

# Scenes from the Past

Many pedestrians and motorists alike that traverse the Calvert Street bridge today likely are unaware that the 1935-built structure replaced an earlier, iron truss bridge that had been completed in 1891. The large span bridge towered over the deep Rock Creek Park. Amazingly, in order to build the current bridge beginning in 1934, the entire iron truss bridge was moved out of the way — by a team of horses, no less.

The deep Rock Creek posed a serious obstacle for Washington development north of the city. Travelers headed north had to drive horses and early cars down the steep embankment, cross the shallow water, and climb up the other side.

A wooden bridge was eventually built in the 1870s over the water on what was then Woodley's Lane, connecting what became known as the Adams Morgan neighborhood with the emerging summer estates in what is today Woodley Park. The District of Columbia's Engineer Commissioner reported no immediate plans for constructing a permanent bridge in 1887, citing the rugged topography as not worth tackling.

Senator Francis G. Newlands and his business, the Chevy Chase Land Company, had purchased enormous amounts of land from the termination of Connecticut Avenue all the way to Chevy Chase in secret negotiations to keep prices down. His Rock Creek Railway Company was formed to transport new home buyers to the north of the city, and it required bridges to span Rock Creek.

Construction commenced on a large iron truss bridge to replace the 1870s wooden bridge leading from Columbia Road to Connecticut Avenue in Woodley Park that was completed in 1891. It was built by the Edgemoor Bridge Company. When completed, the ownership of the bridge was turned over to the city government.

The original bridge was an impressive sight. It was 755 feet long, and cost an estimated \$70,000. The wrought iron used for its construction weighed a total of 1,266 tons.



1990s view showing the Calvert Street / Duke Ellington Bridge crossing at a 45-degree angle in the upper portion of the photo; at the bottom is the Connecticut Avenue / Taft Bridge as it appeared while its roadway deck was undergoing major reconstruction. photo—courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



photo—courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

Architect George Oakley Totten, Jr.'s initial proposed Calvert Street Bridge design.

Beginning in 1917, however, the District Commissioners hired local architect George Oakley Totten, Jr., to design a new Calvert Street bridge. The federal Commission of Fine Arts determined that his resulting design was too costly and ornate, and feared that it might overshadow the newly completed Connecticut Avenue Bridge to the west.

Totten fought for the use of his stone arch design, but the Fine Arts Commission remained unconvinced. Finally, in 1933, Totten's design was discarded, and the Commission selected Paul Crete as chief designer for a new bridge. His first design was also rejected, but the Commission finally settled on a masonry design with multiple arches that was eventually built.

The need for crossing Rock Creek, however, remained during the construction period of the new bridge, which was begun in 1934. The decision was made to move

the original iron bridge 80 feet downstream to be used for diverted traffic until the new bridge was completed the following year.

Engineer John Eichleay, Jr. was hired for the job. His grandfather had founded the company in 1875 expressly to relocate hard-to-move things.

In the early dawn hours of June 7, 1934, the five, 130-foot piers of the bridge were lowered onto a specially made track of horizontal girders outfitted with wheels. At 5:00 a.m., workers cut the railroad tracks on the bridge above, and a series of block and tackle was attached to the bridge with a windlass. Horses took over, and incredibly, in just seven hours and 15 minutes, the bridge was at its new position 80 to the west.

Thousands of onlookers had gathered to watch the unusual feat, and after it was in place, the railroad track was reattached and open for traffic in less than two hours. Following the completion of the masonry arch in 1935, the original Calvert Street Bridge was dismantled for scrap.

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Early view showing a trolley traversing the iron truss bridge.

After more than 11 years and 136 monthly contributions to this space, Paul Williams is bidding farewell to *The InTowner* as he takes up his duties as the new President of the Association for the Preservation of the Historic Congressional Cemetery. We will announce his successor next month. His final article this month will also appear in his forthcoming *Lost Washington*, being published by Anova Books, due out this fall.