some repairs, such as new

planks or railings, were made "in short order" without lengthy closures, but replacing pilings and stringers or putting in a new draw could take two to six weeks, and rebuilding that began in October 1890 lasted two months. In these cases, travelers were accommodated by a ferry. This was a scow operated along a cable that traveled from near the entrance of the present bridge on the Queen Anne's side to a public landing on "Barroll's Creek" near present-day Horsey Lane.

Most accidents occurred when sailing vessels lost control and hit the draw. A fictional account of such an accident is recounted by author Gilbert Byron in *The Lord's Oysters*. His father was the bridge keeper from 1907 to 1909. In Byron's story, the blame was placed on responding too slowly in opening the draw, thus damaging the schooner involved. The real thing was usually the fault of the vessels' captains and crews and resulted in costly repairs to the draw. The year 1884 was particularly bad. In May, the large schooner *Margaret S. Kennedy* hit the bridge causing a nearly \$1000 in damages and a lengthy closure. Over the summer there were three more accidents, culminating in September



when the schooner *William S. Kirby* cleared the bridge in a stiff headwind, lost control and slammed into the draw causing another \$1000 in damages and another resort to a ferry. The unlucky *Kennedy* hit the bridge again in 1890. In these cases unfortunate travelers had to drive their teams up to Crumpton to cross the river or wait for the steamboat.

The ready availability of water transportation and the apparent slow growth of the Queen Anne's County side of the river likely meant the bridge was not heavily used in its earliest years. Did the stockholders in the bridge company see much in the way of income? By 1851 citizens in northern Queen Anne's began to complain about the tolls —six cents for foot traffic, thirty-seven cents for a team and eighty-seven cents for four horses and a wagon. In 1857 a Kent County resident argued for a free bridge, claiming people in northern Queen Anne's took their business elsewhere to Chestertown's detriment. At that point Chestertown had a population of 1530.

The town grew steadily up to 1870, then experienced a growth spurt that led to a 26 percent increase by

1880. The whole area along Chester River became prosperous because of the "peach boom" -- Kent and Queen Anne's counties were national leaders in peach production. All this growth increased bridge traffic and by 1888 bridge tolls again became an issue. Thus Senator John B. Brown of Queen Anne's introduced a bill in the state legislature to provide for the purchase of the Chester River bridge by the commissioners of the two counties. The majority of stockholders in the bridge company were open to the idea of a sale, but at what price? An "Examiner's Report" in October 1888 noted the cost of the bridge, if new, would be \$11,000. Estimated annual expenses were \$400 for maintenance and \$250 for the salary of the bridge keeper. Most of the paving was new, as was the draw, but the piling was deteriorating and would have to be replaced in five years at a cost of \$2000. Other repairs and replacing the bridge keeper's house brought the estimate up to \$5000. Early in 1889 the commissioners of both counties offered \$7500 total for the bridge, but the company stockholders wanted \$11,000— acceptable to Kent's commissioners but not to Queen Anne's. It took over a year



to complete negotiations and the bridge became the property of both counties on July 24, 1890.

With due ceremony, the bridge became toll free for the first time in 71 years. The bridge keeper noted there was more traffic over the bridge on July 24 than in all the preceding two weeks and he did not know there were so many people in northern Queen Anne's. In all, the bridge cost the county commissioners \$11,400 but there was more expense to come. Almost immediately H.M. Stuart, a local builder, was awarded \$1,400 to strengthen existing benches and build additional ones in between, which required driving 268 white oak piles. Abutments at both ends of the bridge were rebuilt and extended. The bridge was closed in October and a 36 x 9 foot scow guided by a 600 foot cable and under the command of the bridge keeper provided service from a nearby public landing. On one day in November the ferry transported 81 teams, with as many as ten waiting to cross. By mid-December, after two months, the bridge reopened, to the relief of all concerned.

