

One More River to Cross

A river is a challenge to man, either to follow the stream up or down or to cross it and explore the land which lies beyond. For the most part the Iowa pioneers crossed the rivers, for here the stream of migration moved from east to west rather than north or south along the rivers. Thus, crossing the Iowa River was one of the earliest problems of travellers and settlers who passed through the capital of the Territory of Iowa.

The Indians had paddled their dugout canoes across the river, and the first white man used the same method. If a canoe were not at hand, the Indians swam the stream or, in the winter, crossed the ice on moccasined feet. The white man, wearing civilized clothing, demanded some more reliable means of crossing. Just down the Iowa River from the site of Napoleon was an Indian village and travellers, it is said, were sometimes ferried across the river by the Indians in canoes. In the winter of 1838-1839, Benjamin Miller established a flatboat ferry at the little town of Napoleon, about two miles south of the site of Iowa City.

It was at this ferry that an incident occurred which is illustrative of the hardships of the early settlers. The ferry keeper lived on the west bank of the river but had a tin horn hung up on the east side

for people to blow to attract his attention. Bryan Dennis, it happened, reached the east side of the river one night at dusk. He blew the horn for the ferryman but a strong wind from the west prevented the sound from reaching the opposite side of the river so there was nothing for Mr. Dennis to do but spend the night on the river bank. Sometime in the night a group of Indians appeared and gave a scalp dance around a fire. Dennis was not discovered, however, and the next morning the ferry came for him and he was carried across the river.

Not long after this first ferry was established the county took a hand in the matter of ferries. Under date of March 6, 1840, the following entry appears on the records of the county commissioners of Johnson County: "On application of Sturgis & Douglass ordered that license issue to Sturgis & Douglass for to keep a ferry across the Iowa River at Sturgises Ferry for the space of one year from this date at the rate of five dollars per year." The location of this ferry is uncertain. Possibly it was north of Iowa City, where William Sturgis had a small tract of land on the east side of the Iowa River just below the bend.

A license was also granted to Andrew D. Stephen & Company to keep a ferry across the Iowa River at the point "where the National Road crosses said River on sections fifteen and sixteen in township seventy-nine North and Range six west of the fifth Principal meridian". A pencil note has been added

to this record explaining that this ferry was just south of the mouth of Ralston Creek, where Benjamin Miller had established his ferry, but a map of Iowa City, dated 1839, shows that the "National Road" was supposed to cross the river approximately where Iowa Avenue now intersects the river. This was apparently considered a desirable site, for the fee was fixed at fifteen dollars.

The commissioners also established the following rates of ferriage: for a single footman, $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for one horse and wagon, $37\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for one yoke of oxen or one team of horses and wagon, 50 cents; for one horse and man, 25 cents; each additional horse or yoke of oxen, $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for each head of neat cattle in droves, $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents; and for sheep and hogs per head, 3 cents.

These ferries and rates seem not to have been entirely satisfactory, for in October, 1840, the commissioners proceeded to reorganize the ferry business. On October 12th they granted a license to F. A. A. Cobb to keep a ferry at Napoleon for one year on condition that he pay a fee of ten dollars and give bond for \$200 with freehold security. The ferry rates were reduced. For a man on foot the ferryman might charge $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents; for a man and horse, $12\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for a horse and carriage, 25 cents; for a team or yoke of oxen and wagon, $37\frac{1}{2}$ cents; for each additional head of horses or cattle, $6\frac{1}{4}$ cents; and for each head of hogs or sheep, 3 cents.

It appears also from these records that Andrew D. Stephen had "neglected an unreasonable time" to establish his ferry, and on October 13, 1840, his license was revoked, his fifteen dollars refunded, and a new license was issued to John Able. The fee was fifteen dollars and the rates were approximately the same as for Cobb's ferry at Napoleon. That freighting had become somewhat important is evident from the provision that the charge "for all freight over and above a two horse wagon load" was to be 6½ cents for each hundred pounds.

