

CAPITAL PAST TIMES

NEWSLETTER FOR THE BISMARCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NOVEMBER 2019

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PONTOON BRIDGE OVER THE MISSOURI RIVER

TOM ATKINSON

Thirty years before the Liberty Memorial Bridge successfully spanned the Missouri River, there was a movement underway in Bismarck to build a pontoon bridge. The bridge could have been built, had it not been for the development of a coal mine near Wilton and a little collusion between two railroad companies.

Lignite coal made homesteading possible in western North Dakota. With frigid winter weather, the region had little timber to heat homes. Steamboats preferred coal over wood as a fuel source. The earliest commercial lignite coal mine was developed in 1873 in Morton County. [1] By the 1890's, coal mines in southern Morton County and northern Burleigh County were operational. The coal was hauled by horse drawn wagons to Bismarck and Mandan. The coal mines in Morton County were closer to Bismarck, but it required the wagons to cross the Missouri River. The wagons used ferries in the summer and crossed the frozen ice in the winter, but during spring flooding and autumn low flow, crossing the river became unfeasible.

One of the ferry crossings was located on the south side of Bismarck. It was known as the Fort Abraham Lincoln crossing. On the Bismarck side of the river, it was located approximately where present day 48th Ave SW meets the river. The ferry began operations at this site in 1873, and depending upon the demand, it provided seasonal transportation across the river until 1891, when Fort Lincoln was decommissioned.

Interest in using pontoon bridges across the Missouri River picked up in the late 1880's. Yankton, South Dakota built one of the earliest pontoon bridges in 1890. Pierre, Evarts and Le Beau SD all followed suit with a bridge of their own. [2] These bridges were seasonally operated. To protect against ice damage, the bridge was disassembled each year before winter freeze and then rebuilt in the spring when the pontoons could be placed on open water. At Chamberlain, SD, the pontoon bridge was constructed with fixed pilings and decks. There was a hinged mechanism that allowed the deck to move up and down as the river flow changed. The deck would split in

the middle and the two sections could be towed towards each shore to make an opening for river traffic. The bridge was able to handle both railroad train traffic and horse drawn wagons.

The idea of a pontoon bridge crossing the Missouri River between Bismarck and Mandan was first proposed by The Mandan Pioneer in 1898. The Pioneer was very supportive of the Morton County coal miners and advocated for a faster way to bring the coal to Mandan and Bismarck. At about the same time, General William D. Washburn, a former U.S. Senator and surveyor-general from Minnesota, purchased 113,000 acres of Northern Pacific Railroad grant land near present day Wilton for the purpose of developing an underground lignite mine. Washburn and site manager Walter P. Macomber came from the Twin Cities in the spring of 1899 to investigate the newly acquired land and establish the Washburn Lignite Coal Company. Washburn realized that he would need a railroad line to Bismarck to be able to sell the coal. Washburn organized the Bismarck, Washburn, and Fort Buford Railroad and started constructing a 23 mile line from Washburn to Bismarck. Construction was completed in August 1900, and the company name was changed to the Bismarck, Washburn, and Great Falls Railroad.

The competition between the coal mines lasted just a few years. The Washburn mine started producing 50 tons of coal a day in September, 1900 and expanded its output to 200 tons of coal per day by the end

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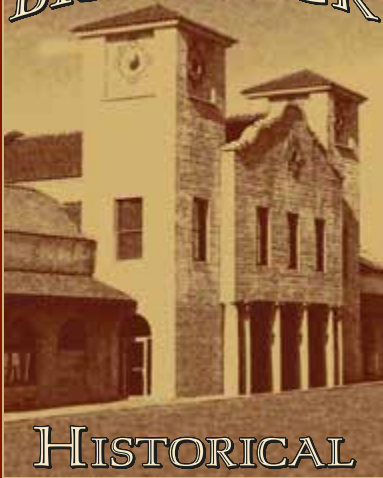


State Historical Society of North Dakota
Old Fort Abraham Lincoln Crossing, circa 1890



Pontoon Bridge, Chamberlain, SD circa 1911, SD State Historical Society Collection

BISMARCK



HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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PRESIDENT'S MUSINGS

KATE WALDERA, BISMARCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESIDENT



Pierre Gaultier La Vérendrye was the first known European to reach present-day North Dakota and the upper Missouri River in the United States. Historians credit him as the first European due to his detailed expedition journals. Pierre was born on November 17, 1685, in TroisRivières, Quebec. Pierre enlisted in the French Army at the age of 22 and fought in several conflicts in France. He returned to Canada and married in 1712. He spent the next 15 years farming and fur trading along the Saint Lawrence.

