Ever give a thought to that cute little bridge that connects Kennebunk’s Lower Village to Kennebunkport’s Dock Square?

By Sharon Cummins

The swinging bridge that connects Kennebunk Lower Village to Dock Square in Kennebunkport is scheduled to be replaced by the Maine Department of Transportation next year. In a resort as colorful as the Kennebunks, where this 1933 landmark on 1896 granite serves as the link between the gin-martini side of the Kennebunk River (Kennebunk) and the vodka-martini side (the Port), that’s the story of a century. Two centuries, actually.
BEGINNINGS
A toll drawbridge bridge was first built here by subscription in 1810 to accommodate growing Kennebunk River shipping and shipbuilding industries. The drawbridge was made free in 1831 when the dirt path that extended from either side of it was designated a County Road. Since then, damaging storms have occasionally necessitated repairs, but most of the major bridge rebuilding projects there have enjoyed the benefit of advance warning.

During one freshet on March 1, 1896, the old wooden drawbridge unexpectedly collapsed with a reverberating crash when huge chunks of ice rushing downriver on a violent ebb tide cut through one of its supporting pilings.

An impromptu bridge committee was assembled to ensure transit between the Lower Village train depot and Kennebunkport hotels was in place before the arrival of money-spending summer folk. Year-round residents of both villages, who shared a post office, a milkman, and a family culture, suffered immediate hardship with the unexpected loss of their intertown connection.

A temporary bridge was hastily constructed between the coal shed in Lower Village and the wharf where David's KPT restaurant now stands. The bridge met the urgent need, but its stationary design meant it had to be dismantled every time a coal schooner made a delivery to Titcomb's Coal Shed on Perkins Wharf.

Its days are numbered: The Mathew Lanigan Bridge was built in 1933, and it’s due for replacement next year. Plan on trading a bit of traffic disruption for a much better structure—for cars and pedestrians.
FALLING DOWN
Within a couple of months it became painfully clear the permanent bridge wouldn’t be ready in time for tourist season. Support pilings were added to the temporary bridge, and efforts were made to make its approaches more presentable for the “summer visitors of a certain class.”

The dark and dirty coal shed at the Lower Village approach quickly earned the derogatory nickname “The Subway” for attracting what the press called “the unwashed and thirsty,” “highwaymen,” and “noble deserters of toil.” Drunks, pickpockets, and the unemployed lurking under cover there were equally offensive to ladies of refinement, who wouldn’t willingly cross the bridge even at midday. In fact, the ladies were so affected it became necessary to pull Constable Dolliff from his regular uptown beat to patrol the Subway.

Construction of the permanent bridge was delayed by one problem after another, not the least of which was project cost-sharing between Kennebunk and Kennebunkport in light of the juxtaposition of each town to the actual channel. At the beginning of July 1896, it was noted in The Wave, “Today the bridge is but little nearer completion than it was the morning after the storm.” Kennebunkport selectmen ultimately agreed to pay the lion’s share of the bridge replacement costs, and the project crawled forward.

TROUBLED WATERS
A swing span design was approved and the lowest of eleven bids to build the span off-site was accepted. Preliminary coffer-dam work for laying the supporting stone abutments commenced but was halted after a week of fruitless pumping. The following comment on the cofferdam pumping apparatus, which cost $80 per day to use, appeared in the Biddeford Journal on July 10, 1896: “Work on the new bridge was again postponed Thursday. A larger boiler, a larger pump and a larger man (from a point of experience) are going to see what they can do with the blamed
thing this week.”

Stone abutments were finally placed. The new iron bridge span arrived at the end of July and was about to be installed when a vague announcement was made by the bridge committee that the span was found to be unsuitable and would be returned to The Groton Bridge and Manufacturing Company of Groton, New York.

UNDER THE BRIDGE
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