

A Prologue to the Construction of the Fifth Columbia- Wrightsville Bridge

by L. W. Newcomer

Construction of the fifth Columbia-Wrightsville bridge across the Susquehanna River is described, and recorded for posterity, in the Journal of The Lancaster County Historical Society, Vol. 73, No. 1, 1969. Written by Robert S. Mayo, C.E., who was in charge as the Engineer of one phase of the project, an on-the-spot record is supplied. The bridge, when completed in 1930, was the longest multiple arch highway bridge in the world and, as Col. Mayo states, "it still is."

Col. Mayo describes the traffic situation which led to its construction. When trains were operated on the narrow railroad bridge which it replaced, or on the railroad tracks which paralleled the river, all highway traffic was halted. (Incidentally, this was the only highway bridge across the river between Harrisburg and Conowingo, Md., each at least thirty miles distant.)

According to Col. Mayo the first concrete was poured on June 12, 1929 and the bridge completed and accepted on September 28, 1930. Thus the bridge was built in less than sixteen months. Col. Mayo does not, however, and would not be expected to include a record of the more than seven years which elapsed from the time a bridge was first proposed until actual construction began.

Col. Mayo writes that "even in 1929 delays to the traffic on the Lincoln Highway became intolerable." There were, however, expressions of dissatisfaction and complaint as early as 1920,—perhaps even earlier. The delays were especially frustrating to people in the Columbia-Wrightsville area who had to make daily use of the bridge for business or employment reasons.

NEW BRIDGE FIRST PROPOSED IN 1921

The first attempt to have a new bridge built was made by State Senator C. N. Berntheizel of Columbia according to a Lancaster newspaper item of February 16, 1925. In this release the Senator

recalled that he introduced a bill in the State Senate in 1921 providing that a new bridge be built, the counties of Lancaster and York each to pay one-third of the cost and the remaining one-third paid by the Commonwealth. He said that the bill passed both branches of the legislature but was vetoed by Governor Sproul who contended that the Commonwealth could not afford the expenditure.

The minutes of a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce for December 7, 1921, and of the similar organization of York on December 6, 1921, record the receipt of a letter from the Columbia Chamber of Commerce asking "what is your position in connection with the movement for a new bridge to be built across the Susquehanna River, the same to be free of railroad traffic and toll charges?" Both organizations replied, expressing a willingness and a desire to cooperate. Both sent representatives to a meeting held in Columbia on January 4, 1922. Lancaster's representatives were its committee chairman, S. E. Gable, President of the Lancaster Automobile Club, and committee member A. E. McCollough, editor of the morning newspaper.

Plans were made to secure the interest of additional organizations and individuals. Additional meetings, held in Columbia and York, of larger groups resulted in the formation of a "Lincoln Highway Memorial Association" from which a "Committee of Ten" was appointed to "direct the work".

That the committee failed to reach any conclusions is evident from a letter sent by the Columbia to the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce on October 4, 1922 which urged that the project be "revived". Although the latter organization appointed committees, composed of some of the leading business men of Lancaster, during the next several years, minutes of the organization record no reports or recommendations,—nor do minutes of the York Chamber show any reference to the subject.

It is the writer's guess that committee meetings were held, that there were conferences with other groups and efforts were made to develop ways and means for accomplishment but that the stumbling block was finding a way to meet the public "demand" for a toll free bridge. If, however, there was negligence or apathy all concerned were shocked into action soon after the beginning of the 1925 new year.

On February 3, 1925 Congressman W. W. Greist of Lancaster introduced a bill, H.R. 12130, asking congressional consent for the "Susquehanna Bridge Corporation"* to build a privately-owned toll bridge. From this point, and until the matter was finally decided two

*The author made an exhaustive search for a record pertaining to such incorporation on state and local levels without success; no such company was incorporated, and it probably was the intention of the organizers to incorporate if congressional approval was obtained. Editor's note

and one-half years later, the Chambers of Commerce and the Automobile Clubs of Lancaster and York accepted the burden of leadership. It was their purpose to: (1) prevent construction of a privately-owned toll bridge; (2) secure the consent of federal and state authorities to build a publicly-owned toll bridge; (3) persuade the commissioners of the two counties to build a bridge, and (4) persuade the voters of the two counties to approve a bond issue and build a publicly-owned toll bridge now, the same to be made free of tolls upon retirement of the bonds, rather than continue efforts to have a toll free bridge at some indeterminate time in the future, if at all.