In the mid-1720s, Pierre became involved with the quest to find the "Great River," which supposedly flowed all the way to the "Western Sea" (Pacific Ocean). The main focus of these expeditions was to be the exploration of new territories. It is quite probable, however, that La Vérendrye's prime motivation was the fur trade. By the late 1730s other explorers had identified two waterways that might be the "Great River." One was the Saskatchewan River, which flowed into Lake Winnipeg, and the other was the Missouri River in what became North Dakota. La Vérendrye chose the Missouri River, pushed across the prairie, and reached a Mandan village most likely located near present-day New Town, ND on December 3, 1738. Unfortunately, the quest to find the "Great River" was unsuccessful since no one river had a continuous path to the Pacific. In addition, the Mandan Indians had never seen the "Western Sea" and could not tell anyone how to find it.

He returned to Canada in 1742 while his sons remained as traders in the west. La Vérendrye died on December 5, 1749, and was posthumously awarded the Order of St. Louis, an exceptional merit decoration given to non-nobility.

Over the years many Canadian locations and buildings were named for him. Falsen, a small community in McHenry County and located about 13 miles northeast of Velva, was founded in 1912. It was renamed "Verendrye" in 1925. It is now a ghost town and the only remaining building is the abandoned Falsen School.

Sources:

- N.D. Studies Part 1 Frontier Era of North Dakota (Profile: Pierre La Vérendrye)
- <https://tinyurl.com/PierreLaVerendrye>
Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye
- <https://tinyurl.com/Verendrye2>
"The Upper Missouri Historical Expedition." Minnesota History, v.6(3): 305.
- <https://tinyurl.com/MinnesotaHistSociety>
"Writers Project Lists County Towns". Mouse River Farmers Press. September 5, 1940.
- <https://tinyurl.com/MouseRiverPress>



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of the year. [3] The best the Little Butte coal mine in southern Morton County could do was to produce 25 tons of coal a day. However, The Mandan Pioneer newspaper continued to advocate for the mines in southern Morton County and for construction of a pontoon bridge. [4]

The Northern Pacific Railway and the Minneapolis, St Paul and Sault Ste. Marie Railway (commonly called the Soo Line) were keeping close tabs on these

developments. In a confidential letter dated June 15, 1904, Jule M. Hannaford, Second Vice President for Northern Pacific Railway Company wrote to H.J. Horn, General Manger, that he had full knowledge of the proposal for a pontoon bridge for some time. He also wrote "Of course we do not care to see the bridge built; at the same time, any opposition on our part would probably antagonize

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THANKS FOR THESE GREAT PROGRAMS:

2019 ANNUAL MEMBER PICNIC

A meal was enjoyed at Hillside Park with Ann Vadnie leading a telling of history and recollections of Bismarck's schools.



DECEMBER 11, 2019

Glen Strom presented on "The Amazing Life of Skitch Henderson", whose ties to Bismarck preceded his incredible career as a pianist and conductor.



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the citizens of Bismarck. I have an arrangement with Mr. Pennington of the Soo Company by which he agrees that his company will not contribute in any way toward the construction of this bridge. Some of our best friends in Bismarck are interested in the matter. How could we block the building of this bridge, without taking a prominent position that would antagonize our Bismarck friends?" [5] Mr. Pennington was Soo Line Vice President Edmond Pennington and would become company president in March 1909. Mr. Hannaford would become Northern Pacific Railway company president in August 1913.