A year later Mr. Able sold his "ferry, Boat, Rope Canoe, & so forth" to Pleasant Arthur and on October 4, 1841, the commissioners issued a license to Mr. Arthur for another year, but raised the fee to twenty-five dollars. The ferry charges were to remain the same. In April, 1844, Enos Metcalf established a "skiff ferry" at the "Dubuque Ford", paying a license fee of one dollar. He was permitted to charge 6¼ cents for each person carried across.

For the next ten or twelve years there were frequent changes in the ferries, their operators, and rates. The license fees were usually five, ten, or fifteen dollars, sometimes to be paid by work on the roads leading to the ferry. The rates on these later ferries show a change in the money used. The ferry charges of the early forties include 6¼ cents — the fippeny bit or picayune; 12½ cents — the bit, levy, or 'levenpence; and various combinations, such as 25 cents or two bits, 37½ cents or three bits, 50

cents or four bits. The rates fixed in the fifties were in modern denominations — 25, 20, 15, 10, or 5 cents.

For the ordinary travel across the Iowa River the skiff and flatboat ferries seem to have been fairly satisfactory, but the great westward exodus which began in 1849 emphasized the need for bridges. Popular demand for a county bridge caused a vote to be taken on the project at an election in October, 1851. The proposal carried by a majority of twenty-nine votes. Perhaps the voters counted the cost during the winter months. At any rate an election was held the following April to rescind the vote for the bridge and this also carried.

The proposal to build a free bridge having failed for the time, a number of men became interested in building and operating toll bridges. In March, 1853, Enos Metcalf obtained a license to build a toll bridge across the Iowa River at the "Dubuque Ford" where he had earlier operated a ferry. This seems to have been between the present Rock Island Railroad bridge and Burlington Street, but the bridge was apparently not built at that time.

In May, 1853, Gilman Folsom secured a license to build a toll bridge at the Iowa Avenue crossing where he was already operating the ferry he had taken over from Pleasant Arthur, his father-in-law. For several years the traffic had been heavy and during periods of high water, the flat-bottomed boat had to be propelled across the stream by means of long poles. The license was similar to that granted

to Enos Metcalf. It was to be good for fifty years and the bond was fixed at \$500. A license fee of \$10 was required and \$20 a year was to be spent on improving the roads leading to the bridge. A provision was inserted that the bridge must not obstruct navigation, for Iowa City still hoped to become a river port.

The rates to be charged for the first ten years were fixed in the license as follows: for each person on foot 5 cents, for each person on horseback 10 cents, for each vehicle drawn by one animal 15 cents, for each additional animal 10 cents, for each head of cattle or horse driven or led 5 cents, for each sheep 2 cents, and for each swine 3 cents. Fifty per cent additional charge might be made for use of the bridge between nine o'clock at night and daybreak. The first bridge constructed under this license is said to have been a pontoon bridge built in 1854. Two years later a wooden structure took the place of the temporary pontoon bridge.

At least two additional licenses were granted in 1855. One was to George S. Hampton, who planned to bridge the Iowa River at the point where Front Street strikes the river on the south. This seems never to have been built. In December, 1855, Enos Metcalf secured a second license for a toll bridge. The provisions of this license were much like those of the Folsom license and the rates were the same. Just when this bridge was opened for traffic is not apparent, but on June 23, 1856, an item in the *Daily*

Evening Reporter of Iowa City refers to the finding of a body near "Metcalf's bridge".

It was not long, however, before the people began to demand a free bridge. Perhaps taxes were less irritating than tolls. At any rate L. B. Patterson and "many others" submitted a petition for a free bridge to the county commissioners on September 7, 1857, and an election on the question was called for the thirteenth of October. The proposition included a two mill tax levy to pay for the bridge. The method of voting was prescribed as follows: "each elector desiring to vote on said question will present his ballot on which shall be printed or written the words 'For a Free Bridge & Tax' or 'Against a Free Bridge & Tax' ". The election resulted in a vote of 1218 for the bridge and 795 against it.

