

Beverly Fluty

Wheeling Suspension Bridge

Michael Nobel Kline: Wheeling's relationship to the river, what, what the Ohio River meant.

Beverly Fluty: What it, what it meant? Starting with the white people?

MNK: Well, sure.

BF: The explorers?

MNK: Yeah.

(006)

BF: Well, I think we can think of the Ohio River as a highway though there were not really roads at that point even for the Native Americans. And they used the Ohio River as their road. And that was also true of the explorers. They came down the Ohio River. And, and when Wheeling was founded it was because of the Ohio River. It provided the transportation for goods, for people. It was one of the main reasons that Wheeling succeeded in becoming a major industrial city. It was a way of bringing raw materials into the city and exporting manufactured goods, one of the major ones being coal. And that was another reason that coal was so important, was that it fueled all the industries. And even today if you read the old newspapers you can see that the whole city was surrounded by banks of coal. And there's ore, there's coal under the ground under downtown Wheeling. So with transportation, with coal, that's what made Wheeling develop.

MNK: Okay.

(019)

BF: Okay. I think that the Ohio River is the heart and soul of Wheeling. There's a fascination with watching it and still today seeing the coal barges or chemical barges. There's a rhythm to the city that gives it its life's blood. It was a shame at one point when Wheeling was polluted and, and the city turned its back on the river. You can tell that from the buildings, that the more modern buildings never had terraces or windows overlooking the river; it was all towards Main Street. And now once again we turned our attention to the river and developing the waterfront, which is a prime objective of WNHAC, the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation. And I think it's rightly so.

MNK: How bad did the river get? How bad was it when you first came to Wheeling?

(032)

BF: It was terribly polluted. You could not fish in it. People were considered daring if they went swimming in the Ohio River. People had no respect for it. And I think that's changed, dramatically changed. The Ohio River is now cleaner. The fish on the surface are edible. They're not--The deep water fishes are not, but certainly the ones on the surface. And people are water skiing and enjoying boating, and it's becoming recreational again, which it was in the past. And it's different now. Our, our river is much

different. With the locks and dams and the depth does not vary any more. They used to skate on the Ohio River. You used to be able to walk across it in the summer when it was very, very shallow. There's even a photograph of women picking up pieces of coal from the bottom of the Ohio River that had fallen off the steamboats. And they, they did that. And it's just an entirely different

(046)

situation. But I think we still very much respect and enjoy our river. And I think we are a river community. There's no question about it.

MNK: What--How did people get across the river going from east to west or west to east in, in the years before there was a bridge?

(051)

BF: It was very difficult to get across the Ohio River. Not in the summer, because it was so shallow you could even ride a wagon across. There's, again, a, an illustration of cows in the middle of the river, and the water's only halfway up to their, up their legs. So it was incredibly shallow. There are even dry spots in the river. And there were times you could not get across the Ohio River when it was a, when there were floods. You just simply could not get across it when the river was high. There was a--Later there was a cable ferry that ran from about, well, it was run by the Zane family. It was slightly south of where the Suspension Bridge is. And there was a cable that ran across to the Island. And at that time there was already a bridge that connected the Island with the state of Ohio in Bridgeport. And that bridge was built around 1833. So very early in the game you could get across the back channel, which was always shallow. The main channel of the Ohio River is near the shore on this end, this side.

(067)

MNK: So there was--This was a cable ferry that was established by the Zane family?

BF: Yes.

MNK: Then--

BF: That's correct. Um hmm.

MNK: Do you, do you have any sense of when that would have been?

(069)

BF: No, I don't. No, I really don't know. I can look it up for you if you really want to know! I know where there's a description of it, a very good one. Also, at times even after the Suspension Bridge was constructed there was a pontoon bridge on two occasions built across the Ohio River. One was just to have a celebration on the Island. And I think it was more or less a lark to do that. But that was a different way of getting to the Island. Early on as, there was just no way to get across the river in the beginning when the water was very high. You just had to wait. Or people just didn't come and try it. It would be like going across the Rocky Mountains in the middle of winter; you just did not do it. And I'm supposing, I don't have documentation on this, but I don't see how they could have made it.

(080)

MNK: So that--There was a bridge across the back channel, what's called the back channel?

