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HISTORIC MAIN STREET BRIDGE

BY DOROTHY S. TRUESDALE

Bridges have always played a vital part in the history of cities. Just as many of the towns of medieval Europe grew up around bridge-heads, so the settlements of frontier America frequently took for their focus the crossing place of a river. But possibly nowhere has the function of a bridge in promoting and developing settlement been more clearly illustrated than in the case of Rochester and its Main Street Bridge. The water power of the falls was there, but it required the first bridge of 1812 really to begin the settlement of Rochester.

The First Bridge

A century and a half ago a bridge over the lower Genesee was needed to unlock the northern section of Western New York, and open a settlement route along the Ridge such as existed along the trans-state highway to the south which crossed the Genesee on the Avon bridge. Yet its building had to wait for the slow trickling in of enough settlers to make the demand for such a bridge felt. By 1809 there were scanty settlements in Pittsford, Perinton, and Brighton on the east, at Hanford's Landing and Charlotte to the north, and in scattered clearings along the Ridge Road trail to the west. All were eager for a better communication than that afforded by the distant Avon bridge, the uncertain ford above the falls (at present Court Street), or even the irregular ferry service at Castleton or Hanford's Landing. Already a road had been laid out from Palmyra to the Genesee Falls, and the natural

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facilities of the Ridge offered an easy means of communication with Lewiston and the Niagara. The best point for a connection between these routes lay in the vicinity of the ford at the upper falls—a fact which the astute investors, Rochester, Fitzhugh, and Carroll, had doubtless noted some years before—and the backwoodsmen of northern Ontario and Genesee Counties (which then contained present Monroe) set out to secure both a state road along the Ridge and a bridge at the Genesee Falls.

It was a cooperative effort of the east and west banks of the river. Calvin Freeman of Clarkson was among those who rode all the way to Lewiston and Black Rock seeking signatures to a petition asking the legislature to authorize Genesee and Ontario Counties to build a bridge. Across the river the Enos Stones, father and son, of Brighton attended the legislative session of 1809 to lobby for the project.

Such cooperation between the northern townships was needed, for strong opposition came from the southern districts, which not only objected to being taxed for a bridge for which they felt no need, but which feared the competition of a northern route across the state. Even distant Buffalo and Black Rock were opposed to the bridge, fearing the rivalry of Lewiston as a western entrepot on the new route. Freeman relates that he could obtain no signatures at those places and very few as he returned along the Buffalo Road.¹ In the assembly, Samuel Lawrence, a member from southeastern Ontario County, rose to denounce as a plain waste of the taxpayers' money a project which would build a bridge in a desolate wilderness "inhabited by muskrats, visited only by straggling trappers, through which neither man nor beast could gallop without fear of starvation, or of catching the fever and ague."²

In spite of opposition, the bridge measure was passed in the session of 1809. Dr. Zacheus Colby of Genesee County and Caleb Hopkins of Ontario were appointed commissioners to superintend the building of the first Main Street Bridge—then known as the Genesee Falls bridge, or more locally, simply as "the bridge." Construction was begun in 1810, but proceeded intermittently during the next two years. Consequently when the Scrantom family arrived at the falls in May, 1812, to become the first settlers on the Hundred Acre Tract which Colonel Rochester had decided to name after himself, they

found the bridge still unfinished and had to cross the river on the ferry at Castleton (across from the present River Campus).

The bridge was completed that summer, having cost nearly \$12,000, and soon assumed the importance which its supporters had anticipated. During its whole lifetime of twelve years, it was virtually the only bridge across the Genesee within twenty miles, for neither the short-lived Carthage Bridge of 1819 nor the Mumford-Brown toll bridge near the main falls existed long enough to become a real rival. Not until Court Street Bridge was built in 1826 on the line of the old Pittsford State Road (Monroe Avenue) was there another enduring bridge nearer than Avon. Over its wooden planks trundled settlers' heavy wagons bound west along the Ridge Road or over the newly opened highway to Batavia, while the fast stages carried mails and passengers across on their way to Lewiston. And on either side of the bridge grew up a thriving community justifying James Wadsworth's envious foresight in 1811 when he said, "I wish that tract of 100 acres could be purchased of the Maryland gentlemen. The Bridge and Mill seat render it very valuable indeed."³

This first of Rochester's bridges was a slight structure built upon wooden piers sunk into the bed of the river. The roadway was built level with the east bank. Since this was considerably higher than the west bank, the western end of the bridge was several feet above the level of Buffalo Street (Main Street) and had to be reached by a ramp. Under this elevated section of the bridge was a low and sandy beach where in low water farmers and villagers watered their horses. Front Street, or Mason Street as it was called in the early days, was not laid out as a street south of present Corinthian until 1825, and the only way from Buffalo Street into the alley-like thoroughfare north of that point was by way of this beach. In high water this strip, together with the area of all of modern Front Street, was under water. Henry E. Rochester relates that as a boy he found great fun in catching crabs along this beach—an occupation all the more delightful because he could sell his catch to S. Melancton Smith, a local merchant who considered them a great dainty.⁴

The topography about the west end of the bridge was greatly changed in 1817—the year of the "Great Freshet." Early in November the fall rains caused a rapid rise in the river which endangered all

the riverside from Mount Morris down to Rochester. At Rochester, however, the damage was especially great, and was popularly attributed to the fact that Elisha Johnson had recently raised the dam supplying water to the mill races. John C. Rochester's mill was undermined, several buildings were washed away, and the west end of the bridge was threatened. The villagers exerted themselves to the utmost to save the bridge, but extensive repairs were necessary, and John C. Rochester wrote to his father, then living at Bloomfield, that "if something is not done this fall the freshet in the Spring with the quantity of ice that will come down will do as much, if not more injury than the late one." ⁵