On February 13, 1925 Congressman S. F. Glatfelter of York introduced a bill, H.R. 12283, asking congressional consent for the commissioners of the two counties to build a publicly-owned toll bridge.

During the last week of February meetings were held in Lancaster and in York. Representatives of numerous civic, business and farm organizations were present in response to invitations. The Greist bill was opposed, the Glatfelter bill endorsed. During the same week the president of the Lancaster Chamber accompanied a large group of representatives from these organizations to Washington. The trip was hastily planned and the group was unable to get a hearing with the congressional committee to which the bills had been referred, however, its chairman gave his assurance that the Greist bill would not be reported out at that session, — but this would probably be true of the Glatfelter bill as well.

Lancaster Chamber of Commerce Directors, in a meeting on February 23, 1925, decided to ask the Commissioners of Lancaster County to join with their contemporaries in York and place the question of floating a bond issue, which would provide funds for building a public-owned bridge, on the November election ballot.

A September 1, 1925 report to the York Chamber Directors by its Bridge Committee is of interest. It reads (in part): "Your committee has been at work on the project all summer." "Various trips have been taken to Lancaster." "There was no success because the Commissioners of Lancaster County and the civic bodies of Lancaster could not agree on any definite common program. The York Commissioners then decided it was wise for York to go ahead on the project and lead the way. As a consequence, the York County Commissioners formally passed a resolution asking the authority of the voters to increase the indebtedness of York County \$1,500,000.00 for the purpose of building such bridge." . . . At a later date the Lancaster County Commissioners passed a similar resolution.

During the summer months the committees of the Lancaster Automobile Club and the Chamber of Commerce planned activities to be made effective in advance of the November election. Funds were budgeted for publicity purposes. Beginning in early October

printed pamphlets, urging support of a publicly-owned bridge, were handed to motorists crossing the railroad bridge. Editorials, news items, advertisements, cartoons appeared daily in local newspapers throughout October and up to election day. One cartoon, depicting corporate ownership of the bridge, carried the line "We can still sell it back to the taxpayers." The proposed privately-owned bridge had been referred to earlier as "a remarkable get-rich-quick scheme" its opponents contending that such a bridge could be built with but \$10,000. capital, that the \$2,000,000. cost (estimated at the time) could be raised from the sale of bonds, that tolls would eventually pay off the bonds whereupon the owners of the \$10,000. capital stock would own a bridge valued at \$2,000,000. or more . . . which they could then sell to the counties or the State. The public who used the bridge would then have to pay for it, in tolls, a second time. (It will be noted, however, in a later paragraph that the corporation offered to give the bridge to the State after its bonds and stock were retired.)

In any event, on November 3, 1925 the citizens of Lancaster and York counties voted three to one in favor of the proposed publicly-owned bridge. (Three to one in favor may be considered a highly favorable vote when it is remembered that in 1925 the number of automobile owners represented a far lower percentage of the voting public than in later years. Non-owners of vehicles, particularly outside of the Columbia-Wrightsville area, were unlikely to be actively interested. Furthermore, the voters of 1925 were not generally inclined to favor an increase in the public debt.)

The private corporation tried to prevent construction. In advance of the election it contended that the act of the legislature was unconstitutional. Local newspapers printed the complete text of the act for the public's information. In early January the Public Service Commission announced that it would meet on January 14, 1926 concerning the application for approval of incorporation of the Susquehanna Bridge Corporation which proposes to build a toll bridge. It was stated that the corporation's attorneys contend that "certain legal questions develop which will have to be determined by the Courts whether the Commissioners of Lancaster and York Counties can build a bridge under the Act of 1923."

The incorporators of the private corporation were Walter Spofford and J. Austin Brandt of Harrisburg, and John S. Rilling of Erie. Rilling and Bernard J. Myers, Sr., Esq. of Lancaster, were the attorneys.