BF: Yes.

MNK: In the, in the eighteen--

BF: Thirties.

MNK: Thirties.

BF: Um hmm.

MNK: Can you, can you talk a little bit about that bridge, who built it?

(083)

BF: Yes. This was built by the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company, the same company in which built the Wheeling Suspension Bridge. They had, members of the Bridge Company had tried very hard to build both bridges, a suspension bridge across the main channel to the Island and then the back channel bridge from the Island to the shores of the state of Ohio. But even though they appealed to Congress and other authorities in Washington for federal money, they were unable to do it. But they did raise enough money to build a little covered bridge across the back channel. And there are wonderful illustrations of that. And it stood for many, many years. As a matter of fact, the piers for that bridge are still in place and provided the foundation for the bridge that's still in use.

(095)

MNK: So the, the current bridge is on the original piers?

BF: Yes, that's right. Yes, that's right. There are very good illustrations of that bridge, covered bridge. There was a toll to use it.

MNK: Can you give some figures on that? What the bridge cost, what the tolls were?

(098)

BF: Not on that bridge. No, I cannot. I can on--When the Belmont, the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company built the Suspension Bridge, then the tolls included both bridges. And I can give you toll rates on both of those.

MNK: Okay. Well let's, let's move on then to the, on to the Suspension Bridge. It must have been years in, in the works. They must have been talking about it for a long time.

(104)

BF: Oh, they did. And this is something that is near and dear to my heart in that you have to have credentials to make something important. And indeed, the Suspension Bridge has wonderful credentials. But to me the story of the Wheeling Suspension Bridge is a people story in that when you think that the beginning of the construction of the, idea for constructing a bridge across the Ohio River dates back to 1818 when the National Road was inching its way towards Wheeling. And the people in this community recognized that there was a need for people to be able to get across the Ohio River easily. The solution, of course, was a bridge. And so this very small group of people formed the Bridge Company, the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company. Wheeling for Wheeling, Virginia, Belmont for Belmont County in Ohio. Hence the name. And they did appeal for funds to build a bridge, federal funds, and did not succeed. They did have a proper charter from the commonwealth of Virginia to build bridges across the Ohio River. And they simply could not raise the proper funds to do it. So when you think about that and the smallness of Wheeling at that time before the National Road arrived here, which made the community just boom. The

population doubled in ten years with the

(126)

National Road coming. That this small group of people decided they needed to build a bridge across the Ohio River. And there was no bridge anywhere down the Ohio River, which is almost a thousand miles long, which I think is incredible.

MNK: Wow. So--Can you talk a little bit about the, the design, how they conceived of this design long before they were able to do it?

(131)

BF: Yes, they had had engineers come and look at the site. One of the problems in designing the bridge was that it had to be, no, it could not in any way obstruct navigation. So they wanted, even in the beginning, to build a suspension bridge that would be clear for the whole channel.--Bye, bye, dear-- between the Island and downtown Wheeling. And that was a tremendous problem, because at that time even there are steamboats with stacks. So you got to build something that's going to clear that whole channel. The answer is a suspension bridge. And the technology was really not in place in the United States at that time. So, yes, this was a, a monumental idea and project. Emery Kemp can tell you more of the background of the evolution of the suspension bridges, but it was very early. But I want to insert something that I think is important. Someone said to me not too long ago, "Well, if you think the

(148)

Suspension Bridge is a marvel in engineering, what about the railroad viaduct at Bellaire," which is certainly very impressive with all those many arches, even going through the side of the community. But when you think that, for example, near Tel Aviv there are eighteen kilometers of those arches built by the Romans. But the Romans could not build a suspension bridge, which I think dramatically shows us how important the evolution of suspension bridges was and the importance of our own bridge because it was the longest suspension bridge in the world, and it was first constructed in 1849. And that's one of the credentials of our bridge.

(160)

MNK: It's hard to imagine in 1849 that they were even making steel cables strong enough to, to support that kind of weight.

BF: Yes, and they were made in Wheeling on Wheeling Island.

MNK: The cables were?