With county ownership came a series

of regulations that give some insight as to how the bridge had been used or perhaps abused. Promenading had long been popular. In 1857, William Perkins, proprietor of the "Rising Sun" (an oyster house and ice cream parlor on Maple Avenue where the Chestertown Fire House now stands) reminded "Gentlemen and Ladies don't forget to call up when you have been *promenading on the Bridge*." Even in the days of the toll Chestertown residents could walk on the bridge free of charge if they did not cross. Contracts for bridge repairs mentioned benches, so citizens clearly sat to enjoy the breezes. Fishing was always a popular pastime.

The new rules, however, suggested there had been or might be less sedate activities. No dancing, singing, boisterous language or disorderly conduct was permitted, nor were persons allowed to "congregate in groups." Wheelbarrows, pushcarts, baby carriages were forbidden. Velocipedes or bicycles had to be walked across. The bridge was an early "no smoking" zone. "Bathing" from off or under the bridge was off limits. The discharging firearms and fireworks was forbidden, although citizens



congregated on the bridge on the Fourth of July between 1899 and 1906 to enjoy fireworks discharged from the riverfront lawn of the Barroll home, Byford Court.

In an attempt to prevent accidents, mooring vessels of any sort to the bridge was off limits. Captains, owners, masters and sailors going through the draw were required to take in sail and proceed with caution or they would be liable for any damage they inflicted as well as subject to a fine. Fines ranged from \$2.50 to \$10 per offense. This did not stop all accidents, for in 1892 the schooner "Virginia," swept along only by a strong current, got her anchor entangled with the draw and pulled it off its pivot, leading to a three week closure and resort to a ferry. Moreover, Capt. Capel of the schooner "Australia" delighted in showing off his skills by sliding through under full sail.

Although there was no longer a toll, teams crossing over the bridge were required to proceed at a walk and keep forty yards apart. The bridge keeper was supposed to enforce these limits but as Gilbert Byron reported in an "I Remember" piece in the *Baltimore Sun*, anxious or impatient drivers did

not always slow down. What did keep them in check was slow traffic like hay wagons at the end of summer. Bridge rules also limited drovers crossing with animals to no more than ten horses, ten cows, fifty hogs or one hundred sheep at a time — they must have made quite a spectacle!

The automobile age signaled the end for the venerable wooden bridge. The Maryland State Roads Commission took over the bridge in 1912. By that time almost 100 cars were registered in Kent County alone. Trucks had begun to rival the railway as the favored mode of distance transport. These took their toll on the aging wooden bridge. The bridge had a four ton limit, and in 1916, when a moving van weighing eight tons arrived from Philadelphia, it was stopped and the driver was compelled to unload into two wagons and reload on the Queen Anne's side. The whole process consumed four hours.

World War I accelerated the movement toward trucks and newspapers reported "fleets" of trucks and "heavily loaded trucks" heading south. Automobile traffic also increased, despite war related



curtailment of pleasure driving. In September 1918 a record 100 autos crossed the bridge on a single Sunday. In 1924 the count was 1900. But the days of the old bridge were numbered.

The State Roads Commission began a program of building concrete roads and in May 1916 proposed to pave Washington Avenue. The *Transcript* reported a proposal to build a concrete bridge across the Chester. The editors remarked "Let it come as soon as possible." This would set off a storm of controversy.

The paper reported in September that the old bridge had about two years life left, and the state would route the new bridge to High Street. The editors opined the High Street route would obstruct navigation on the river, close the steamboat wharf and require a costly roundabout to connect to Washington Avenue. Chestertown merchants wanted the High Street route but there was opposition from residents of Maple Avenue. They feared the site of the old bridge would become a veritable dump and their street would remain unpaved. In addition the residents of the growing Queen Anne's community of Kingstown were absolutely opposed to any change in

the location of the bridge. Meetings were held on both sides of the river. The State Roads Commission appeared to have settled for rebuilding at the old site. These things remained until 1929.

