

The Bridges of Nashville

The Nashville Bridge (1823-1851)

The first bridge that connected the west and east sides of The Cumberland River was completed in 1823. It extended from the northeast corner of the Public Square to Main Street across the river (the site of the present Victory Memorial Bridge).

The contract to design the bridge was signed by Thomas Talbot, first president of the Nashville Bridge Company, and by Joseph Johnson, engineer-architect of Philadelphia, in June 1819. The contract deals with all financial, constructional etc. details of the new bridge.

The bridge was removed in 1851 after it became a hindrance to the traffic of steamboats along the Cumberland River. Its function was taken over by the Suspension Bridge.

The Suspension Bridge (1853-1886)

The Suspension Bridge that made the necessary connection between Nashville and Edgefield (now East Nashville) was built in 1853. It extended from the southeast corner of the Square to Bridge Avenue, thence to Woodland Street (now the site of the Woodland Street Bridge).

Adolphus Heiman, a successful engineer-architect of Nashville, was commissioned to design it. He supervised the building of the towers and anchors for the cables and the supports for the deck. M.D. Field was contracted to do the wire work. Heiman became dissatisfied with the work Field was doing and resigned from the project.

In the spring of 1862, as the Union Army approached, General Albert Sidney Johnston, commander of the Confederate forces in the West, ordered the wires of the bridge cut and allowed the bridge to fall in the river.

After the war, the Suspension Bridge was restored. Col. Albert Fink, a prominent bridge engineer, was employed as the consulting engineer. Major W.F. Foster, City-Engineer, designed and supervised the work.

The bridge was replaced by the Woodland Street Bridge in 1886.

The Railroad Bridge (1859-present)

The Railroad Bridge was opened for traffic in 1859. It was built for the joint use of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad and the Edgefield and Kentucky Railroad. It was constructed under the charter of the latter road and under the direction of Adna Anderson, the chief engineer for the line. W.F. Foster was assigned as engineer in charge of constructing the bridge. He supervised every detail of construction until the masonry was ready to receive the superstructure. Maxwell, Saulpell and Company were the contractors for the substructure. Gray-Whitton Company were the contractors for the superstructure.

The retreating Confederate army in 1862 set the bridge afire at the same time they cut the suspension bridge, but only the superstructures was damaged and the U.S. Corps of Engineers had it in service in a few months.

The bridge remains in use up to the present day.

The Woodland Street Bridge (1886-superstructure 1965; substructure present)

The Woodland Street Bridge replaced the old Suspension Bridge that had become unsafe and unsuited for higher amounts of traffic. It was completed on April 10, 1886.

Major W.F. Foster made the soundings, surveys and estimated the cost of a new bridge. The City Engineer prepared the plans and specifications for the bridge masonry. Flemings (Louisville, Kentucky) and Hollins (Indianapolis, Indiana) were contracted to build the bridge. The superstructure was built by The Louisville Bridge and Iron Company, under direction of J. A. Johnston, one of the best engineers in the profession.

The bridge was removed in 1965 to make room for one designed to care for the increasing traffic and high speeds of today. The masonry in the two abutments of the old bridge was in such good condition that they were used for the abutments of the new bridge.

The Shelby Street Bridge (1909-present)

The Shelby Street Bridge, formerly *Sparkman Street Bridge*, was built one block south of Broadway at Sparkman Street. It was built simultaneously with the Jefferson Street Bridge, which was almost its perfect twin. The bridge was opened on the 5th of July 1909. The Jefferson Street Bridge was opened a year later. In contemporary postcards the two bridges appear as impressive structures, the substructure a light grey or white concrete, the

superstructure elegant arches of black steel. Wilbur Creighton Jr., who as a small child attended the ceremonial celebration of the Shelby Street Bridge, independently described the bridges the same way.

Howard M. Jones, The Chief Office Engineer of the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway, was employed to design and supervise the structure.

The substructure and concrete approaches were built by the Foster and Creighton Company (the concrete approaches of the Jefferson Street Bridge were built by J. D. Foy of Dothan, Alabama). The structural steel of the two bridges was erected by the same company, in co-operation with the American Bridge Company. The Gould Contracting Company of Louisville was sold a third of the contract to get the use of their experienced organization in the erection of steel bridges. The original architectural drawings of both these bridges, as approved by Howard M. Jones and executed in between 1907 and 1909, are preserved in the Metro Transportation Offices. The *Sparkman Street Bridge* performed its function for about 25 years, when time and the weather showed that there was something wrong with the concrete. Between 1927 and 1930 the weathered surfaces of the bridge were chipped off and replaced by “gunite” under the direction of Eugene Freeland, a Nashville engineer. However, the weathering continued, and the bridge had to be repaired a second time, in the early 60’s by the Standard Engineering Company of Albany, New York. They subcontracted the repairs to the steel to the Nashville Bridge Company. This second period of repairs also included the Jefferson Bridge.

The *Shelby Street Bridge* was admitted on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. Main reason for this is the rare truss design that was used on this bridge.

Lately, the bridge has become unable to answer the present day traffic needs. At present it is in the process of being changed into a pedestrian bridge.

The Jefferson Street Bridge (1910-1990)

See description of the Shelby Street Bridge.

In 1989, the *Jefferson Street Bridge* was included in a state-wide survey of metal truss bridges to determine which were potentially eligible for the National Register. Because the bridge is an exact copy of the Shelby Street Bridge, which was in better condition, the Jefferson Street Bridge was not eligible and subsequently demolished in 1990. It was replaced by the new Jefferson Street Bridge.

The Victory Memorial Bridge (1955-present)

The *Victory Memorial Bridge* was built as a memorial to the sons and daughters of Tennessee who died in World War II. The bridge extends from the northeast corner of the Public Square to Third and Main Streets in East Nashville, the site of the first bridge to span the Cumberland in 1823.

The work on the bridge was divided into three parts, river piers, substructures, and superstructures. The C. F. Rule Construction Company was awarded the contract to build the two river piers.

A contract for the east approach was awarded to the Marion Construction Company, owned by Malcom Poteet. They also constructed the concrete abutment east of First Avenue, built the retaining wall and fill at the east end, the concrete base and handrails, and surfaced over the fill.

The Nashville Bridge Company was awarded the work on the superstructure of the bridge. General Manager L. C. Anderson took the project to a successful completion.

The work on the bridge was supervised by Roy Higgs, the Resident Engineer.

Sources¹

Bibliography

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Broadway Bridge thrown open to public travel, *The Tennessean*, July 6, 1909.

National Register of Historic Places, Inventory-Nomination form, Shelby Street Bridge, 1998.

¹ The sources listed are available in copy at the Nashville Civic Design Center.

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Various pictures of the different bridges collected at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, The Main Library, The Metropolitan Archives in Green Hills and the Metropolitan Historical Commission.

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