(164)

BF: Yes, the cables were. And one, one of the things that, that people very much enjoy knowing is that-- I'm sure you know the bridge fell in a high wind storm. And it tore those cables off the top of the towers and they went thundering into the Ohio River with a crash, great splash and waves, et cetera. But they rebuilt the bridge in three months. And the cables were reused, and we're still using the same cables today, which I think is incredible. Some of them have been replaced over the years, but I'm sure in the heart of there we have cables that were made out of Wheeling Island between 1846 and 1849.

MNK: Made on Wheeling Island where?

(174)

BF: We don't know the exact site. That has not been ascertained. We know the name of the company, but--

MNK: Which was?

BF: Bodley, made the company. And there are descendants of that family here in Wheeling.

MNK: That's spelled?

(177)

BF: B-O-D-L-E-Y.

MNK: Bodley.

BF: Um hmm.

MNK: Can you say that again, the, the--

BF: Bodley.

MNK: Can you say the whole sentence, that the cables were, were made in the--

(180)

BF: They were made on a site on Wheeling Island. We do not know precisely where they were drawn, but they were made there.

MNK: Okay. And how do you make cables?

(184)

BF: I don't know that! That's one of the things, you bring up a very interesting point, one of the things that I have--It's very difficult, is to interpret a bridge. I think everyone knows about the Roebling Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge built by engineer Roebling in New York. It's a very famous bridge. But do you know how it's interpreted? It's very difficult to interpret a bridge. They're lovely to look at. They're very photogenic. People love them. But they're very difficult to interpret. And one of the things I'm very much hoping we can do in Wheeling is explain such things as how a wire was drawn.

MNK: Extruded.

(194)

BF: Yes. How it, how--What is that processes, where the materials come from. How did they put it together, and how did they draw them? And the newspaper descriptions simply say "two cables"-- "two cables across--" and a date. Well, it does not tell you how they even had those two cables go across the river. And Dr. Emery Kemp, who is a best friend of the Wheeling Suspension Bridge and a civil engineer, is dedicated to studying the history of suspension bridges in the United States. And his favorite example is the Wheeling Suspension Bridge, so that he's in the process of writing a book. And I think that will clear up some of the mysteries for us. But this type of information that you may wish to have is from Dr. Kemp. And if you'd like to, I'll give you his telephone number, and you can interview him. I think that would be wonderful.

MNK: Okay.

(208)

BF: One of the things that I very much enjoy doing is teaching children the dynamics of a suspension bridge. And--Would you like me to describe how I do that? I use four, four, let me see--One, two, four, eight children who volunteer, and I put them four wide apart and two on one side of the towers, and two of them on that same side are the anchorages. And then I have the other four being the other tower and the anchorage on the other side. Then I take clothesline and have one student hold it as the anchorage and then take it over the shoulder of the one standing up to be the tower and then dip it in the middle the way our cables do, then over the shoulder of the tower, the other one, and into the anchorage. And that student is kneeling. And then the other one to the other side of the cable. And then I explain how the suspenders go straight down and across the bottom and then the road bed makes it stiff. And

(226)

that's the heart of the way a suspension bridge is built. And there's a model that we use to further explain this. And they understand it beautifully. And they enjoy participating in it. And adults like it too.

MNK: That's interesting.

(229)

BF: But that's the type of thing I think we need to do. And if we can get this across to children and, so they understand the dynamics of a suspension bridge, our bridge will mean more to them, and every other suspension bridge they see anywhere. And there are little ones built even in Wheeling across creeks in Ohio County. I've seen little suspension bridge. And then Boy Scouts, they make monkey bridges, which is the same principle of a, of our Wheeling Suspension Bridge. My, I've gone far afield here!

MNK: No, no. So the, the--How long was the bridge in construction?

(240)

BF: It was started in 1846. The dedication was in November of 1849, which means that we're very close to having a bridge that will be 150 years old in November of 1999.

MNK: ...

