

HISTORY OF THE ANOKA-CHAMPLIN MISSISSIPPI RIVER BRIDGE

Prior to a Bridge

Prior to the first bridge, crossing the Mississippi River between the cities of Champlin and Anoka was done by ferry boat. The first ferry crossed the river in the fall of 1855. Operators came and went, but one of the most remembered was John Bean. He had a “twinkling eye and [was] never without his plug of tobacco.” He often allowed the town’s boys a ride back and forth across the river without paying. The fee depended on the cargo. A man on foot paid less than a man with a team and a wagon. Wagon wheels were chained to the deck while crossing as the horses were sometimes frightened or skittish—especially when a log from one of the log drives scraped or bumped under the ferry.

Winter ended the ferry boat service each year, but with caution and a knowledge of the river, ice bridges were used during the winter until boat traffic resumed in the spring.

The First Bridge – 1884



The first bridge to span the Mississippi River between Champlin and Anoka opened in 1884. It was a spring bridge with the center section turning on a central pier, like a hinge on a door, to allow boat traffic to pass alongside the open bridge. It was 900 feet long with an 18 foot wide roadway and was constructed of iron with a wood deck and rested on Kasota stone and granite piers.

The bridge served horse and wagon traffic, but for safety reasons they could only cross at a walking pace. Fines of \$5 or \$10 were levied against those “speeding” across the bridge. The \$115,000 cost of the iron bridge was divided between Anoka and Hennepin counties, the cities

of Anoka and Champlin, and the state of Minnesota. The city of Anoka's \$30,000 share wasn't paid off until 1924, 40 years after it opened.

The Second Bridge - 1929

By the 1920s, automobiles were replacing horses. The bridge could not handle the automobile traffic and the weight of the loaded trucks. River boats no longer traveled this section of river, so a bridge did not need to allow for their passage. It was decided that a new bridge was needed to accommodate the heavier automobiles. The old bridge stayed in service while the new bridge was built right next to it. Once the new bridge was finished, the old iron bridge was dismantled. Sections of the old bridge were moved north to cross the Mississippi again between Clear Lake and Clearwater. Though the cost of moving the bridge section was \$30,000, it saved more than \$50,000 for the new communities it served.



The Minneapolis Bridge Company received the contract to build a new bridge in 1928. Horace E. Horton, a well-known bridge builder from Rochester, was selected as the designer. Horton's design called for a continuous arch bridge of reinforced concrete with eight spans and two approaching spans. The open spandrel construction had twin concrete arches for each span. Supporting spandrels and simple transverse slabs supported the concrete deck and road surface. The approach span had closed spandrels. A concrete railing with simple outlined panels ran the length of the bridge and contained classical elements. Vertical fluting decorated each pier. Iron lamp posts stood on the bridge deck above the piers. The total length was 995.1 feet with a maximum span of 109 feet. The deck of the bridge was 60.5 feet wide with a roadway width of just over 40 feet. Eight foot sidewalks ran on both sides of the roadway. The cost was \$500,000.

Bridge Reconstructed – 1998

As one of the only river crossings in the north metro and beyond, the Champlin-Anoka bridge saw traffic volumes continue to grow each year. Highway 169 was a major gateway to the “lake country” of northern Minnesota, a popular weekend destination for city dwellers.

A resurfacing project in 1971 replaced the bridge deck without changing the integrity of the bridge design. Traffic volumes continued to grow. In 1988, discussions began to surface about repairing, replacing, or reconstructing the bridge.

In 1991, discussions turned to action as bridge reconstruction was scheduled and a temporary four-lane bridge. Traffic was rerouted onto a temporary bridge built beside the historic bridge. Then funding to restore the old bridge was lost and the project was put on hold and the temporary bridge remained in use. When funding was restored, the State of Minnesota contracted with the Edward Kraemer and Sons Company of Wisconsin to remove the old bridge deck down to the arches. In addition to making the bridge wider, the work included stabilizing the arches and replacing the decorative railing of the original design. The project managers took great care to insure the historical integrity of the bridge and its elegant arches were not compromised in the \$8 million project. The rebuilt bridge was re-dedicated and opened to traffic in 1998 and the temporary bridge was removed as soon as the new bridge was open.



National Register of Historic Place Designation

This bridge was part of a American program of concrete highway bridge construction that evolved around the Minneapolis/St. Paul area in the 1920s. During this era, the Twin Cities was a center for innovative bridge engineers to try their designs since the Minnesota and the Mississippi rivers provided many opportunities for bridge builders.

By the 1940s, arched bridges were deemed too expensive to build and prestressed girders took their place in subsequent bridges across the nation. In 1980, the Anoka-Champlin bridge was placed on the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in both historical and engineering reasons. Historically, it represents a major river crossing that

joined together two communities with long-standing commercial and economic links. It featured cutting edge technology in its design and construction with the graceful concrete curves of its open spandrel arches.

Written by R.B. Johnson, 1998

Edited by John Cox, 2015

Sources: Ferry Recollections, *Anoka Union*, 6 November 1929
The New \$500,000 Bridge Across the Mississippi at Anoka, *Anoka Union*, 16 July 1930.
Anoka-Champlin bridge work should be done in early August, *Anoka Union*, 3 April 1998.
Bridge Removal, *Anoka Herald*, 16 October 1928
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