



## Chattanooga's Drawbridge Ready to Roll Out

The year was 1917. Woodrow Wilson was president. The cost of a first class stamp was 2 cents. A world-wide flu pandemic struck. Georgia Tech won the NCAA. Mata Hari was convicted and executed as a German spy. And the Market Street Bridge opened.

More than just a steel and concrete ribbon that spans the Tennessee River, the Market Street Bridge is Tennessee's only drawbridge, as well as being one of only a handful in the United States. Chattanoogaans are admiring their 90-year-old treasure, the Market Street Bridge.

Market Street Bridge is a rolling-lift bascule bridge, meaning the spans roll or rock to rise like a rocking chair on a track. "Bascule" is a French term meaning seesaw. The two, huge concrete weights on each end of the bascule allow the bridge to open in the middle to provide clearance for boat traffic. The most famous bascule bridge in the world is Tower Bridge in London which spans the Thames River.

On the Market Street Bridge two small 50-horsepower electric motors get the works started, and the counter-weights pull the spans up the rest of the way. It takes only two minutes to raise the two sides to a 45-degree angle.

Although most people know it as the Market Street Bridge, its official name is the Chief John Ross Bridge in honor of the Cherokee chief who established Ross's Landing on the banks of the Tennessee River, which later became Chattanooga in 1838.

For most of Ross's Landing's first 75 years only ferry service was available. By 1911 load limits and costly repairs to the Walnut Street Bridge led officials to begin planning for a new bridge. Market Street was the commercial center downtown, so it made sense that the new bridge would be destined for that street. Another consideration before building was that military gunboats might have to travel the river, so the bridge had to have 100 feet of clearance and a 300-foot channel span.

The original Market Street Bridge construction began in 1914 and opened 1917, and it was called the "million-dollar bridge." At the time, it was said to be the largest concrete bridge in the South and the largest double-leaf bascule highway span in the world. To mark the dedication, a Hudson Supersix was driven across it, making it the first automobile on the completed bridge.

Building the bridge was a major fete. The original Market Street Bridge construction began in 1914 and opened in 1917, and it was called the "million-dollar bridge." At the time, it was said to be the largest concrete bridge in the South and the largest double-leaf bascule highway span in the world.

The method of construction was unique at the time. Imagine two 200-foot-tall steel towers erected on each bank of the river with cable running between them. Instead of wheelbarrows on planks, they devised a system of transferring 20-gallon buckets on cables.

Constructing the bridge wasn't the only challenge. Several floods of the Tennessee River caused delays. Normally, falseworks prevented driftwood from accumulating, but the floods caused driftwood to accumulate too fast; the falseworks were dislodged by the pressure of the river. Part of the bridge was washed away during construction – an enormous part – after the entire structure of framework and forms was set and ready to be poured.

A newspaper story dated Dec. 20, 1915, reported that a 28-foot stage flood and a portion of the bridge – span 3 – was swept 10 miles downriver. "The 10 men hanging at the water's edge pushing and pulling would no sooner get one mass (of trees and

driftwood) into the current, than another would pile in on top of them. The timber around them was sagging and cracking like the reports of pistols.”

## Market Street Bridge Trivia:

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- Viola Nance was the first pedestrian to cross the new Market Street Bridge in 1917. She was 31 years old, worked in downtown Chattanooga and made her home in North Chattanooga with her sister, Myrtle Nance Wilson.
- To mark the dedication of the opening in 1917, a Hudson Supersix was driven across it, making it the first automobile on the completed bridge.
- Bascule, a French term meaning seesaw, bridges are the most common type of movable bridge because they open quickly and require relatively little energy to operate. The most famous bascule bridge in the world is Tower Bridge in London which spans the Thames River.
- In 1950 the bridge opened accidentally for six hours. Two cars that were on the bridge at the time were trapped between the south concrete counterweight and the river. Jacks had to be used to lift the counterweight. No one was injured.
- The bridge was hit by a runaway barge in 1978.
- The blue hue wasn't always its color. As recently as 1987, the bridge was painted green. Now all the bridges in the downtown Chattanooga area are painted the same special color of blue, which is referred to by the TDOT Structures Division as “Chattanooga Blue.” The bridge carries North Market Street, formerly U.S. Hwy 127, and State Route 8.
- “Gephyrophobia” is the fear of crossing bridges.

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