Again, it is of interest to note an item in the York Chamber of Commerce minutes. In a report of a meeting held January 5, 1926 of civic organizations of Lancaster and York it is stated: "This conference was necessary because of the opinion prevailing that the counsel of Lancaster County was not friendly to the bridge (the publicly-owned bridge) and the Lancaster organizations would have

to be very alert to take care of their end of the program." Nevertheless, on January 12, 1926 the Lancaster County Commissioners announced their opposition to construction of a privately-owned bridge—as did the Automobile Clubs and the Chambers of Commerce of Lancaster and York. All of them petitioned the Public Service Commission to refuse permission to the corporation to build a bridge.

No decision was announced at adjournment of the hearing. Immediately afterward an attorney for the corporation offered to have the bridge built and turn it over to the two counties as soon as toll receipts would pay for its cost. Definite terms and conditions, however, were not made known so far as the writer could learn. It was reported that the York County Commissioners favored the offer. Lancaster County Commissioners rejected it—as did the York Commissioners a few days later.

Lancaster newspapers on February 20 reported the commissioners of both counties unanimously in favor of building a publicly-owned bridge. (The same newspaper reported that the "Lancaster party," enroute to York for a scheduled 3 P.M. meeting, was delayed for forty-five minutes in Columbia because Lincoln Highway traffic was blocked by trains.)

Lancaster County Congressman W. W. Greist introduced a bill asking congressional consent to the Commissioners of Lancaster and York Counties to build the bridge, authorizing the collection of tolls for a period of thirty years. (It was paid off and made toll free in less than fifteen years.)

A Lancaster newspaper item of March 8, 1926 is of interest. It reported that Senator Bingham of Connecticut, Chairman of the Committee on Commerce in the upper house, publicly announced that it will be more difficult to secure Senate consent to bridge bills in the future, that such bills will be referred to, and must have the approval of, the Highway Department of the State affected before his committee will give them any consideration. Evidently the Columbia-Wrightsville bridge "fight" had not gone unnoticed in Washington!

On March 29, 1926 the House of Representatives passed the bill sponsored by Congressman Greist. The Senate gave its consent a short time later and on May 8, 1926 it was signed by President Coolidge.

In the meantime, the bridge corporation's objection to the construction of a toll bridge by the county commissioners, based upon the premise that the Pennsylvania legislative act of 1923 did not permit it, was taken to the Grand Juries and the Courts of the two counties. The former refused to consider the subject. The Lancaster County Court, on May 22, gave the commissioners the right to go ahead and to finance Lancaster County's share of the

cost through the sale of bonds. The decision of the York County Court was delayed until December 26 when it approved a procedure proposed by the commissioners of that county similar to the procedure adopted earlier in Lancaster County.

The private corporation appealed the decisions to the State Supreme Court which caused further delay. On July 13, 1927 the rulings of the courts of the two counties were affirmed. By this time the authority granted under the federal bill had lapsed and it was necessary to introduce a new bill in the next session of Congress. Congressman Greist did so in January 1928. It was passed.

Now the commissioners of the two counties could take action on the many time-consuming preliminaries to actual construction. A Joint Board of Toll Bridge Commissioners was formed. Permission was asked of the State Highway Department to build bridge approaches over certain state roads,—of the Public Service Commission to build over the railroad tracks. The Lincoln Highway Association was asked to re-route the highway over the new bridge.

A Consulting Engineer, selected from a number who were invited to submit bridge design proposals, was assigned the task of drawing up plans and specifications. These were completed and approved on February 19, 1929. Bids were invited, a contract awarded on April 9, 1929,—and, as Col. Mayo has stated, concrete was being poured on June 12, 1929.

Perhaps, despite the years of discouragement and difficulty, Fortune smiled on the project. Opposition had been overcome; construction of the new bridge was underway in advance of the stock market crash of November 1929 and the "great depression" of the 1930's. Had it not been so,—who can tell?—the old, narrow, inconvenient railroad bridge may have remained the only Columbia-Wrightsville crossing for another seven years,—or more.

Thanks are expressed to Paul Z. Kistler, Executive Vice-President of the York Area Chamber of Commerce, who researched the records of that organization and supplied the text of minutes pertaining to the subject,—and to Gerald L. Molloy, Executive Vice-President of the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce, for permitting the writer to obtain information on the subject from the minutes and the scrap books of newspaper clippings, 1919 through 1929, of the Lancaster organization.

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