For some reason which does not appear in the county records there was some delay in constructing this Free Bridge and it was not until June, 1859, that County Judge Geo. W. McCleary let the contract for a new bridge across the Iowa River on a line with Burlington Street. A firm by the name of Prather and Ealy was given the contract for the sum of \$8688. The bridge was to be of wood with two spans, each one hundred and sixty feet in length. At the east end was an extension three hundred and thirty-five feet long for which the contractors were allowed \$1450 additional compensation. The structure was to be completed by November 1, 1859.

For a few years the traffic crossed the new Free Bridge and the toll bridges were neglected. Then on the last day of October, 1863, while some cattle belonging to Le Grand Byington were being driven across the wooden bridge they were startled by the appearance of a footman crossing from the other side. The cattle stopped, tried to turn back, and suddenly the east span of the bridge collapsed, throwing some fifty or sixty of the cattle and the footman into the river along with the debris from the bridge. The man was seriously injured and many of the cattle were either killed or so severely crippled that they had to be killed, the loss amounting to about \$500. Blame for the collapse of the bridge was attributed to the engineer who designed it, for it was claimed that the spans were too long.

This accident, of course, put the Free Bridge entirely out of use. The Metcalf Bridge had been carried away by high water and the Folsom Toll Bridge a short distance above the Free Bridge had not been kept in repair because with a free bridge so close people naturally did not care to pay toll. This was now repaired and used for traffic.

We are reminded that this was war time by the following announcement of Mr. Folsom in an Iowa City paper on November 11, 1863: "The proceeds of my Bridge on Saturday the 21st of November inst., are set apart for the benefit of the soldiers from Johnson County. All tolls received will be paid to the Soldiers' Aid Society of Iowa City. Let all who

can make it convenient to cross that day." The tolls amounted to \$40.50 and Mr. Folsom gave the Aid Society a check for \$50.00. Benefit toll days were kept up for some time, the proceeds of one Saturday in each month usually being donated to relief work.

In the meantime the county supervisors were busy with the problem of repairing the Free Bridge. Removing the wreckage alone cost the county nearly \$150. It was decided that the broken span should be rebuilt on the "Improved Howe Principle", and on January 16, 1864, a contract was let to Finkbine and Lovelace for \$4290. The sum of \$3000 was borrowed from the Branch of the State Bank at Iowa City. At the same time a contract for repairing the west span was let for \$1200. Thus the repairs cost more than half as much as the original bridge.

Early in 1868 the long span on the east leading to the bridge was removed and a causeway with riprapped sides was substituted. For this work the supervisors paid Wilson and Bush \$3900. Lest teams drive off the embankment along the sides of this causeway, wires were stretched from the east end to the bridge and in addition the supervisors adopted the following resolution: "That we consider advertisements or signs of any kind stuck on either end of Free Bridge a nuisance calculated to confuse or distract the attention of the public from the *Bridge Notice*, and stopping teams on the bridge."

About this time there was much debate as to the safety of the Free Bridge, especially the west span. Bridge committees differed as to the need of a new span, but finally, in January, 1869, the committee reported that they had been compelled to provide emergency supports for the west span and it was decided to replace the wooden structure with one of iron. A contract was made for the installation of a "Z. Kings Combination Bridge" on the west half of the Free Bridge, the price fixed being \$7,012.50. While this change was being made the Folsom Bridge was again opened for traffic.

