

**Sandwiching in History Tour:
Rock Island/Clinton Presidential Park Bridge
Riverside Park, Little Rock, Arkansas
Friday, March 1, 2019
By David Collins**



Hello everyone! Welcome to the March 2019 Sandwiching in History tour. I am David Collins, the Preservation Coordinator at the Capitol Zoning District offices. Today's tour will cover the evolution of the old Rock Island Railroad Bridge you see behind us, which is now the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge. Before we get started, I want to thank the Clinton Presidential Library and the City of Little Rock for allowing us to gather and enjoy the site together. It's also necessary to acknowledge Michael Hibblen for his research and work to preserve the story of the Chicago Rock Island line in Arkansas, both materially and academically. His book, *Rock Island Railroad in Arkansas*, is a feast of historic imagery and heavily informed this talk. Finally, thank you to Callie Williams, the Education and Outreach Coordinator at Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, and Rachel Patton, the director of Preserve Arkansas, for their help in locating resources for the tour.

The Clinton Presidential Park Bridge is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but it reflects the golden age of the rails in both Little Rock and Arkansas, as well as the development of Little Rock's cityscape. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, many different rail companies vied for territory and access to major centers of convergence, such as Little Rock was becoming at the time. (And I do mean many, so be patient with all the names) The Choctaw and

Memphis Railroad was a subsidiary of the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Company, which began its operations in Arkansas in the early 1890s. The line originally worked out a deal to use the Baring Cross Bridge, the first rail bridge built over the river in 1873, to move its cars across the river. The arrangement ceased in the latter part of the decade, and the C&M found it necessary to construct its own bridge after purchasing the Memphis and Little Rock line in 1898, which would allow it to carry primarily coal across the entire state and connect to lines in the west. The following year became a crucible for Arkansas as a more expansive rail state, opening many new markets, and the use of this bridge was an important factor.

Construction on the bridge began in March of 1899 and was completed in November of that year, after which a celebration was held for the first crossing on December 10th. As originally constructed, the bridge was around 2,400 feet, including an approach section constructed of wood on the Argenta (North Little Rock) side. However the primary steel sections of the bridge made up around 1,600 feet—four spans of 400 feet each. Three of those spans, as you can see, were fixed, each weighing 1.25 million pounds or 625 tons. Each span was supported by concrete and dressed stone piers that extended 40 feet below the river bed. One span, which is now lifted, was originally installed as a swing span to allow for river traffic and weighed 1.07 million pounds or 535 tons. At the time of construction, the swing span had a bronze, center-bearing pivot and could make a total revolution in a minute and a half. The spans had the ability to support two 90-ton engines with 50-ton fuel cars and hauls of 4,000 tons per linear foot.

The Choctaw and Memphis line now had its own sturdy passage across the Arkansas River and began buying more lines and adding more variety to its hauls including timber and agricultural resources. However, less than two years after the construction of the bridge, a railroad company out of Illinois took notice of the Choctaw and Memphis operation and took advantage. The Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad bought a controlling share of the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf Company in May of 1902, and officially took up operation of its roads in March of 1904, as it began to expand its reach south to the Gulf of Mexico and west to the Pacific Ocean. Since 1904, this bridge became known as the Rock Island Bridge and remained so until 2011, but we'll get to that eventually.

By 1910, Rock Island had negotiated one of the most extensive railroad systems in Arkansas. In order to attend to the increasing traffic, in 1907, Rock Island began construction on new rail yards, a roundhouse, and shops in southeast Little Rock, which came to be called Biddle yard. The company ultimately moved its center of

operations in the area from the Argenta yards to Biddle yard around 1910. However, in 1913, it built a new depot in Argenta, which heralded a growing passenger market that became an important contributor to the company's profits over the next three decades.

The 1920s represented the peak of opportunity for Rock Island as its acquisition of lines to the south coincided with Arkansas's oil boom. Its cars transported a large majority of the oil tapped in towns like El Dorado and by 1930, its value in Arkansas had reached almost \$12 million. The line even had luck on its side to some degree. During the massive floods of 1927, this easternmost bridge survived the swollen Arkansas River while the westernmost Baring Cross Bridge washed out. It took the Missouri Pacific company two years to complete its replacement while the Rock Island Bridge remained fully functional.

All of Rock Island's success in Arkansas in the 1920s gave way to larger sustainability problems in the next few decades. During the Depression years, the company had trouble remaining solvent, falling into bankruptcy in 1933. Updated passenger lines, including those that ran from Memphis to California, helped the Rock Island to crawl out of its receivership status by the late 1940s, but its influence in the state only diminished in the years after World War II. The majority of its revenue came from its mail transportation services for the Railway Express Agency over its passenger lines. However, that program ended in the mid-1960s, making it impossible for passenger services to make money. The company never earned a profit after 1965. By 1967, Rock Island only had two operating passenger trains and claimed that the end of the mail service would, "cost it \$1.2 million worth of mail business a year on the two trains" and finally closed their passenger lines. The company fell into bankruptcy again in 1975, and by that time it was unable to properly maintain its infrastructure. The Rock Island Railroad was finally liquidated in 1980, and many of its tracks were removed. The primary vestige of the line that remains is this bridge.