When the flood subsided, it was found that the sandy strip of shore at the west end of the bridge had been entirely washed away, and that the river had cut four or five feet into the bank. About half of present Front Street was in the river, and henceforth all of it was flooded at times of high water. At such times the eastern end of Buffalo Street was likewise inundated, and Matthew Mead in the building nearest the bridge was sure to have the fire in his blacksmith shop threatened by the spreading waters.⁶ The inconveniences caused by this flood were destined to extend far into the future, for as a result no one was exactly sure of the boundaries along the river at this point, and a fertile source of legal dispute was created.

The Second Bridge

The more immediate result of the flood was to manifest the need for a new bridge. Repairs were not enough, and after five years of patchwork the now incorporated village of Rochesterville appealed to the newly formed County of Monroe for a new bridge. In the fall of 1822, the county supervisors accordingly petitioned the state legislature for authority to raise \$14,000 by tax for a new structure. The legislature granted the petition but the project came to grief over a dispute between the village and county as to the financial responsibility. The village trustees found to their dismay that the county proposed to assess one quarter of the \$14,000 directly upon the village and appealed in indignation to the legislature for redress.⁷ This was the beginning of a series of disputes which occurred between the county and the village every time a new bridge or extensive repairs were needed.

In this case apparently neither side gave way and nothing was done about the bridge for nearly a year. When in October, 1823, the matter was again considered, the supervisors drastically cut the amount to be raised. A maximum of only \$6,000—about half the cost of the original bridge—was set.⁸ In February, 1824, the bill of authorization having passed the legislature, the supervisors appointed Samuel Works as commissioner to supervise construction, and awarded the contract for the bridge to Elisha Johnson for the full amount of \$6,000.⁹

Johnson began the reconstruction of the bridge as soon as possible after the spring high water, but almost immediately new obstacles arose. The plan which Johnson had submitted involved the enlargement or extension of the abutments of the bridge, especially that of the east end. The millers and property owners along the river bank became alarmed for this constriction of the river channel seemed to threaten even worse floods than that of 1817. Although Johnson promised to excavate the river bed to a depth sufficient to compensate for this narrowing of the channel, the millers petitioned the legislature to set aside the bridge plans and appoint new commissioners. The legislature, however, refused to intervene on the grounds that to do so would be to violate the contract already signed by Johnson and the county authorities.¹⁰ The millers then turned to the courts and tried to get an injunction stopping construction, but with no more success.¹¹ In December, 1824, the bridge was completed and officially accepted by the supervisors.¹²

It seems always to have been the fate of Main Street Bridge* to be largely ignored by Rochesterians. An object of utility, it has ever been eclipsed in popular regard by more spectacular structures. So it was with the bridge of 1824. The villagers boasted of the new Erie Canal aqueduct built by the state a few rods to the south of the bridge; they proudly took visitors to see the ruins of the suspension bridge across the lower falls which had fallen after fifteen months; but they took little notice of the beginning of a phenomenon which was to make Main Street Bridge unique among the bridges of the nation. For gradually buildings began to creep out over the river. As early as 1827 at least two stood on the north side of the bridge.

*To avoid confusion the term "Main Street Bridge" is used throughout this article, although, of course, the bridge was not always known by that title. The term "Main Street" referred only to that section of present Main Street East which lay east of the bridge. West of the river was "Buffalo Street" until 1871.

Two factors contributed to the growth of buildings on Main Street Bridge. One was the increasing scarcity of land in the desirable central locality about the bridge; the other—and the factor which made such building possible—was the presence of those same rapids and low falls which had first attracted the seekers of mill sites. Had the Genesee been navigable at this point, the New York State law declaring the river a public highway would have prevented in all likelihood building on the bridge on the ground of impeding navigation. As conditions were, the common law principle that lots abutting on non-navigable rivers and streams extend to the center of the stream was generally interpreted as giving the adjoining property owners the right to build over the river.¹³ And the low banks and modest rapids presented no physical barrier to such building. In later years property owners on and about the bridge sometimes regarded their titles to the river bed as so absolute that they even opposed the public right to intervene to maintain the free flow of the river or to institute flood control measures.*

Just when the first building appeared on the bridge, or which it was, seems impossible to determine with certainty, but it is evident that building on the bridge was originally a process of encroachment from the shore. Mill owners, especially those on the east bank, were cramped for room by the narrow space between the mill race and the river. They began to extend their buildings over the race on one side, and over the river on the other. In 1825 Horatio Curtis built a mill on the lot just south of the east abutment of the bridge, and rested its western end upon a wall which joined the abutment and extended into the river parallel to it.¹⁴ Other millers, both to the north and south, followed this example of aligning the river sides of their mills with this abutment.

*In the past hundred years, several lawsuits have involved the allied questions of the ownership of the bed of the Genesee and the right of the city to prevent encroachments or undertake flood control measures. Among these might be mentioned *Mayor and Common Council of Rochester v. Curtiss* (1840) 1 Clarke 336; *Comm'rs of Canal Fund v. Kempshall* (1841) 26 Wendell 404; *Starr v. Child* (1846) 5 Denio 599; *Powell et al. v. City of Rochester* (1916) 93 Misc. 227. While the question of ownership has apparently not been definitely settled in some instances due to a technicality involving the grant to Ebenezer Allan, the courts have generally upheld the right of the public authorities to the river bed for the purpose of flood control or preventing obvious obstructions to the river's flow.