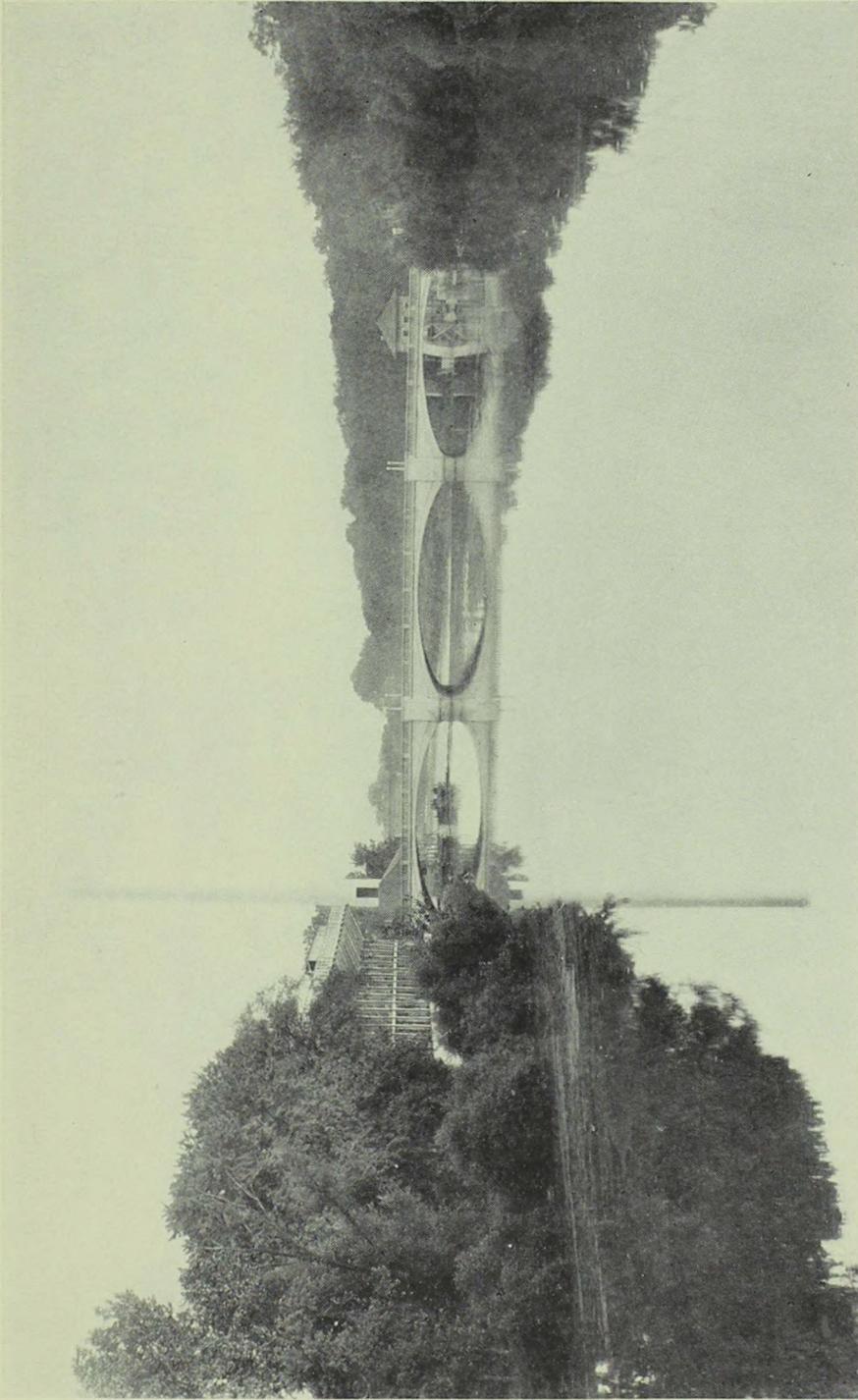
Perhaps the incongruity of a bridge half wood and half iron attracted attention to the condition of the old part. "The wooden span of the Free Bridge at this place is reported dangerous", said one of the Iowa City newspapers in July, 1870. "The man who put up this span of the bridge by contract, when it fell before and cost the county \$2000 costs and damages, *economically* put in old and decayed timbers that are just now ready to drop out and cost the County some more."

