

# Market Street Bridges--old and new

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As DelDOT completes its Market Street Bridge repairs, it is instructive to reflect on the various bridges that have spanned the Brandywine River at this place. J. Thomas Scharf's History of Delaware identifies five bridges across the Brandywine between the mid-eighteenth century and 1888 when his book was published. The first, dating from 1764, was a suspension bridge supported by chains. Around 1810, a second suspension bridge replaced the initial span, which had become "somewhat dilapidated" but the replacement lasted only twelve years, swept away by a flood in 1822.

The third bridge, built in 1822-23, is of particular note because it was constructed by Lewis Wernwag, considered by some to be one of the leading bridge designers of his day. The Levy Court was the county body responsible for roads and bridges and their records describe the Wernwag bridge as a covered, wooden arched bridge supported by "substantial stone abutments." Wernwag's span suffered certain structural problems, however. Most notably, by 1825, the bridge had settled rather severely in the center. Wernwag admitted that he had miscalculated in his design, but he also provided a solution for the problem, the regular tightening of a system of bolts and nuts to stabilize the structure. In 1839, when the Wernwag bridge also succumbed to a flood, the Levy Court constructed another wooden covered bridge, one with sidewalks that allowed pedestrians a view of the river and its banks.

In the 1880s, changes in transportation coincided with the construction of yet another bridge. Built in 1887, the bridge was a metal truss design. It easily accommodated the Wilmington City Railway Company's electric trolleys that were replacing the earlier horse-drawn streetcars. In 1888, a year after the bridge's construction, the company ran its first electrified trolleys up a route that crossed the Market Street Bridge, traveled through Brandywine Village, and went up Philadelphia Pike as far as Riverview Cemetery. In the early years of the twentieth century, the company briefly offered funerals by trolley along this route. They provided a special funeral car divided so there was space for the casket and flowers in one end of the car and accommodations for mourners at the other end.

The metal truss bridge, which had a speed limit of eight miles an hour, served the community well for four decades, but by the 1920s, city leaders were characterizing the span as "somewhat rickety (and) inadequate to modern traffic." While the metal bridge had originally carried only horse-drawn vehicles and electric trolleys, a late 1920s traffic census showed that 85 percent of the traffic consisted of passenger automobiles, with the remaining 15 percent divided among trucks, trolleys, and horse-drawn vehicles.

A 1927 drawing of an early version of a proposed replacement bridge showed a reinforced concrete structure without the substantial piers that eventually anchored the bridge's four corners. Instead, it had modest railings with only slightly enlarged posts at either end of the span. The proposed bridge layout included two trolley lines down the center of the bridge and four lanes of vehicular traffic, two lanes on either side of the trolley lines.

In 1928, the Levy Court began construction of the current Market Street Bridge immediately adjacent to the metal truss bridge and just upstream from the older span. The nearby Washington Memorial Bridge, completed upstream in 1921 and dedicated in 1922, rose above the Brandywine on soaring, weight-bearing arches. The Market Street Bridge, however, was too near the water to be constructed similarly so the bridge's designers, Harrington, Howard and Ash [of Kansas City] used a cantilever design with a shallow, decorative arch that provided the desired "attractive lines." Residents of the nearby neighborhood anticipated the new bridge eagerly, seeing it as a "decided improvement" that would both provide an attractive entrance to their community and demonstrate the city's progressive character.

The story of the Market Street Bridge and the area around the intersection of Market Street and the river pulls together threads from a larger, richer story of the community. Until the recent restoration work, for example, steel rails survived just north of the bridge. A spur of the Brandywine Branch of the Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington Railroad, the tracks ran as far as the Jessup and Moore paper mill that once

occupied the site where the Brandywine Park Condominiums now stand. [Portions of the rails survive near the Zoo.] Safety barriers stood on either side of the bridge, ready to drop and hold back traffic when a train was passing along the tracks, although such delays were infrequent.

Although the railway line was used by trains conveying supplies to the mill and finished products out to customers, each summer it also carried a train of mill workers and their families who took a day for relaxation away from Wilmington at the seaside. After leaving the paper mill and heading toward the main line along the Delaware River, the train would stop in Brandywine Village so that flour mill workers and their families could join in the outing.

The 1887 bridge carried primarily horse-drawn vehicles and electric trolleys and evidence of the importance of horses was visible near the south end of the bridge where a large, round watering trough for horses stood at the junction of King and 16th streets. Six feet in diameter and five feet high, the fountain originally had a tall light standard rising out of the top and spigots shaped like lions' heads on three sides. The National Humane Alliance had installed the fountain in 1909 and it remained there until 1929 when the Wilmington Fountain Society removed it and reinstalled it along South Park Drive just northwest of Van Buren Street. The trough remains on that site today, in a recently

refurbished setting, although it now lacks all its decorative elements.

So substantial a structure as the Market Street Bridge seems as though it has been there "forever." But projects such as the recent extensive rehab work offer the perfect opportunity to reflect both on the changes in a community--no more horses, flour mills, or railroad cars--and on the continuity of life in the community--the need for a link across the river, the desire of the community for an attractive gateway into their neighborhood, and the fact that Wilmington's Bus Route 1 still follows the same path up Philadelphia Pike that the Route 1 trolleys traveled in 1888.



This photo of the Market Street Bridge dates from 1930, the year after the span was completed. The stair railing along the lower left side of the picture marks the entrance to the "comfort station" that was constructed below the bridge. [Photo courtesy of IA Holdings archives]