At the same time the demand for land about the western end of the bridge caused an attempt to utilize and extend the narrow strip along the river south of what is now Corinthian Street. In 1825 John Mastick bought from Rochester, Fitzhugh, and Carroll the land "between the north side of the bridge on Buffalo Street and where River alley [Corinthian Street] intersects Mason Street [Front Street] being the same ground on which Mason Street is laid out as far north as River alley" on condition that he build a wharf and wall along the east side as protection against floods.¹⁵ Mastick began the construction of this wall but was threatened with prosecution by the village and stopped. Thereupon the board of trustees for the first time declared Mason Street a public thoroughfare, and authorized Works and Graves, neighboring property owners, to construct a wall along the river and fill it in to provide access from Buffalo Street into Mason.¹⁶

The village itself now, in 1827, proceeded to build out from this wall along the bridge and erected one of the first buildings on the bridge in the form of a public market. For several years farmers' wagons and peddlers' carts had thronged the streets with their produce, making that regulation of buying and selling which the survival of medieval customs still declared to be the prerogative of the village or city extremely difficult to enforce. Since most of them tended to congregate in the central location supplied by Main Street Bridge, it was only natural that, when the annual town meeting of the village decided in July, 1826, to build a public market, the trustees should look for a location as near as possible to the bridge.

Shortly afterwards a committee reported to the trustees that Charles H. Carroll, the son of one of the original proprietors of the village, who had recently purchased Mastick's land at the northwest end of the bridge, was willing to sell a strip 40 feet wide on Mason Street and extending 60 feet out into the river along the bridge for \$200.¹⁷ In addition to its central location, this site over the river had the very practical advantage of affording easy cleaning for the market stalls, and Carroll's offer was promptly accepted.

The contract for the market was awarded to Ashbel W. Riley, the low bidder, for \$1,485, and construction was begun with \$1,000 borrowed from Elisha Johnson.¹⁸ As with so many public improvements however, the market was soon found to cost more than had been anticipated. A few months later the trustees sounded out a village meeting

on the possibility of raising \$3,500 by tax. Needless to say, such a measure was indignantly voted down by the outraged taxpayers. Thereupon the trustees turned to the issuance of sixty shares of market stock totaling \$3,000, all of which was quickly subscribed by the merchants of the village who apparently considered it a very good investment, and the market was finished in the spring of 1827.¹⁹

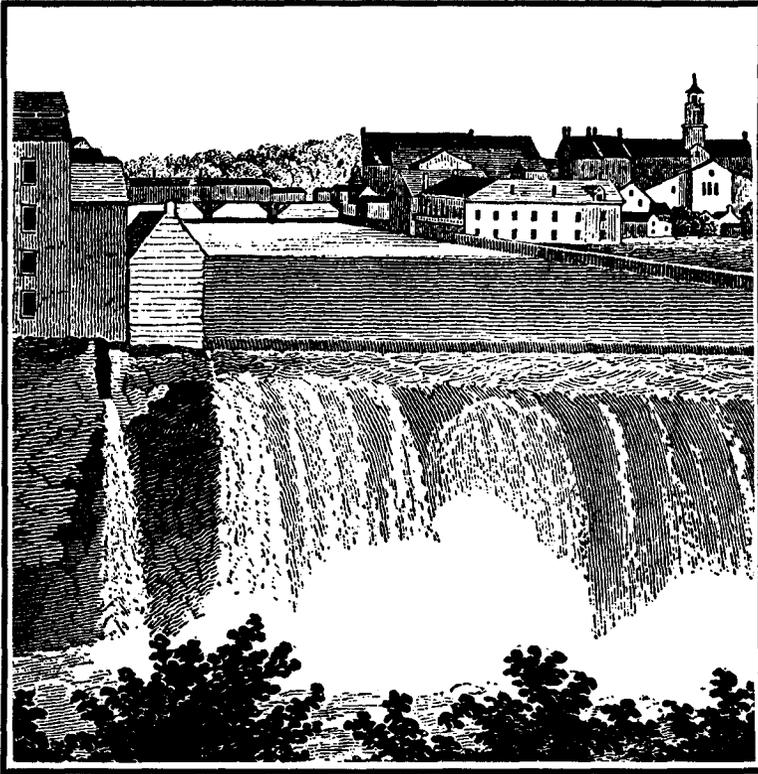
The front, or west end, of this market rested on the Front Street wall constructed by Works and Graves while the rear, or east end, rested on the westernmost bridge pier. Its general appearance was described in the first Directory of the village as follows: ²⁰

The Market Buildings. . . consist of an open platform, adjoining the bridge, of 20 feet, designed for a vegetable market; next, a raised platform, in a range with and corresponding to the sidewalks of Buffalo and Main-streets, of which the market will serve as a continuation. Next to this, is the covered meat market, having in the center a walk of 12 feet wide, between two rows of turned columns, and on either side, the places for stalls, each 10 by 14 feet.

The building is 40 by 80 feet, and built on the plan of the new market, in Boston—cost estimated at \$3,000.