Some progress was made on Maple Avenue. In the fall of 1923 concrete paving began, and a long troublesome hill at the foot of the bridge was removed. On June 8, 1929, the State Roads Commissioners held a well-attended hearing (145 people) to present three alternative routes for the new bridge. One was the foot of High Street, one Maple Avenue, and the third was Barroll's Hollow [now Horsey Lane]. Most of Chestertown's mercantile community still favored the foot of High Street. Cessation of steamer traffic had made the old argument about obstructing navigation moot. The argument against the High Street route was the street was already crowded to capacity. Wilbur Ross Hubbard, a prominent citizen and owner of Widehall, pointed out the High Street route "would materially destroy the beauty of the waterfront." This argument was also advanced by the proponents of Barrolls Hollow—to preserve the beauty of the waterfront and reroute traffic around the center of

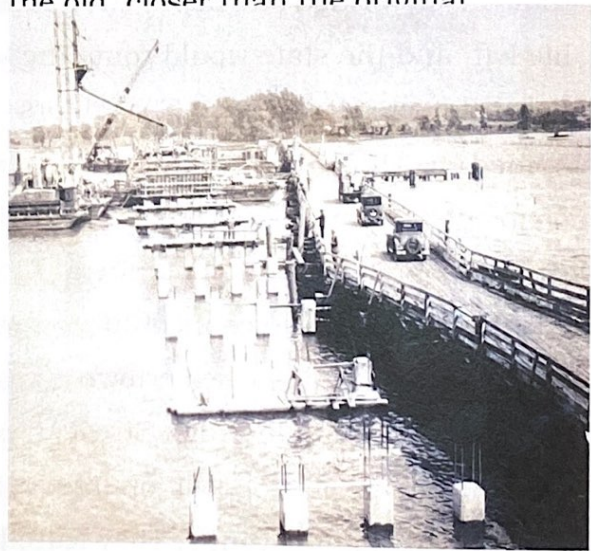


the town. The Queen Anne's contingent would have none of these. Their choice was the present route; "the entire county was in favor of the Maple Avenue location."

The commissioners retired to Baltimore to make their decision. It came a few weeks later. The Maple Avenue route would be retained but the proposed new bridge would be begun 225 feet north of the old one on the Queen Anne's side. This would allow the old bridge to remain in use as the new one was constructed. The state had to seek federal approval as the Chester River was navigable well above Chestertown. The key factor was the new draw. Plans called for a bascule with a clearance of five feet above that of the existing bridge, and an opening of 60 feet as opposed to the current 40. The new bridge would improve navigation and more vessels could pass without the bridge being opened. Federal approval came swiftly and the new bridge contract was advertised in September 1929 and awarded to a New York company in early October.

At 27 feet wide, the new bridge would be a definite improvement for automobile and truck traffic as each lane would now be ten feet. It would

also have a five foot wide walkway on the west side that made the bridge safe for fishermen, crabbers and strollers as the advent of the automobile had made these pastimes hazardous. On November 2, 1929 work began by building a temporary approach to the west that met with the old bridge in a "dog leg" fashion 150 feet from the shoreline. This enabled the removal of part of the bridge at Maple Avenue so the new concrete bridge could be built on the footprint of the old. At the same time a new approach was constructed on the Queen Anne's side 150 feet from the old, closer than the original



Chester River Bridge Construction, C. 1930  
HSKC

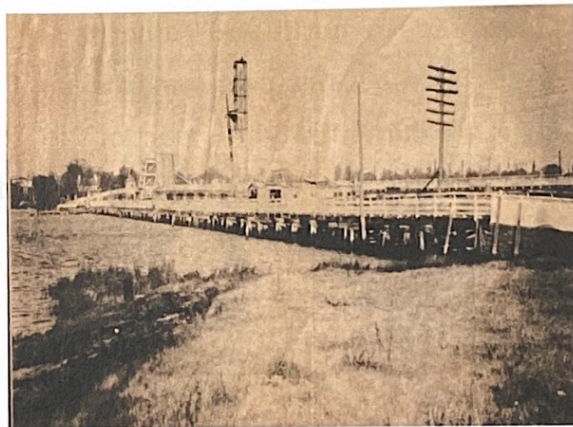
Construction of the new bridge was a monumental undertaking. What was reported to be the "largest pile driver in the world" soon arrived to drive four 75 foot long test piles that