(245)

BF: It was the first bridge across the entire length of the Ohio River. It was the longest bridge in the world when it was first constructed. It has the significance of being associated with two very prominent, nationally recognized civil engineers, Charles Ellet Junior and Washington Roebling. It really, and Dr. Kemp can describe this more to you, the Wheeling Suspension Bridge set a precedent as to how to build this type of bridge. And also because it fell, it taught a very valuable lesson to engineers on aerodynamics. Because at that time it wasn't still enough. And also until--As a matter of fact, until the beginning of the twentieth century the deck of the bridge was wooden, and they were slats of wood. They were very close together so no air could get through the deck of the bridge. And it made it more susceptible to wind. And you know now we have an open grid deck which does allow that air. It also

(266)

makes it more frightening for people to walk across it because they can see down. Many people are very uncomfortable doing that! I've given tours where women looked down and are not a bit pleased about what they're seeing. But that, that was a handicap with the bridge. And now when you look at the

Suspension Bridge, it not only has those vertical suspenders, which are part of the original construction, it has diagonal, what are described as being stay cables, which help to stiffen and strengthen the Suspension Bridge. Early on before that was done in the 1870s it swayed very badly. It was light, and it swayed. But people were not hesitant in using it. That was part of the bridge, and they just used it. But I have read an instance where they did close it one day because the wind was so strong. But, as we know, it fell in a wind storm. And it was just because of the aerodynamics weren't what they should have been.

(283)

MNK: What about the, what about the cost of the, the source of the funding for it?

BF: Well--This is part of my people story. And let me talk about that a little bit. To me that's a whole story, the Suspension Bridge is. Not a credential of the Suspension Bridge, but it's what makes the bridge very, very special to me, and I think to most of the people in Wheeling also. When you think it was built by people in Wheeling, it was paid for by people in Wheeling who purchased stock in the private bridge company at ten dollars a share, and built this longest bridge in the world. And we almost lost the bridge. In the 1970s it was close to failure. And the state of West Virginia owned the bridge at that time, and they wanted to replace it and tear it down. And it took a ten-year struggle to save the bridge. And the people of Wheeling were just so enthusiastic and so willing to help in any way they could to save the bridge. And I think that

(303)

even shows up recently when Randy Whorls, as chairman of Wheeling 2000, was raising the money locally to do the decorative lighting on the bridge. He had no problem at all raising the funds to do that lighting. So it shows other people that we have a very special bridge in Wheeling. The bridge has always been something that's near and dear to the city, and to me that bridge is the heart and soul of the people of Wheeling, very definitely. Now, where were we?

(312)

MNK: So originally these--

BF: There were stocks.

MNK: Shares--

BF: Yes, yes--

MNK: ...

(314)

BF: And I have not read all the newspapers from 1846 through '49, but I have read in the beginning of 1846 when they were trying to sell stock so, through parts of Ohio and some of the southern parts, or at least south of Wheeling, in Virginia. Because of course at that time we were part of Virginia. And they were not very successful. So the bulk of the funds to build that bridge came from the people of Wheeling. At that time there were only about 10,000 people in Wheeling. So I think that's pretty amazing in itself.

MNK: And how much did they raise then?

(325)

BF: Oh, I'll look it up if you want to know! Let me look--

MNK: ... saying.

BF: All right. I was saying there are great many stories about our bridge. Camels marched across it. Elephants marched across it. Because there were great doings on the Island including the circus. And the state fair at the beginning of the twentieth century. And before that there was a Wheeling fair that was held on the Island. So we always had all these animals walking across. But during the Civil War there was a huge camp that had Civil War soldiers there. And they had a tendency to cross the Suspension Bridge and buy liquor in Wheeling. So every evening at dusk the bridge was closed to all the soldiers. But one of them was, somehow or other managed to get onto the bridge. And he was tipsy, and he fell into the river. And the newspaper description talks about his going up and going down, and going up and going
(342)

down, and finally a lifeboat managed to drag him out in the nick of time just before he drowned. And there are just great stories all the time about the Suspension Bridge and the funny things that happened on it. Also during the Civil War when Morgan was making his raids in this part of the country, it was suspected that he might try and attack Wheeling. So a group of people went out and removed all the nails from the wooden deck of the bridge so that if he came close to Wheeling they could very quickly lift up all those, all the wooden deck and he would not be able to get into the city. So, you know, I can just think of lots of stories about the Suspension Bridge that are wonderful! I like humor. So--

MNK: So you, you have a, a bridge--They sold tickets for the bridge?
(358)