As will be noticed in this description the finished building extended some twenty feet farther over the river than Carroll's deed had stipulated. Carroll had conveyed the right to build on the bridge pier together with 60 feet of river bed, but when construction began it was found that the pier was 80 feet distant from the bank. As there was nothing else to support the east end of the market, the trustees made the market 80 feet long. Carroll protested, but the village authorities were apparently sure that his permission to build on the pier legally obliged him to grant the extra 20 feet. Doubtless the Yankee tradesmen congratulated themselves on a clever bargain with the valley landholder. But Carroll was as tenacious as they.

The resulting dispute continued hotly for several years. The matter became acute when Carroll himself began building on the bridge and rested his timbers on the disputed pier. The trustees summarily ordered him off, and Carroll countered by an ejection suit against them. The chancery court decided the matter largely in Carroll's favor by ruling that although the trustees had a right to the pier, they must pay rent for the excess twenty feet. In a huff over their defeat, the trustees changed the name of Carroll Street, named after Carroll's father, to State Street.



GENESEE FALLS AND MAIN STREET BRIDGE: 1836

This enlarged section of Alexander Anderson's woodcut, prepared from a drawing by J. T. Young of the main falls for O'Reilly's *Sketches of Rochester*, shows the second bridge with a row of buildings almost completed along its north side after the fire of 1834 and the flood of 1835 and with the new city market on the west bank. The turret of the Reynolds Arcade in the right background still dominated the young city's skyline.

By November of 1827 there was at least one other building on the north side of the bridge—a wooden structure known as the Exchange Buildings.²³ One of the earliest uses of a part of this structure was in connection with the current antimasonic excitement when a large canvas portraying the supposed fate of William Morgan was exhibited there in 1828. Although the abduction of Morgan from the Canandaigua jail had occurred nearly two years before, it was still political dynamite and Mr. Tuthill, the artist, caused considerable excitement in

the village with his picture. The *Anti-Masonic Enquirer*, urging all to see it, gave a vivid description well calculated to stimulate the horror-loving into paying the admission charge.²⁴

There are the dark conspirators, the wirepullers of the whole plot, standing in the background. . . There is one, who. . . has drawn the knife across the victim's throat. . . Other zealots confine the hands and feet of the victim. . . while one holding a lamp to the scene points to the oozing blood, and seems to say, "so mote it be with the enemies of free masonry."

As Morgan's fate was never known, it must be admitted that whatever the artistic merits of the canvass, the artist possessed high imaginative qualities!

By 1830 practically the whole north side of the bridge was occupied by buildings. Those on the bridge proper were exclusively of wood construction, but one of the most prominent stone structures in the entire village was built at its eastern end and rested partly upon the bridge. This was the Globe Building, a four-story structure built in 1827 and equipped with water wheels under the building. It was devoted to small manufacturing shops and factories, and, after the Arcade, was the pride of the village. On the south side, the bridge was open, and the view toward the aqueduct and the new Court Street Bridge was only obstructed by the hay wagons of the farmers who utilized the open space at times as a hay market.

Crossing the bridge after dark in these years before adequate street lamps was a perilous undertaking. In 1824 the village had voted \$100 to place oil lamps on the bridge, but there is no evidence that they were put in place for several years. In 1827, during the construction of the Globe Building, a plank was removed from the bridge. An unsuspecting stranger from the neighboring village of Ontario, crossing the bridge in the early dusk of a November evening, stumbled through and was drowned in the river below. The *Rochester Album* took the occasion offered by the tragedy to warn solemnly all strangers to carry lights with them.²⁵

This second Main Street, or Market, Bridge had many troubles and was often the subject of village bickering, but a really great catastrophe struck in 1834. On the night of January 25, fire started in the market at the west end, and fanned by a westerly wind quickly spread

through the row of wooden buildings. The fire companies were helpless to do anything but to watch the highly inflammable partitions crumble and fall into the river. Leaping across a narrow space between the bridge structures and the Globe Building, the fire seized upon a wooden staircase on the outside of that stone building and soon gutted the interior. Nothing was left of the market, but the market irons. Altogether the fire was reckoned to have taken a toll of \$100,000 and to have been the most destructive conflagration thus far seen in the village.²⁶

Once again the north side was clear of buildings, but not for long. The trustees resolved to add an amendment to the pending city charter authorizing the issue of stock for a new market, and a committee was appointed to estimate the expense of building a brick market.²⁷ The principal property owners on the bridge, Charles H. Carroll and S. W. Wood, evidently discouraged by the fire, offered to sell their property to the village at \$50 a front foot, a total of over \$7,000. Whether because of this sum or for some other reason, the enthusiasm for rebuilding the market on the bridge waned rather suddenly. The village decided to dispose of the old market lot, offering it first to Carroll at the same rate of \$50 per front foot, and when he refused to buy, putting it up for general sale. The trustees found no buyers, however, and the lot was subsequently leased in 1838 to Ezra M. Parsons and Edmund Lyon. In 1854 it was sold to Aaron Erickson.²⁸ Plans for another market were discussed from time to time, but nothing definite was undertaken until 1836 when a new market was finally built on Front Street some distance north of the bridge.

