

The Washington Memorial Bridge

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Current repair work has drawn considerable attention to the Washington Memorial Bridge. This graceful, soaring span provides a tangible link to Wilmington's rich history and, at the same time, beautifully combines art, architecture, and poetry that offer a treat to the careful viewer.

In 1891, Wilmington businessman Samuel Baynard and several of his colleagues joined forces as the North Side Improvement Company, purchased several acres of land on the north side of the Brandywine, subdivided it into building lots, and began marketing sites for new homes in a development called Washington Heights. Two years later, at the behest of Baynard and his partners, the Levy Court constructed a metal truss bridge across the Brandywine where the current bridge stands. The 1893 span, the Washington Street Bridge, provided the necessary access for Baynard's real estate venture to succeed and residents began buying lots along its primary street, The Boulevard, a name that was changed to Baynard Boulevard after the developer's death in 1925.

By 1918, the bridge was suffering from the volume and weight of traffic it was being asked to bear. A consulting engineer reported that only the "lighter type" of trolley cars were allowed to cross the bridge and the Levy Court restricted the speed of vehicles crossing the bridge to six miles an hour. It was clear that a new bridge was needed and in March 1919, only months after the end of World War I, the General Assembly approved the establishment of the Washington Street Bridge Commission, charged with the task of seeing a new span built. At the same time, there was a sentiment among Wilmingtonians to designate the new bridge a memorial to Delawareans who had given their lives during America's brief participation in the war.

In August 1920, the original Washington Street Bridge was closed and, in the following months, dismantled to be replaced by the current span.

The new bridge opened to trolley traffic on 7 December 1921 and to vehicular traffic two weeks later. As the day of dedication approached, the Washington Street Bridge Commission decided to change the name of the bridge from Washington Street Bridge to Washington Memorial Bridge, underscoring their determination that the bridge be recognized as the memorial it was intended to be. Heralded in the local press as "a fine gateway to the city for all traffic from the north," the "magnificent" bridge was formally dedicated with a parade, pageant, and speeches on Memorial Day, 1922.

As an ornament on the Wilmington landscape, the bridge uses sculpture and poetry to commemorate not only Delawareans who died in the Great War, but also to recognize George Washington's connection with both the Brandywine and Wilmington. Eagles atop globes decorate four massive plinths, capturing the sense of victory that the end of the war brought. The obelisk shape of the plinths links twentieth-century America to ancient Egypt where such obelisks were erected at temple portals. Four bronze plaques include images and poetry. John Rossell, a member of the Bridge Commission, noted, in his address at the dedication, that the commissioners had chosen a quote from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," to honor soldiers who were "unafraid and resolute, unmindful of shot and shell" as they fought for their country.

When the repair work is completed, Wilmingtonians will again have the opportunity to enjoy the scenic view from the bridge and to read again the sentiments that moved patriotic citizens in the 1920s to transform a structure of reinforced concrete into an eloquent memorial.