A decade before the Rock Island Railroad went under, plans were put in place to make the Arkansas River more navigable for commercial traffic across the entire state. This required existing bridges to coordinate operations with a lock and dam system. For Rock Island, this meant replacing the original swing span with a new lift span, which you see in place today. However, the new span was only in operation for about 14 years after its installation. The Little Rock and Western Railroad continued to use the bridge after the Rock Island was liquidated in 1980. Much of the company's track lines in Arkansas were removed in the early part of the decade, and in 1984, a crossing was removed that had provided the Little Rock

and Western line access to the bridge, and it began using the Baring Cross bridge instead. Michael Hibblen states in *Rock Island Railroad in Arkansas* that, "... November 1984 was likely when the last train ever crossed the Rock Island Bridge over the Arkansas River. Power was disconnected, except for navigation lights for barges, and the lift span was locked in the 'up' position."

This marked the beginning of a long period of abandonment for the bridge. During this time, it stood almost as a symbol of widespread divestment in downtown Little Rock as the entire area seemed to be in a state of arrested development. This area, which was a bustling Rock Island station for the majority of the century, quickly became a proverbial wasteland, and the bridge itself was in disrepair due to neglect and vandalism. The Union Pacific Railroad owned the bridge by the beginning of the 1990s and plans to remove it were gaining steam due to the possible liabilities that the company faced by leaving it open for trespassers.

From 1994 to 1996, the ongoing River Market Project to create a pedestrian and commercial anchor in downtown ignited new efforts to revitalize the entire riverfront, including this old train station. In 1995, Little Rock Mayor Jim Daly, North Little Rock Mayor Pat Hayes, and Pulaski County Judge Buddy Villines traveled to Omaha, Nebraska to help convince Union Pacific to indefinitely delay the removal and to provide options for the city to assume ownership of the bridge. Despite having been vandalized and neglected for a decade, the bridge was still structurally sound at the time and remained so until it was finally renovated in 2010/2011.

In November of 1997, after some encouragement from downtown revitalization advocates, President Bill Clinton decided on this location for his Presidential Library, and retaining the bridge as a potential piece of the Presidential Park was a key selling point. Construction on the library and park began in 2001 as the city finally assumed ownership of the Rock Island Bridge. Eventually, it was to become a pedestrian bridge to provide access to the library from North Little Rock and bookend a foot and bike trail to run along both sides of the river, eventually to be named the Arkansas River Trail. The Clinton Center was completed in 2004, and while the bridge remained in the care of the city, plans to transform it into a pedestrian bridge were halted for lack of funding. Over the course of six years, funds were dedicated to the project by local sources, but failed to reach a necessary amount. The City of Little Rock contributed \$1 million, the William Jefferson Clinton Foundation offered \$4 million, which was donated by private donors, and Pulaski County and North Little Rock invested \$1 million. Still, the project would ultimately require \$10.5 million to complete. So finally, in 2010, the U.S.

Economic Development Administration provided a grant of \$4.5 million to complete the funding, citing that the project had the potential to connect commercial activities and attractions on both sides of the river.

Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects designed the renovation while Clark Contractors of Little Rock managed the project. The work to transform the bridge began in summer of 2010. The idea was to maintain the old rusty bones of the bridge and to fill it with a clean and modern pathway. New ramps leading to the bridge were built on both sides. The counterweights that allowed for the lift span to rise were removed and new crossbeams were built to resemble the historic ones. The approaches to the lift span were built up to allow for a mild grade and ten inches of concrete were poured over the entire surface to provide a continuous, slightly arching path—altogether totaling 3,450 tons of concrete. On either side of the lighted path, silver steel handrails were also installed. The project was complete by September of 2011, and on Friday, September 30, 2011, Bill Clinton spoke at the dedication of the bridge, which was renamed the Clinton Presidential Park Bridge. That day, the bridge was briefly opened to the public, while the grand opening occurred on Sunday, October 2, 2011.

In 2013, an effort to illuminate the iconic six bridges over the Arkansas River in Little Rock and North Little Rock reached the old Rock Island Bridge. The Entergy Company donated \$2 million to affix LED colored lighting to this and two other bridges—the Main Street Bridge and the Junction Bridge—while Phillips Lighting Company donated \$100,000 worth of LED lights. The finished product was unveiled in December of 2013. Since the transformation of the Rock Island Bridge into a pedestrian space, it has served as a key spectacle for the Presidential Park and a link between the two cities. Its design pays homage to the historic character of the bridge while also giving it continued life for the future.

Thank you all so much for joining us today. Please feel free to ask questions and to tour the bridge. On behalf of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, I'd like to invite you to our next tour on Friday, April 5th, which will be conducted at the USS Hoga. It is located at the Arkansas Inland Maritime Museum at 120 Riverfront Park Dr. in North Little Rock. Again, thank you so much for your interest in local preservation and we look forward to seeing you all at the next tour.

Information Sources:

Files of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Hibblen, Michael E. *Rock Island Railroad in Arkansas*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2017.

Information provided by Michael Hibblen, Little Rock, Arkansas.

Zbinden, Van. "Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway." *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>. (accessed 1 March 2019).