BF: Yes. The way that the bridge was supported was by selling stock. But then of course they were responsible to the stockholders. And the way they did this was to charge a toll. And there was a toll for using both bridges. There was a special toll for pedestrians just to walk back and forth from the downtown area to Wheeling Island. There was another toll for stagecoaches. There were also tolls per head of a cow or a sheep. Because this was a way of bringing animals into market into Wheeling. They came from Ohio, the back channel bridge, the covered bridge, across the Island. And then they were brought across the Suspension Bridge. So they were charged a toll per head for the person to bring them. Which brings up a very interesting impression of how the Suspension Bridge not only was visually, but what the odors were on the bridge from all those animals. Must have been tremendous, which was also
(377)

true, of course, on the National Road. They didn't, did not have, to my knowledge, road cleaners at that time. And we sometimes don't really have an accurate picture in our minds of how it was to have lived in that day and age. And although we think that it must have been awful looking back on it, people were accustomed to it. It was part of their every day living. And so--

MNK: ... watch where you step.
(385)

BF: It was just the way it was. That's, that's the way it was and you lived with it.

MNK: I don't imagine it was as bad on the Suspension Bridge as it was on the back bridge, which was a covered bridge. Imagine the--

(388)

BF: Oh, yes! True. Oh, very true! And that's something that many people do not know, why a covered bridge. And I'm sure you know that the reason they were covered was to, to protect the wooden deck of the bridge. That was not true of the Suspension Bridge, the elements were there. But they, they--The bridge company did a remarkable job always of maintaining the bridge. Always did. And they, on the bridge until well into the twentieth century. And the Suspension Bridge, when you stop and think about it, was the main, still, bridge across the Ohio River until 1956 when the Fort Henry Bridge was opened. That is pretty amazing. And people don't talk about it. But I have heard of the convoys that used to go across the Suspension Bridge during World War II.

MNK: And I'm sure World War I.

(404)

BF: Yes, as well. Yes. But we don't think about that's during our lifetime that that was going on.

MNK: So it's, it's, in that regard it's linked to national security.

(408)

BF: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. All kinds of munitions, et cetera were used on that bridge for transportation. Yes.

MNK: What were some of the tolls that people would have paid in the years that it was--

(412)

BF: No, I have to ... All right, and I'm reading this. "Foot passengers to and from the Island, five cents. Man and a horse, ten cents. One-horse carriage or wagon, fifteen cents." And that was a lot of money in that day and age. "One horse dray," a dray is a type of wagon, "twenty-five cents." If you had a tourist dray it was thirty-five cents. "A one-horse cart, fifteen cents." Now let's go down. If you had a six-horse wagon it was seventy-five cents. "Cattle per head, five cents. Horses and mules per head each, eight cents. Hogs and sheep per head, two cents." And the western stages, I think this is incredible, were two thousand dollars a year. So they paid dearly to get across the Ohio River at Wheeling, Virginia.

MNK: Does that suggest that, that this was a profitable venture?

(430)

BF: What I have read of the stockholders' meetings, they never became terribly wealthy, but they held their own and certainly maintained the bridge absolutely first class. So, yes, I think it made money, but it was not a, a--You didn't become a millionaire because you were healthy, hefty stockholder in the, in the bridge company. But up at Oglebay they still have some of the stock certificates. And very well-known people in Wheeling, descendants, those, those stocks are still up there. It's, it's fun to look at them.

MNK: We talked to Robert Hazlett a little bit about the bridge, but--

(443)

BF: Yes, and he didn't, he didn't--

MNK: A little vague, but--

BF: Oh, I can tell you a wonderful story. I was at home, our children were young, and Bill was due home. Bill is my husband, was due home for dinner shortly. And I received a telephone call from the Greenwood

Cemetery's secretary who said, "Mrs. Fluty, we have just sold a safe that has been here for many years, and the new owner opened it and all these documents seemed to be about the Wheeling Suspension Bridge. Would you like to come down and look at them?" And I thought, oh, another wild goose chase. I've received many phone calls that are not fruitful when I investigate them. But I thought, this is the Suspension Bridge, I'd better go take a look. I was absolutely amazed when I saw them. There were drawings of the bridge. There were stock

