

Longfellow Bridge
(Cambridge Bridge)
Spanning the Charles River
at Main Street
Boston, Massachusetts
Suffolk County

HAER No. MA-47

HAER
MASS.
13-BOST,
80-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

LONGFELLOW BRIDGE
(CAMBRIDGE BRIDGE)
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Date: 1900-1907

Location: Spanning the Charles River at Main Street, between Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Designed by: William Jackson, Chief Engineer, and Edmund M. Wheelwright, Architect

Owner: City of Boston

Significance: The chief monument of the Charles River Basin and the structure which does more than any other to formalize the planning of the river is the Longfellow Bridge, designed, the bridge commissioners wrote in 1900, "to furnish the eastern boundary of a great park system along 18 miles of river...destined to be the most beautiful park in the country. It is the present purpose, to make the new Cambridge Bridge one of the finest and most beautiful structures in the world."

The Longfellow Bridge was authorized by the same 1894 legislation which authorized the Boston Transit Commission, the Tremont Subway, and the Charleston Bridge. Like the Tremont Street Subway, the Longfellow Bridge was in large part a result of heavy streetcar congestion brought about by the increased traffic of the new electric cars. The old West Cambridge Bridge, constructed in 1793 and rebuilt in 1854, had been on the very first route to carry horsecar traffic, in 1856.

Originally known as the Cambridge Bridge, the present structure was begun in July 1900 and completed in 1907. The Chief Engineer was William Jackson (1848-1910). City Engineer since 1885, Jackson had been responsible for most of Boston's major bridges in this period, among them the Charlestown, Northern Avenue, and Harvard bridges. The Cambridge Bridge, completed three years before his death, was his most important project.

The architect responsible for much of the monumental character of the bridge was Edmund M. Wheelwright (1854-1912). Wheelwright had worked for both Peabody and Stearns, and McKim, Mead & White before starting in Boston

on his own. As City Architect between 1891 and 1896, he designed a large number of municipal structures including the granite kiosks for the Tremain Street Subway at Park and Boylston Streets. Following the completion of the Longfellow Bridge, he was appointed to the corresponding post on the design and construction of the Hartford Bridge over the Connecticut River.

The Longfellow Bridge is a combination street railway and highway bridge: the deck carries two lanes of street traffic on either side of the two central tracks of the Cambridge Subway (today's Red Line), though this link was not made until 1912, when the subway opened between Harvard Square and Park Street. Street traffic originally included traffic for streetcar service as well. The deck, 105 feet wide and 1728 feet long, is supported by eleven steel-arch spans varying in length from 101 to 188 feet. The central span is flanked by the most striking features of the bridge, four granite towers, marking the formal entrance to the Harbor. The bridge is somewhat reminiscent of the Columbian Exposition of the 1893, and has been called "one of the finest steel arch bridges in the world."

Transmitted by: Monica E. Hawley, Historian, 1984