Meanwhile Carroll and Wood had decided to rebuild, and all during the spring and summer their timbers and planks hampered traffic across the bridge. Carroll apparently planned to utilize the twenty feet formerly rented from him by the village, but to do so he had to rest his timbers on the corporation's wall on the west bank. The village, still uncertain as to the location of its market, granted him permission to do this on condition that it might at any time build on the timbers upon payment of their value.²⁹

From this circumstance grew up a sort of make-shift market on the old site. Several butchers and merchants realizing the advantages of being located on the accustomed market site petitioned what was now the common council of the newly incorporated city for permission to

build on the timbers Carroll had erected. This promise of market rent without having to build a market appealed to the aldermen. The city bought the timbers from Carroll and rented the right to build on them to private individuals, most of whom were butchers and found being over the river as great a convenience as ever.³⁰

But it was soon evident that the early buildings on the bridge had but a precarious hold on their location. Less than two years after fire had swept the bridge clean of shops, flood washed away most of the rebuilt structures. The flood of October, 1835 was the greatest Rochester had experienced since the "Great Freshet" of 1817. The river rose to a height which nearly filled the arches of the aqueduct, and swirled against the always vulnerable western abutment of the bridge. One scientific Rochesterian calculated that over two million gallons of water per minute were rushing under the bridge. In spite of retaining walls, the river overflowed into Buffalo Street as far as the Arcade.

Under this pressure the west abutment of the bridge gave way, precipitating the timbers and buildings depending upon it into the flooded river. Edward Champeney's market, the most pretentious of the butcher establishments on the "Market Ground," fell into the river in one piece, and according to the *Daily Democrat* "reached the falls and commenced its terrible descent but little shattered." Other buildings, including Nehemiah Osburn's shop at the east end, also collapsed into the river, while several warehouses on the east bank followed suit.³¹

In the flood's wake came repairs to the bridge and the inevitable disputes with the county supervisors. The city undertook re-enforcing the undermined west abutment and laying new flooring. But when the aldermen sent a bill to the board of supervisors for the county's share of the expense, the supervisors refused to pay it. While this dispute was going on, the March freshet wrought new damage, sweeping away a section of railing and for a time threatening the bridge with the shops and stalls which had been rebuilt on it.

The Third Bridge

This threat was too much and agitation for a new bridge began. The usual bickering between aldermen and supervisors occurred—the supervisors at one time going so far as to declare that the bridge was exclusively a city responsibility and no business at all of the county.

Nevertheless they voted an appropriation of \$5,500 toward the cost, but were so slow in paying it over to the city—which had already begun construction of the bridge in 1837—that the latter on the advice of the city attorney memorialized the legislature to compel action.³²

The following summer the city contracted with Henry Fox to complete the bridge and agreed to advance whatever sum might be needed in excess of the amount appropriated by the county.³³ As the city was engaged at the time in improving and changing the levels of Main and Buffalo Streets, the new bridge was planned to correspond with the levels of these streets. Ambitious plans for a stone bridge were abandoned, but two stone piers were built and the east abutment raised to lessen the grade up Main Street hill. By September, 1838, the last railings were put in place and all that remained was to attempt to obtain reimbursement from the county. The city presented a bill for \$4,004, and after a good deal of trouble collected about half of it.³⁴

Like its predecessors the new bridge was soon occupied along its north side by a row of stores. Most of these stores were devoted to the sale of inexpensive dry goods and ready made clothing, and during the next two decades the bridge was a recognized section for such commodities. The majority of the shops were small concerns, occupying sections of the one or two-story wooden buildings. They more nearly resembled stalls than actual stores, having open fronts which were closed by shutters at night. These stalls or shops were constantly changing occupants as the proprietors sold out, dissolved partnerships, or moved to new locations every two or three years.

These dry goods and clothing stores on the bridge were the bargain stores of the day. There was, for instance the Original Canada Store and One Price Emporium ("Fancy and staple dry goods from Canada and New-York") which whetted customers' curiosity by advertising that they would find "something entirely different from any goods kept in other dry goods stores." There was the Paris Cash Store where "all kinds of Yankee goods and notions are sold." I. B. Van Every at No. 9 claimed that his "cassimers, beaver and pilot cloths, satinets, flannels, Merinos, bombazines" were all "cheaper than can be found west of New York, for cash." H. and J. F. Hoyt, on the corner of Front Street and the bridge, asserted that their goods "will be sold cheaper than at any other establishment," while George Shelton,

clothing merchant, announced that his was the "largest establishment in the state, and none cheaper."

Some of the other merchants, however, apparently believed in emphasizing quality or the local manufacture of their wares to lure customers. Thus the Rochester City Clothing Store, J. B. Brown, proprietor, advertised that his dry goods and ready made clothing "can not be surpassed for style and making by any other establishment in Western New-York," while A. C. Way and Sons pointed out proudly that all the clothing in their "red front" store was "manufactured by ourselves."³⁵

No allusion to the dry goods merchants of the bridge can be made without mention of Mrs. Maria Gifford, who maintained a shop at No. 4 for several years and for many more affixed the masculine notation "dry goods merchant" after her name in the city directories. Unfortunately very little is known of this pioneer business woman. She was apparently successful, for she sold her shop on the bridge in 1847 to Paine Bigelow and opened a new establishment on State Street—then the district of the more pretentious stores.