(461)

certificates. There was correspondence with Charles Ellet, Junior, the engineer who designed the Suspension Bridge. It was just absolutely wonderful archival material about the bridge. And the Greenwood Cemetery Association members finally gave that entire collection to Oglebay Institute Mansion Museum, where it resides right now. And it's a great collection. There are also two minute books that are invaluable for their information that belong to Nancy Bloch. And her uncle was an officer with the bridge company when it was sold to the city of Wheeling, and they're lost at the moment and I hope that they can be recovered. Because they need to be copied and the information translated for our use in interpreting the bridge. It's very important. But we need to find them. It's too bad. And the other information comes from the National Archives because of the Supreme Court

(481)

cases. And our newspapers are still ... during that complete period of building the bridge. We're only missing one newspaper. I think it's 1850 or 1851, but the rest are there. So we can follow the history of the bridge very nicely as primary source material, which is wonderful. I do get off the track, don't I?

MNK: No.

(488)

BF: This goes way back to 1969. And I was working for Father Clifford Lewis at what at the time was named Wheeling College. It's now Wheeling Jesuit College. And he was the researcher for the Antiquities Commission, State of West Virginia. And Father Lewis had engaged me to do some research. And he asked me to please go to the Bloch's home to look at the Suspension Bridge minutes. Well, we were new to Wheeling, and I became lost but eventually I found the house. And Mrs. Bloch was most gracious and seated me in her enormous living room with the book. And I sat there for four hours in the middle of winter with my feet just freezing reading that minute book realizing that the myth that Roebling had constructed the Wheeling Suspension Bridge was erroneous. It was built by Charles, signed and built by Charles Ellet, Junior. And that news was received very poorly in Wheeling. There was

(512)

even a plaque on the Island, on the Island side of the bridge that was dedicated by a national society of engineers saying the bridge was constructed, constructed by Roebling. And, again, it was a matter of pride. Roebling was associated with the Brooklyn Bridge so the people of Wheeling wanted desperately for it to be a Roebling bridge not an Ellet, Junior bridge. Because he had not received the recognition that, that Roebling had. And it's just been recently that the engineers who are interested in historic structures, particularly bridges, have realized the genius of Charles Ellet, Junior. So he's beginning to come into his

own. But it was a blow. They even had a plaque ready during the centennial, bicentennial celebration of Wheeling dedicating once again the bridge to Roebling, and it was changed at the last minute. It was not good! But there it was, Charles Ellet, Junior was selected by that

(535)

bridge company board of directors to design and build the Wheeling Suspension Bridge.

MNK: But Roebling had applied for it?

(537)

BF: Oh, yes. The two leading engineers in the United States for suspension bridge.

MNK: How do you, how do you imagine that that choice was made? Was Roebling more expensive or--

(542)

BF: Charles Ellet, Junior said that he would take stock out in the company as part of his payment. I--No, unfortunately the minutes do not say that's the reason. But don't you imagine that that could have been a very strong point in his favor. And he had received at that point the contract for building a bridge across the falls in Niagara.

MNK: Say that again.

(551)

BF: Excuse me. At the falls of Niagara. And so he was establishing his reputation. He was very well known at that time.

MNK: So would Roebling then have consulted with him about the bridge, or, or did Roebling make any, any, have any input into the project?

(558)

BF: No, none whatsoever. The rivalry between Ellet and Roebling is a story unto itself. As I said, Ellet starting building the bridge at Niagara. And he was a flamboyant person. He managed to get the first two cables across with some great public flair, but he disagreed with that bridge company and was fired and Roebling took over that bridge. So that--When he--At the--Simultaneously he was working on the bridge at Wheeling. It's a very interesting story. So he'd be in Wheeling working on the bridge here, and then he'd go to Niagara and work at that bridge. So at the time that he was fired he and Roebling were very close competitors. But Roebling was certainly in personality more level, more conservative. Ellet was a flamboyant person, very good at public relations and also a genius as an engineer. But for someone who was conservative probably they would have been more

(586)

comfortable, I think that's a good word, with Roebling. Ellet, even in his physical appearance, was tall, was slight, was frail looking. And his health was not that great. He also was connected in Wheeling later in the '50s. He is the one that selected the route for the Hempfield Railroad, which came to Wheeling right after the B & O came here. So his association with Wheeling continued. And then he was killed during the Civil War very tragically. And he didn't live long enough to establish his, really his reputation. He had plans that are located in the National Archives for drainage for the whole Mississippi delta and the whole Mississippi Valley. He was an extraordinary person. And there has a book, been a book published about

him and his education, et cetera, which is, is great. And we should be very proud in Wheeling that Charles Ellet, Junior built our bridge, there's no question about it.