were 24 feet square and weighed 20 tons each. While actual work was halted during the winter, the wharf at the foot of Cannon Street was leased so the reinforced concrete piles could be constructed on site. So great was the weight of the construction materials that the wharf began to collapse and had to be rebuilt. There were 40 piers or "bents" of four piles each—in all 160 piles. Enough piles were ready by early February to begin driving; all were in place by the beginning of April but inevitable delays prevented a hoped-for September completion date. The draw or "basculer" arrived in a single piece. The bridge was finally ready in early November and the dedication date was set for Armistice Day, November 11, 1930. In all the new bridge had taken a year to build at a total cost of \$400,000.

The new bridge was dedicated to the citizens of Kent and Queen Anne's counties who served in "The Great War." Bronze tablets were placed on the obelisks at each end of the bridge. A military parade formed at Washington College and proceeded down Washington Avenue, over to High Street, turned on Queen, then Maple Avenue and across the old bridge. At

precisely 11 am., the marchers halted on the Queen Anne's side. The sirens of the fire department, the electric light plant and the new bridge sounded one blast, followed by a minute of silence for the war dead and a dedication ceremony. The parade then marched back to Kent County on the new bridge, marking its official opening. All stores in town were closed and a crowd of 4000 witnessed the ceremony.



Both Bridges, C. 1930

HSKC

What happened to the old bridge that had served for so long? On November 12, 1930, a wrecking crew appeared to dismantle it. It had been reinforced so many times that its underpinnings were almost solid wood. Everything was removed except the portion that served as the approach on the Queen Anne's side. Citizens of the area wanted it retained as a public landing. That portion of the old bridge



still stands today, with the original granite foundation stones supporting brick walls on either side of the old roadway. The bridge keeper's house also survives. It was moved to Flatland Road and is being restored by restoration carpenter Michael Dickinson.

The "new" bridge is now 87 years old. It has become part of an essential artery connecting Chestertown to Cecil County in the north and Talbot in the south. While Kingstown remains a separate community it is part of the Chestertown zip code, its residents and businesses closely connected to Kent County. The draw of the "new" bridge was replaced in 1967 and the entire bridge was renovated between 1989 and 1990. With traffic crossing the bridge estimated at 15,000 per day, this now historic bridge has recently received another face lift.



THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
KENT COUNTY

## SOURCES

Microfilm of the *Transcript*, and the *Kent County News*, available at the Miller Library of Washington College. Unless otherwise stated all information quoted comes from the *Transcript*. Issues of the *Kent News*—later the *Kent County News*—from 1890 are available online through the Maryland State Archives.

Kevin Hemstock, *Kent County Abstracts*, vols. 1-8, 1746-1893 [ongoing series], privately printed, 2015-16.

An article on the bridge appears in Kevin Hemstock et. al., *Tales of Kent County*, vol. 1. Chestertown, 2006.

Information on the old bridge also comes from the Vertical File and photographs of the bridge keepers' house are found in the Pippin collection of the Historical Society of Kent County.

Useful photos of the old bridge can be found in Patricia Joan Horsey & R. Jerry Keiser, *Kent County* [Images of America], Arcadia, S.C., 2005, R. Jerry Keiser, Patricia Joan O. Horsey & William A. Biddle, *Chestertown and Kent County* [Postcard History Series], Arcadia, S.C., 2005, and in R. Jerry Keiser, Patricia Joan Horsey & William A. Biddle, *Kent County*, [Then & Now], Arcadia, S.C. 2010.

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