There were a few exceptions to the general rule of dry goods stores on Main Street Bridge. One of the most noteworthy was the Central Drug Store of John M. Winslow who was one of the oldest and longest tenants on the bridge. Winslow had opened his establishment at No. 6 in 1835 where, besides drugs and patent medicines, he sold perfumes, cosmetics, and fancy soaps. He also, like most druggists of the period, manufactured his special brand of patent medicine—in this case, Winslow's Balsam of Horehound—which was peddled throughout the surrounding territory and made his name known to the farmers in the country round. Winslow weathered the flood of 1835 and the rebuilding of the bridge, and when he finally moved in 1847 the *Daily Democrat* mournfully remarked that the bridge would not be the same.³⁶

Art activities on the bridge, which had been begun by the exhibit of the "Immolation of Morgan" in 1828, were maintained by the presence of Colby Kimble, "Portrait, Fancy & House Painter etc." in quarters over I. B. Van Every's store at No. 9. Mr. Kimble is listed among Rochester's early portrait artists, but it is obvious that he found it necessary to engage in the more utilitarian branches of his art as well.

The row of dry goods stores was also broken at No. 11 where J. H. Palmer manufactured snuff and cigars.³⁷

The south side of the bridge of 1837, like that of its predecessors, remained open, but it was not due to any lack of enterprise on the part of the owners of river "lots." For some years Frederick Starr had been buying up the rights along the south side of the bridge with a view to erecting a block there. Unfortunately for Mr. Starr, by the time he was ready to build, the city, in the interest of fire protection, had restricted the building of additional wooden buildings in the central section. The piers of the bridge were not strong enough to support stone or brick structures, and the proprietors of the surrounding mills vigorously protested against building additional piers for fear of congesting the waterway. Mr. Starr got so far as to build a pier for the support of a block, but injunctions and law suits prevented further steps.³⁸ At either end of the south side buildings extended out over the river in the manner of the Globe Building on the north, but further occupancy of the bridge had to wait for a new structure.

The Fourth Bridge

Agitation for a new Main Street Bridge began about the mid-century. Frederick Starr, of course, with his interests on the south side dependent for development upon a new and stronger bridge took a leading part in the movement. But it was clear to more disinterested individuals that twenty years of upholding the busy comings and goings of the growing city had exhausted the usefulness of the bridge. In 1854 the bridge sidewalks were in such a decrepit condition that it was asserted that a man could stamp a hole in the planks with his foot. The *Daily Union* claimed that if the carriage way and buildings were removed so that the perilous state of the foundations could be seen, "none but the stout-hearted would venture to cross upon it." Even the Monroe County Grand Jury in its September session found both Main Street and Court Street Bridges "dangerous and unsafe" and declared the north sidewalk of Main Street Bridge liable to give way at any moment.³⁹

The common council had recognized the need for a new bridge at least a year before when it had requested the county supervisors to build a new bridge. The supervisors, however, occupied with the problems

of erecting a county poorhouse, and facing a popular protest against higher taxes, were even more loath to act than usual. Consequently it was not until after two years of constant prodding from the city that the county at last voted to contribute funds to the project. Then they were incorporated into a "blanket" bridge measure that provided for bridges at Charlotte, at the lower falls, and at Ballantine's south of the city.⁴⁰ Great indignation was manifested by the interior townships, which were willing to contribute to Main Street Bridge, but claimed that the other bridges were exclusively town affairs. At the last minute they threatened to hold up the appropriation, until it was discovered that the county treasurer had already gone ahead and issued bonds for the whole sum.⁴¹

Of this "blanket" \$38,000 appropriation, \$20,000 was for Main Street Bridge, but it was given only on condition that the city raise the entire remaining cost. The common council therefore issued \$20,000 worth of city bonds. As the bridge was estimated to cost nearly \$50,000, and the final contract was negotiated for over \$44,000, it was clear that additional appropriations would be needed before the bridge was finished. As a matter of fact, it cost the city over three times this initial appropriation.⁴²

This first stone bridge in Rochester was destined to serve the city long and well. Today, eighty-four years after the keystone in the last of its five arches was set in place, it still upholds the downtown traffic of a city more than six times the size of the old "Flour City." Yet its beginning was far from auspicious. Quarrels and delays beset its building. And more than one Rochesterian gloomily feared the whole structure would collapse into the river before it was ever finished.

The first dispute arose as to what type of bridge the new structure should be. All were agreed that it should be a stone bridge, but the number of arches, whether round or elliptical, and the number and location of the piers were hotly debated. The millers in the vicinity were determined to have the largest possible waterway in order to protect their property against floods. On the other hand, the owners of river lots along the bridge, and especially the long-thwarted Mr. Starr, wanted a bridge with as many piers as possible in order to accommodate their buildings. The general public complained that these conflicting interests thought of the bridge as a private rather than a public

convenience, and the *Daily Union* commented acidly, "It is a pretty state of things if the public must be stayed in the proposed improvement as long as the owners of the old buildings on the bridge and the millers . . . shall see fit, from motives of interest or convenience, to dictate." 43

The common council finally settled the dispute by referring several proposed plans to McRea Swift and I. F. Quinby, professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at the University of Rochester. These engineers decided in favor of a five-arch structure. Thereupon the council let the contract to Charles B. Coleman, and appointed Kauffman and Bissell engineers, with Professor Quinby as consulting engineer.

Work began in September of 1855, but was halted abruptly. The disgruntled millers, headed by Samuel P. Ely, secured an injunction stopping construction on the ground that the waterway of the proposed bridge was too small and thus endangered their property. Public opinion, already aroused by the delay of the previous dispute between the millers and bridge occupants, was highly indignant. The fall season of low water was vital for the construction of coffer dams and, as the newspapers pointed out, a few weeks' delay might mean the postponement of construction for nearly a year. A public meeting assembled in protest against the injunction, and the *Daily Union* declared, "There are *some* other interests here besides the millers."