(612)

MNK: You alluded to Pittsburgh--

BF: Oh, yes. Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh was a rival of Wheeling, as incredible as it, as it may seem. Pittsburgh was always ahead of Wheeling. Their land was flatter. One of the great disadvantages of Wheeling has been that we have a level piece of ground immediately next to the river, but then the hills begin, which certainly curtailed our ability to expand. And Pittsburgh had an advantage in that they had more level land. And they started a complex canal system, et cetera, to bring transportation to their city, whereas Wheeling had the National Road. So we were competitors for industry, for prominence nationally in the jumping off place to settle the west. And because of this, even as the Wheeling Suspension Bridge was being constructed they were growling in Pittsburgh, in the press in Pittsburgh, which was picked up in Wheeling.

(640)

And what they were saying about our interfering with their navigation. And they thought we would be, our bridge would not be high enough and the stacks from the steamboats would not be able to clear the deck. And underneath this was the realization that they were afraid of internal improvements. They were afraid that with the National Road and the Suspension Bridge and the

B & O was thinking very strongly at that point of having the terminus at the Ohio River being Wheeling, that we would be very strong competitors. And also, Wheeling's, Wheeling was the head of navigation on the Ohio River, both during the summer when the water was low and during the winter. Often the steamboats could get as high as Wheeling and could not make it to Pittsburgh. So for these reasons the people of Pittsburgh, particularly the business community members, were very unhappy with the building of the Suspension

(668)

Bridge. So they did a very smart thing. They had the whole commonwealth of Pennsylvania sue our little bridge company, the Wheeling and Belmont Bridge Company, in the United States Supreme Court. They did not go through the judicial system. They started with the Supreme Court. So there was a court case, and the decision by the Supreme Court was that indeed the Wheeling Suspension Bridge was an obstruction to navigation and it either had to be raised or the whole bridge raised in height in six months. Fortunately, and remembering that we were then Wheeling, Virginia, and a very powerful state, we had an act passed in Congress that said that the bridge was lawful in its position and its height and it was a United States Postal Route, and that saved the bridge. So an incredible story. There's been a whole book written on the Wheeling Suspension Bridge case. And then--

MNK: This the was 1850s?

(700)

BF: Yes. Let me give you the dates on that. Because this is important. Now how am I going to--Three.

MNK: Say that again.

(704)

BF: The decree by the United States Supreme Court was February 1, 1853. Let me think about this. The bridge had to be raised in height or torn down by, there it is, or torn down. Let's back up here.

MNK: Again.

(714)

BF: The decree was first announced in February of 1852, and the final decree was pronounced in May. And in that decree in May it said that it had to be raised in height or torn down by February 1, 1853. In the meantime along came this bill, this act of Congress, which was passed in August 31 of 1852. So that's what saved the bridge. Then the bridge fell down in 1854. Now what, what the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had failed to do the wind did. And, and the bridge went down. And so Ellet came in and immediately--

(Side Two)

BF: One way.

MNK: Start with the deck again. The deck was--

BF: Was reconstructed to only be one-half the width of the original deck, which meant it was one way. So they had a system of bells, a bell on each end of the bridge so that a drove of cattle or a stagecoach, et cetera, would go one way. Then they'd ring the bell and let traffic go the other way, much as they do today when something is one way. And then--So--Hi, George. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania again sued the little Bridge Company in Wheeling in the Supreme Court. And the Supreme Court at that point upheld the act of Congress, which is an amazing story that lawyers just very much enjoy. The, the Supreme Court had made a decision, said it was an obstruction of navigation, then Congress said it was an act of, a postal route, and the

(013)

Supreme Court then reversed their decision and supported the act of Congress. So it was not until 1860 that the bridge was rebuilt to its original width. And it was just before the Civil War when it was desperately needed for the transportation of goods going west on the, on that, for troops, et cetera. It's, it's--The history of our bridge is just amazing in every facet.