

East Falls Past-- Spanning the Schuylkill at East Falls

The Fallser, February 2008, by Ellen Sheehan

The lighting of the Falls Bridge on January 12, 2008 has focused our attention on the bridges that have existed in the Falls of Schuylkill for the past 250 years.

Beginning in 1760, a series of bridges was built over the Schuylkill River in East Falls.

Dr. William Smith, first provost of the University of Pennsylvania held a seven-year license on a rope bridge to pull boats from one shore to the other. Pedestrians also used this bridge.

The second bridge to be constructed on this site was built by Messrs. Kennedy and Carpenter in 1808. This was a chain suspension bridge, one of eight in existence at the time, and the first to be built in the United States. It was the longest, spanning 306 feet. Excursionists from the city flocked to pay a penny for the privilege of crossing. Called the "Finley" (after the man who held the patent), it was also known as the "Corporation Bridge." On the morning of January 19, 1816, it collapsed under the weight of snow and ice.

By June 1816, Josiah White and Erskine Hazzard had erected a wire foot suspension bridge at the same site. Three wires on the east side were attached to the window of a nearby wire factory and three wires on the west side to a huge tree. The toll for crossing was two cents. We can only marvel at the courage of those travelers!

Construction on the Reading Railroad Bridge began in 1852. This bridge, known as the "Skew" bridge, was a new idea in architectural engineering. A "Skew" or twisted bridge, it was a succession of single arches which formed a whole, each circle being independent of the other. The more weight placed on this type of bridge, the stronger it becomes.

The stone used in the construction was taken from a quarry known as Stoever's or Scott's, located on Kelly Drive. The stone foundations were laid by divers, some of whom lost their lives in accidents related to the laying of these foundations. It opened in 1856.

Our present Falls Bridge is the third to be built on this site. The first bridge to stand on the site was built in 1848. It was a white, uncovered wooden toll bridge controlled by Aaron Smith. In 1850, remains of an old Manayunk bridge floated down the river during a storm and crashed into the toll bridge, resulting in the western span being torn from the piers and abutment. In 1861, the city built the "Old Red Bridge. This was a covered wooden bridge painted Spanish Brown. In October of 1878, a strong gale swept the middle and western spans into the river.

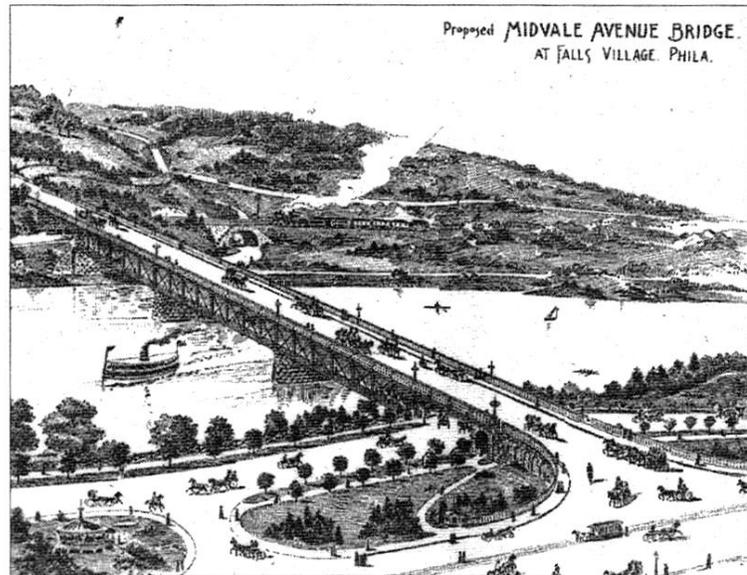


Photo Courtesy of East Falls Historical Society

Our present Falls Bridge was opened in June 1895. The original plans for it to be a double-decked bridge were never completed. The approaches for the upper deck were to extend from the Weightman Chemical Laboratories where the homes known as "Falls Ridge" stand today. On the west side of the river, it was to extend to the very top of Falls Road, now Neill Drive. Two different lighting fixtures lined the upper interior of the bridge, one side for gas, the other side for electric.