The supervisors were of the same mind apparently, for in September they ordered the bridge committee to contract with the firm which had just put up the west span for a new iron span on the east. There was an attempt to require the committee to advertise for bids, but the supervisors rejected the motion, although they finally required that the contract must be submitted to the board. During the

following January a contract was made with King for the east span at the price of \$6764, which included lowering the west span that had been built a year or two before. The work was completed early in 1871. "It is good the era of rotten wood bridges is passing away", commented an Iowa City newspaper editor.

It was not long, however, before there was a popular demand for another free iron bridge at or near Iowa City. In January, 1876, a petition signed by two hundred and fifty-five persons asking for a new bridge was submitted to the county board. Various sites were discussed, each having vehement adherents, some of whom wrote letters for the newspapers signing their communications "Pons" or "Justice". Finally the supervisors agreed on the site of the old Folsom Bridge. The chief objection to this location was the curve in the road to the west, the low land on the east, and the hill leading up to the Old Capitol. The prospect of driving a team and loaded wagon up this hill when the mud was deep was not attractive.

Perhaps the supervisors felt that there should be a bridge leading from Capitol Square westward. At any rate this was the site chosen and at their April meeting in 1876 the county supervisors ordered that bids be received for a bridge to cost not more than \$15,000. Contracts were let at the June meeting for a wrought iron arch bridge having two spans, each one hundred and fifty feet long, and providing a



COURTESY OF F. W. KENT

THE BURLINGTON STREET BRIDGE

seventeen foot roadway and a four foot sidewalk on each side. The cost of this structure, according to the contract, amounted to \$11,900.

Work on the bridge, however, seems to have dragged. A newspaper reported in October that the "work on the Centennial bridge after a long delay on account of high water is now rapidly progressing. The click of the hammer and trowel, the creaking of the derrick and the thug of the pile-driver is continually heard, from the rising of the sun to the setting thereof". The stone work when completed was twenty-two feet in height, laid upon a foundation of timber supported by fourteen foot piling. The stone used was of "adamantine quality, from North Bend." The Centennial Bridge, as this structure came to be known, was completed late in 1876. A newspaper for January 3, 1877, published the following comment: "The new bridge, including approaches and all the appurtenances thereunto belonging, cost \$14,300, which is less than the west span of the old bridge cost."

A quarter of a century passed before another bridge was constructed at Iowa City. This was located south of the city near the site of the Ryerson Mill. At a meeting in December, 1901, the county supervisors decided to accept the bid of the American Bridge Company to erect an iron bridge at this point on the Iowa River, the price being \$10,450. Professor A. V. Sims, of the State University, a brother of Admiral William S. Sims, was employed

to draft the plans and specifications and to oversee the work. That the erection was partly due to ambitious hopes of improved transportation facilities is indicated by a note in the supervisors' records that the contract would be signed as soon as the county attorney approved the guarantee of some citizens to furnish an additional \$1500 to convert it from a highway bridge to an electric railroad bridge, should it be needed for that purpose.

The bridge company was dilatory, and in March, 1902, the supervisors declared that the draft for \$500 deposited with the bid should be forfeited since the company had failed to put up a bond. About a month later a bond for \$10,500 was furnished and the resolution forfeiting the \$500 was rescinded. The work, however, progressed slowly and there appears to have been much criticism of the project. One editor objected to the employment of a University professor to oversee the work. "A good many people", he declared, "are tired of Johnson county and Iowa City being clinical subjects for the civil engineering department of the State university".

That some of this criticism was partisan is evident from another comment published in October, 1902, complaining that the bridge had been ordered in "by the old Democratic board of supervisors to favor the American bridge trust."

A new board of supervisors was elected that fall and in June, 1903, this board adopted a resolution annulling the contract for the bridge on the ground

that the company was "not proceeding with the construction of said bridge as speedily as it should under said contract and the quality of the work done is not satisfactory to the Board."

A representative of the bridge company hastened to Iowa City, promised the supervisors some better materials and completion of the work within four weeks of the arrival of this material, so the annulment of the contract was rescinded and the work was continued. Early in 1904 the bridge committee of the board of supervisors reported that \$10,311.07 had been paid the American Bridge Company. This iron bridge, which still stands, is popularly known as the Ryerson Bridge or the Benton Street Bridge.

