Bridges Through the Years

1856: Lincoln and the Railroad Bridge

The first railroad bridge to cross the Mississippi River was in Rock Island, Illinois. Construction began in 1854. It was completed in April, 1856. The bridge was located slightly upriver from the present Government Bridge.

In May of 1856, while heading up river, the steamboat Effie Afton struck one of the piers of the bridge. The boat was destroyed by fire, and a portion of the bridge was damaged. Train traffic came to a halt. The owners of the steamboat company brought a suite against the railroad, claiming the accident was intentional.

Abraham Lincoln was an attorney in Illinois at this time. He was hired to defend the railroad company. The outcome of the trial gave all river traffic the right away, but the railroad would remain. It was here to stay.

1872: An Iron Replacement

In 1872, a second bridge was built by the Arsenal. This bridge consisted of a single rail line above the wagon path. The bridge was built on the same location as the present day Government Bridge. The train track was on top because the smoke and noise frightened horses when trains ran under them.

The bridge was built by the Baltimore Bridge Company. It had five spans 220 to 260 feet long. The draw span was 368 feet in length. The width of the structure was a narrow 16 feet, as it was used for two way wagon traffic. The posts and the top chords of the bridge were wrought iron and the ties were flat iron bars.

The 1872 bridge was replaced in 1896, as locomotives and rail cars had become too heavy for the structure.

1896: U.S. Government Bridge

The Government Bridge was built to accommodate the automobile and increased railroad traffic. This design, with two railroad tracks on top, is unique in the United States. The swing span turns 360 degrees either direction. It is operated by a 56 horsepower streetcar motor, original to 1896.

A bridge operator controls the swing span from the house on top of the bridge. Bridge personnel are on duty 24 hours a day. A ground person makes sure all traffic is off the bridge before it turns. Can you find the ground person?
Happy Birthday!
In 1996, the government bridge celebrates its 100th birthday. Little has been done to change the bridge in all these years. The bridge stands today as an engineering marvel for the time period of its construction.

Get a Closer Look!

The Mississippi River Visitors Center offers a good viewing location. For a closer look, some follow the sidewalk from the visitors center to the bridge, and watch it operate from below. Today, the bridge remains a unique piece of history, fascinating to all ages.

More Exciting Facts about the Government Bridge

* The Government Bridge is owned by the U.S. Government but operated by private contractors.

* The Government Bridge has never been restricted to public travel. However, during the Vietnam War, bunkers were built on both ends of the island. Armed soldiers stood guard over the bridge house 24 hours a day. Extra security was needed only during the worst of the protest movement. Only recently was the box containing firearms removed from the bridge house.

* Once the bridge is off its "peg", the wind can easily turn it. During construction, a 35 mile per hour wind speed restriction was placed on the bridge. If there is a wind, often the motor is not needed, and the brake is used to control the bridge.

For more information about the Government Bridge, contact one of the Park Rangers at the Mississippi River Visitors Center.

Connecting Yesterday with Today
The Bridges of Arsenal Island

A guide to the historical pathways that have led us to the "garden spot of the Mississippi."

The Sauk and Fox indians believed the forests and fruits of this island were protected by a guardian spirit.