The courts lifted the injunction in less than three weeks but popular fears were justified. Early in October a freshet not only ended the season of low water but swept away such work as had already been done. The city had paid out \$8,000 and the citizens gloomily asked themselves what they had to show for it. There was no new bridge, and few signs of it to be seen. Only the hewn stone, originally designed for the United States government piers at Charlotte eighteen years before, cluttered Main and Buffalo Streets waiting to be used.

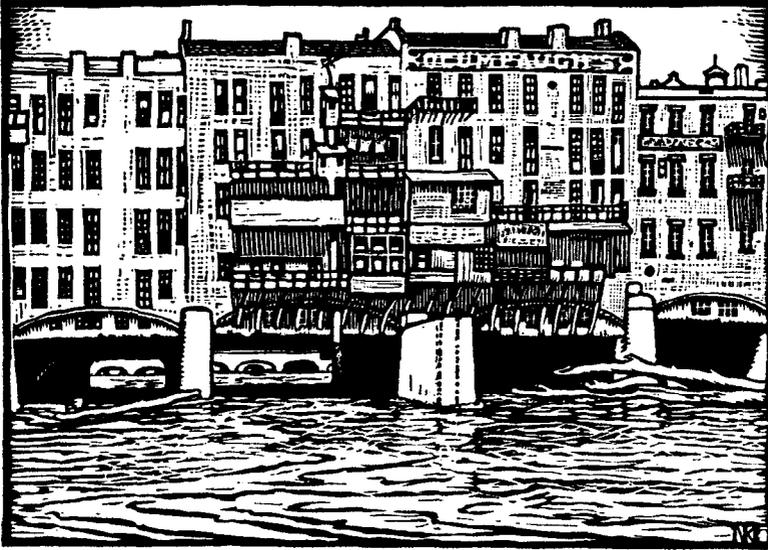
In the spring, excavations for the east abutment began. And here new difficulty met the builders. Elisha Johnson's economy of 1824 was revealed when excavations disclosed that the east abutment was not backed by stone, as had been supposed, but merely by earth. As plans had called only for strengthening and enlarging this abutment, the discovery caused a radical revision and a considerable addi-

tion to the contract price. A further change of plan was made by the common council later in the summer when it was decided to widen the bridge to 80 feet instead of 70 as had been first contemplated. This increased width necessitated a projecting iron trusswork to support the sidewalks and was severely criticized for hiding the stone construction of the bridge.⁴⁴

Meanwhile Frederick Starr was conducting a single-handed fight to change the west end of the bridge and locate it some ten feet to the south. This proposal came to nothing, but it occasioned considerable excitement. Several of the piers had already been built, and in order to persuade the city to change their location Starr asserted that both workmanship and materials were deficient. As a good many people were also suspicious of this, the citizens were torn between fears for the future of the bridge, and reluctance to incur the added expense of reconstructing the piers.

Popular criticism was further aroused as it became apparent that the bridge would be closed for a second winter. During the summer, the only means of crossing the bridge or attaining access to the stores had been by a narrow and perilous foot bridge along the north side. To allay this dissatisfaction, the common council in October voted to build a temporary wooden bridge substantial enough to allow the passage of teams. This decision proved highly welcome although there were some citizens who pointed out gloomily that \$1,500 had thus been added to the expense of the bridge.⁴⁵

Such persons must have felt their gloom justified when in February the break-up of the ice in the river tore away a span of this temporary bridge and once again made the Main Street crossing impassable. As the ice jam also made the long decrepit Court Street Bridge unusable, persons wishing to cross the river in the center of the city were forced to use the aqueduct towpath. The city hastily threw across a foot bridge at Main Street to afford a crossing while the temporary bridge was being repaired, but for a time the only bridge in the city open to teams was at Andrews Street. The ice jam and flood, however, performed a useful function in sparing the owners of buildings on the old bridge the necessity of tearing down their structures before rebuilding on the new. The supports were so weakened that all but the western-most building toppled into the river, and the city was



SOUTH VIEW OF MAIN STREET BRIDGE: 1936

This reduction from a linoleum cut by Norman Kent (original size 9" by 6½") shows the backs of the brick buildings which were constructed along the south side of the bridge after 1870. A glimpse of Andrews Street Bridge further down the river may be seen under the arches in the background.

treated to the fine spectacle of watching the wooden structures float over the falls.⁴⁶

The early months of 1857 saw a complete reorganization of the work on the bridge. Faced by the successive delays and changes of plan, the contractor found his resources running low. He was unable to buy needed materials, and the overseer of the poor complained that bridge workmen were forced to seek poor relief because they had not been paid. Finally Coleman informed the council that he could not finish the work. The council thereupon took over construction, appointing G. S. Copeland to superintend the actual work. About the same time the council also removed Kauffman and Bissell as the engineers, not only from Main Street Bridge but also from the suspension bridge at the lower falls, and appointed the city surveyor, Daniel Marsh, as engineer, with Professor Quinby as associate.⁴⁷

The slow progress of Main Street Bridge continued to be an inevitable topic of conversation and discussion during these months.

