

Bascule bridge

Span destroyed by ship

There have been a number of bridges over the Burlington Canal dating back to 1876 when the Hamilton and Northwest Railway constructed a swing bridge to accommodate the pending rail traffic over the Beach Strip.

Then, with the introduction of the Hamilton Radial Electric Railway line over the canal, another swing bridge was constructed in the 1890s, this one designed to also accommodate foot traffic.

Complaints were soon heard from the nearby Royal Hamilton Yacht Club that the bridge would swing right in front of their building, and this issue, along with financing, delayed the construction.

But by 1895, the funding was secured and George Webb was hired to build the new bridge, which would indeed swing to the west with the end of it in front of the yacht club building.

By 1900, the bridge and canal required substantial repairs and this process took over four years.

In 1907, the swing bridge was re-planked and large stones were placed on the south pier to reinforce it.

In the early 1920s, this bridge was scheduled to be dismantled and replaced with a new single-leaf Strauss Trunnion Bascule Bridge.

Construction of the bridge by the Hamilton Bridge Works Company began in September of 1921. The bridge was 40 feet wide, with a roadway of 22 feet wide and sidewalks on each side.

The lift span of the bridge was 138 feet long and was controlled by two counter-balanced weights which were made of concrete. The total weight of the two weights was estimated at 600 tons. The lifting system was centred on four large trunnion pins.

The bridge could be lifted to a maximum 85° angle and the time elapsed would be about 75 seconds.

At 3:25 p.m. on March 14, 1922, the first test of the bridge took place. “Never was there a more satisfactory test; everything came off without a hitch, and the apparatus was so well balanced that hardly a sound above the chug of the gas engine was heard,” noted a newspaper reporter.

That first bascule bridge was so successful that when the canal was widened in 1931, a north span was added providing passage for inbound ships.

While the new bridge helped provide smooth access across the Beach Strip, it was also the scene of huge traffic tie-ups, especially during the summer months when one of the spans was raised for ships sailing through the canal.

But then, 30 years after going into service, disaster struck, a disaster which would forever alter the traffic flow across the Beach Strip.

Shortly before 2:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 29, 1952, the Chicago owned sand-boat, the W. E. Fitzgerald, ran into the bridge shoving it off its concrete sill, crumpling it like a toy and



• *Spectators get a close-up view of the damaged bascule bridge.*

dumping it into the inbound water lane. This very effectively closed the only passage across the canal on one of the busiest highways in the province. Damage to the bridge was set at \$403,000 and damage to the ship at \$200.

The Spectator observed the next day: “In this case, a hopelessly inadequate bascule bridge was nudged into destruction; a tenuous though vital link in the province’s highway network was severed, and one government, perhaps two, was pushed into a bridge-building project.”

They noted later, “It was probably the most fortunate accident that ever happened to the people of Ontario.” After years of discussion the government was forced to act and very shortly authorized the start of construction of what would be the Burlington Bay Skyway Bridge.

On Jan. 27, 1958, after the completion of a six-year study, the Exchequer Court of Canada handed down its decision as to liability in the accident. It assessed damages of \$367,823 against the owners of the Fitzgerald – the Gartland Steamship Company of Delaware. A limitation of liability reduced the sum the company had to pay to the Crown to \$184,383.

The Burlington Bay Skyway, linking Niagara to Toronto, opened Oct. 30, 1958.

- *Margaret Houghton*