

Once upon a Time: How Memorial Bridge was built

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Erection of steel for the bridge was under the personal supervision of President Howard of the Kelly-Atkinson Construction Company on Oct. 19, 1929. (Photo courtesy of Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County)

By JUSTIN COFFEY

Stretching nearly one mile across the Mississippi River, the Quincy Soldier's Memorial Bridge has served the community for more than eight decades. Linking Missouri and Illinois via Route 24, the bridge is an integral part of daily life in the era of automobiles. But getting the bridge built was no easy chore, yet the construction and completion of the bridge fulfilled a decades-long dream of the people of Quincy.

Ever since the founding of Quincy, residents had faced the difficulty of traveling across the Mississippi over to Missouri. Travel during the first century was limited to boats and ferries, which worked well enough in a time before cars, but ferry travel still had its shortcomings, particularly in the winter when the river froze over. A railroad bridge, built in the late 19th century, represented an improvement, but with the boom of the automobile industry in the 1920s, the old bridge simply was unable to serve the increased traffic.

By the late 1920s, city leaders were ready to act. At a city council meeting held in January 1928, the members took up a proposal that came from the Quincy Chamber of Commerce. The leaders of Quincy's business community had pushed for the building of a bridge, to be financed locally instead of by the federal government. The council

agreed unanimously upon the idea. It voted to grant the right to build the bridge to the Kelly-Atkinson Company, a Chicago corporation, with the provision that the city had the right to buy the bridge in the future. The Kelly-Atkinson Company agreed to build the bridge and accepted \$250,000 in bond payments. The city began a bond drive in the community to help furnish funds for the costs of the bridge, which the council had estimated to be about \$1.25 million. The bridge was named in honor of the men and women of the city of Quincy and Adams County who had died in wars fighting for America. The bridge was set to open by 1930.

On June 16, 1928, Mayor Charles L. Weems turned the first spade of grass. The construction of the bridge was not easy. Digging began in June 1928, and the bridge would not be completed for another two years. The elements played a role in some of the delays, as winter conditions delayed some of the construction. There were also some unfortunate and tragic accidents. Four men perished during the building of the bridge, one by drowning. Finally, in May 1930, Quincy Memorial Bridge was open to the public. The first car to cross the bridge, on an official inspection trip on May 19, 1930, was driven by I. L. Pesses, engineer, who was accompanied by W. Emery Lancaster and Mayor Weems. The original toll for crossing the bridge was 50 cents, a round trip fare that remained the same for over a decade. By 1945, the city had paid the outstanding bonds, and the fares for the bridge were eliminated.

During construction, a group of laborers dubbed the "Sand Hog" crew toiled some eight feet below the Mississippi. Working in arduous conditions, the laborers did a difficult job that required special skills. About two-thirds of the Sand Hogs were African Americans. They lived an itinerant lifestyle, moving constantly from place to place where new bridges were being built. During the building of the Memorial Bridge, the workers typically had one hour shifts, since being in an environment with an air pressure of 40 pounds meant that they could only be down there for a limited amount of time.

By the 1970s, the bridge, while still in good condition, with two lanes was simply not large enough to handle all the traffic. A new bridge was needed to alleviate the congestion. Bayview Bridge opened in August 1987, serving westbound traffic from Quincy into West Quincy. Although the Quincy Memorial Bridge remains structurally sound after 83 years in existence, there is the possibility that the bridge could soon be replaced. In October 2012, the state of Illinois discussed the option of building a new, more modern edifice. The bridge remains as busy today as ever. Rodney Hart of the *Quincy Herald-Whig* noted that in 2009, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation, about 6,900 cars crossed over the Quincy Memorial Bridge each day.

Anyone wishing to learn more about the history of Quincy Memorial Bridge can visit the Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County at 12th and State. The Historical Society houses minutes of the annual meeting of the Quincy Memorial Bridge Company from 1942-1950. In addition, the Society has in its archives three scrapbooks relating to the bridge. One of the scrapbooks is composed entirely of photographs of the construction of the Bridge, while the two others have newspaper clippings and other assorted materials.

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author of numerous articles on American history and is on the board of the Historical Society.

Sources

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