Young Henry Morse wrote impatiently in May of 1857 that "quite a number of workmen are hewing and hammering at it, in an old foggy way which you know is ever characteristic of Rochester." Other citizens advanced suggestions to speed up matters. One proposed that the stone bridge be abandoned and one of the new Whipple iron bridges be laid on the piers, thus finishing the whole business in three months. Another citizen endorsed this suggestion, saying he did not think the contractors and engineers knew how to construct a stone arch bridge anyway and that the whole thing would probably collapse as soon as finished. Defenders of the stone bridge scoffed at this fear and pointed to the aqueduct as an example of the sturdiness and durability of stone. Most of them, however, wanted a return to the original plan of stone arches supporting the sidewalks, and in the end a final change was made and the stone arches were extended under the sidewalks.⁴⁸

In spite of adversities and skepticism, the building of the bridge drew to a finish in the early summer months of 1857. The keystone of the last arch was set in place at eleven o'clock on Wednesday, July 29, 1857, and the bridge was formally opened the following Saturday. But a good deal of finishing work still remained, and it was not until the next summer that the pavement of Medina stone was completed, while the temporary wooden walk on the south side still remained for some time.

Building on the north side of the bridge began almost as soon as the structure was finished. Extensions to the bridge piers and river walls were built to support the stone and brick buildings which now took the place of the frail wooden ones of the past. But Mr. Starr and the other owners on the south side found themselves still delayed in their long desired projects. The principal cause was a dispute over the south line of Main Street. The roadway of the bridge was still several feet narrower than the street, causing a considerable jog in the south line of street and bridge. Property owners on Buffalo Street objected to buildings on the south side of the bridge because this jog would then completely cut off their view of Main Street. The problem was finally solved in 1861-62 by widening the bridge on the south side. The owners of property on that side complained that they were not adequately compensated for territory taken from them for this purpose, but the way was at last open for them to build.⁴⁹ No actual construction, however, was begun until after the great flood of 1865, and

the south side of the bridge was not completely built up until the mid-seventies.⁵⁰

Within a few years of its completion, the bridge received its ordeal by water as the greatest flood Rochester has ever known swept down upon it during the weekend of March 17-19, 1865. A sudden thaw and rain on the uplands of the Genesee sent the flooded river rushing lakewards with the heavy snows of an exceptionally long and cold winter. At Rochester, where the river channel had been steadily narrowed for many years by the greedy mills and factories, the Genesee had its revenge. The struggling currents burst over the banks and into the Genesee Valley and Erie Canals and from there poured into the streets in the western part of the city. At midnight of Saturday the angry river broke over the barrier of Main Street Bridge and rushing across its western end found a new outlet through Buffalo and Front Streets to the lower river.

At this end of the bridge the water was six to eight feet deep, while the swirling currents tore up the paving and hurried onwards to do more damage to Front Street. Buildings at either end of the bridge were undermined, and on the bridge itself the suspended basements of the new brick buildings were torn out causing the collapse of many of the walls and upper stories. Three men trying to save the goods in Hartwell's store in the western end of the Globe Building narrowly escaped death when the floor suddenly collapsed into the river. Erickson's Building, on the site of the old market, and the rest of the Globe Building were left sagging dangerously.⁵¹ When the waters subsided the aldermen were so appalled at these and other scenes of devastation that they petitioned President Lincoln to exempt the city from further calls for the Civil War draft because, as they said, they needed every man for repairs at home.⁵²

The bridge itself, however, had suffered little damage. Such as there was consisted mostly of pavement torn up by the flooding waters. For several days it took an agile pedestrian to make his way among the scattered paving stones, and for a somewhat longer time carts and wagons had to detour by Andrews Street Bridge. Enterprising merchants took advantage of the opportunity to offer "flood sales" of slightly damaged cottons and linens, and these together with the natural excitement of crossing a bridge so lately under water soon restored the active life of the bridge.

Nevertheless a considerable share of blame for the flood fell on Main Street Bridge. A committee appointed by the common council to investigate the causes of the flood dubbed the structure "a monument of errors" and there was a considerable outcry against the buildings on the bridge for obstructing the channel. But no one seriously considered any very great alteration in a structure so recently completed, and even those who complained loudest against the buildings conceded that too much money had been invested in them to allow of their removal. The obstructions which had almost closed the eastern arch were removed, but little else was done in the way of flood precaution until 1913 when a new river wall was built on the west bank.

The structure of the bridge was little affected by this, or even by the deepening of the channel in 1915-1919. Although engineers have been pointing out for several years the need for a new bridge with a wider water capacity, Main Street Bridge still stands today essentially as built over eighty years ago. And in spite of eleven other bridges in the city, it is still, as in 1812, the principal crossing of the lower Genesee. Yet few of the busy throng who daily pass over it are conscious of crossing Main Street Bridge. The buildings on either side have given it so much the appearance of a city street that most Rochesterians would find it hard to distinguish between Main Street and its bridge.

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14. *Ibid.*
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27. "Doings of Trustees," January 27, February 11, 1834.
28. *Ibid.*, March 25, April 2, 1834; Common Council, *Proceedings*, July 19, 1859.
29. "Doings of Trustees," March 19, 1834.
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31. *Rochester Daily Democrat*, October 27, 1835; *Report of Special Committee . . . on Flood Conditions in the Genesee River* (Rochester, 1905).
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33. Common Council, *Proceedings*, June 12, 22, 1838.
34. Supervisors, *Proceedings*, October 11, 1839.
35. *Rochester Directories*, 1840-1850.

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37. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1840; *Directory* (1841), adv. section.
38. *Rochester Daily Union*, June 18, September 20, 1855; July 29, August 8, 1856.
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43. *Daily Union*, September 17, 1855.
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45. *Ibid.*, October 8, 13, November 6, 7, 1856.
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