It was not long before a demand arose for a bridge to the north of Iowa City. On December 3, 1906, the board of supervisors accepted plans and specifications prepared by Professor C. S. Magowan, of the University engineering faculty, for a bridge to be located on or near the north line of section ten of township seventy-nine. The county auditor was instructed to advertise for bids. When the board met to open these bids on December 20th they found several offers ranging from \$27,886.80 to \$20,701.50. All these bids were rejected, but an agreement for a somewhat cheaper bridge was made with the Iowa Bridge Company, the lowest of the bidders. The price is not stated on the supervisors' records. A contract was approved at a meeting of the supervisors in July, 1907, and on January 4,

1909, upon the recommendation of the county engineer, J. O. Schulze, the Park Bridge, as it came to be called, was accepted. Iowa City contributed a thousand dollars and the county issued warrants to the Iowa Bridge Company amounting to \$19,856.

The building of this bridge marks the end of the era of the wrought iron and steel structures with their intricate framework obstructing the view of the river. The Ryerson Bridge and the Park Bridge still stand, rumbling and clattering bravely as heavy motor vehicles rush across them.

Two bridges have been erected over the Iowa River at Iowa City since 1909. Both are of the reinforced concrete arch type with low railings along the sides and graceful arches underneath.

The first of these was built at Burlington Street to replace the wrought iron structure which had taken the place of the old wooden Free Bridge. In April, 1914, the board of supervisors considered a petition for a new bridge and ordered that the question of issuing bonds up to \$50,000 and levying a special tax of one-half mill be submitted to the voters of Johnson County at the primary election on June 1, 1914. The proposition carried in the county by a majority of about 500, though Iowa City contributed a majority of 1069.

On June 24th the supervisors employed Professor B. J. Lambert, of the College of Applied Science, to draw the plans and specifications and to supervise the construction of the bridge. For this he received

four per cent of the contract price. Bids were opened on August 21, 1914, the prices ranging from \$77,890 to \$54,500. An attempt was made at that time to sell bonds for \$50,000 but this was unsuccessful and the board adopted a resolution rejecting all bids.

After much discussion the Horrabin Construction Company offered to build a bridge four feet narrower than the one specified, and with certain other changes, for the sum of \$50,000, taking county bonds bearing interest at five per cent in payment. This offer was accepted, and the first of the new generation of bridges was constructed where the old wooden Free Bridge had once stood.

Before this bridge was completed a demand arose for a similar concrete structure to take the place of the iron bridge built in 1876. The State legislature in April, 1915, had passed a law which was apparently intended to benefit Cedar Falls, but applied equally to Iowa City, permitting certain cities of the second class to have control of their bridge tax levy. Thus the construction of bridges in Iowa City was placed within the jurisdiction of the city council.

At a meeting of the Iowa City council on December 10, 1915, the bridge committee submitted a report recommending that a concrete bridge somewhat wider than the Burlington Street structure be erected in place of the Centennial Bridge and that this be done at an early date since the legislature might repeal the favorable special legislation. It

was estimated that the new bridge would cost about \$75,000. The council voted to build the bridge and B. J. Lambert was again employed to draw the plans and specifications and to supervise the work, his compensation being the same as that paid by the supervisors for the Burlington Street Bridge.

On the twenty-first of January, 1916, the bids for this structure were opened, the highest being \$89,000. William Horrabin bid "\$500 less than the lowest bid offered", which made his price \$77,400. The contract was awarded to him.

The new Iowa Avenue Bridge, completed by the end of 1917, leads west across the Iowa River from the Old Stone Capitol, and marks the fourth stage in the crossing of the river at that point—the ferry, and the bridges of wood, iron, and concrete. To the north stands one of the iron structures, and to the south is another and older bridge of iron, but the ferries and the wooden bridges have passed away. Even the river, it seems, has changed and become more orderly and conventional.

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