



*“Making Way for a New Bridge”*

That was the headline in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on Monday, December 5, 1921. The picture and caption summarized a weekend effort to replace the existing double-decked swing bridge at N. Wells St. with the new bascule. Trains were stopped on the old bridge at 8 P.M. Friday night and resumed crossing the new bridge at 7 A.M. Monday morning - that's right, only 59 hours! The official dedication of the bridge took place ninety years ago on February 11, 1922.

Crossing the Chicago River at N. Wells St. began in 1841 with one of the earliest floating bridges built in the city. The floating bridge era ended in 1856 when the first of three swing bridges were built here. The second deck, accommodating the Northwestern Elevated Road was added in 1896. The bascule era began in 1922 with the current bridge.



View of the north leaf of the Wells St. bridge under construction with the existing swing bridge in place - 1922. (Photograph from "Engineering World," Volume 20, June - January, 1922 - as digitized by Google books)

N. Wells St. was an important thoroughfare connecting the north and south sides of Chicago. To minimize traffic problems during the project, it was important to maintain rail service for the six years the new bridge was under construction. The leaves of the bascule were built in the raised position while the existing bridge stayed in service. At the point the new bridge was almost complete, the old swing bridge was rotated open, cut up, and floated away. The leaves were then lowered, and the new bascule completed. This construction technique was developed at W. Lake St. eight years earlier and perfected at N. Wells St.

The bridge house plaque summarizes the key players in the design and construction of this bridge. Hugh E. Young was the design engineer, Edward H. Bennett

was the consulting architect. Steel for the superstructure was provided by the Fort Pitt Bridge Co. of Pittsburgh, PA.

During the 1920's this bridge was raised about 2,500 times per year. As commercial river traffic migrated to the Port of Illinois, the number of lifts declined. Today this bridge is raised about 40 times per year to accommodate the migration of sailboats to and from the harbors in Lake Michigan.

Today this bridge carries approximately 8,500 pedestrians, 8,500 vehicles, and 400 trains each day.

Our majestic downtown bascule bridges continue to mark milestone anniversaries. The N. Wells St. bridge is the seventh downtown bridge to join the nonagenarian club.