The railroads had reasons to be concerned. In March 1904, the 58th session of the U.S. Congress had passed a bill (S. 4124) authorizing the construction of a bridge across the Missouri River between Wanbliska, in Burleigh County, to "a point" in Morton County. This led to the Mandan Times to ask "Who can tell us where the city, town, village or hamlet of Wanbliska is?" [6] The paper went on to say "Now if we can determine the location of "Wanbliska", it will be easy to locate the "point" in Morton County, and then we will know where the bridge will be located". The Fargo Forum went so far as to report that the Wanbliska Bridge planned to be built over the Missouri River is now said to be planned over the Red River. [7] It didn't take long to find out. The Wanbliska Bridge Company (note the name change) filed Articles of Incorporation with the Register of Deeds in Morton County

on June 1, 1904. The object of the company was to "open up the nearby coal fields of Morton County, directly south of Bismarck, to this trade. Last winter a large amount of this coal was used in Bismarck." [8] The site of the pontoon bridge was to be located at the old Fort Lincoln crossing. The plan was to operate a ferry until a bridge could be built. The Board of Directors consisted of Capt. Isaac P. Baker, Clarence B. Little, Henry Tatley, William H. Webb, Jr, and Joseph Hare, all of Bismarck. Baker was owner of the Benton Transportation Company, a part owner of several businesses in the local area and a past Mayor of Bismarck. Little was President of First National Bank in Bismarck, owner of banks in Braddock and Washburn, and was President of the Bismarck Water Supply Company. Tatley was the owner of the Grand Pacific Hotel and owned a farm south of Bismarck. His property was the proposed site for the bridge. Webb was part owner of the Webb Bros. Department and Furniture Store in downtown Bismarck, a real estate developer and was Mayor of Bismarck from 1905-1907. Hare was part owner of the Hare and Holt Hardware store, a director of the First National Bank and was very influential in getting the Soo Line to lay tracks to Bismarck. [9]

The Wanbliska Bridge Company activity was moving quickly. The company secured permission for a 15 year lease for a river landing from Morton County on June 8 and from Burleigh County on June 20. At



Wanbliska Ferry, 1905.

the August 1 meeting, the company approved the start of the ferry by August 10 with construction planned for the bridge in the summer of 1905.

Outside factors were against the new bridge. The Soo Line purchased the Bismarck, Washburn, and Great Falls Railroad on May 15, 1904. This acquisition allowed for lignite to be shipped at reduce rates and faster time throughout the upper Midwest. [10] At the same time, the Northern Pacific Railway started survey and engineering work to build a railroad line from Mandan to Elgin. Construction of the new line started in 1905. The Washburn mine had expanded and was now producing 1,000 tons of coal per day. To add insult to injury, the ferry started operation in August 1904 with forty crossings a week, but for the first half of October, when the ferry was need to allow wheat and coal laden wagons to travel to Bismarck, the ferry was idle – stuck on a sand bar in the middle of the river. [11]

The end result was that the bridge was never built. The Wanbliska Bridge Company's certificate of authority

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MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

- Individual: \$30.00
- Family: \$45.00
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to do business was revoked by the ND Secretary of State in February 1906. Ferry operations were moved upstream to the Bismarck landing, which was next to the Northern Pacific Railroad Bridge. The ferry ran between Bismarck and Mandan until 1922, when the Liberty Memorial Bridge was opened.

Sources:

- ¹ "North Dakota People Living on the Land", State Historical Society of North Dakota, North Dakota Studies, Unit 3, Coal, 2019. <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-2-making-living/topic-9-industries-coal-and-brick/section-3-coal>
- ² Wusk, Greg. "The East and West are One: The Missouri River Bridge at Mobridge". South Dakota State Historical Society, Journal of SD History, Vol 29, 1st Quarter.

- ³ "North Dakota People Living on the Land", State Historical Society of North Dakota, North Dakota Studies, Lesson 2, Topic 9, Section 3, Coal, <https://www.ndstudies.gov/gr8/content/unit-iii-waves-development-1861-1920/lesson-2-making-living/topic-9-industries-coal-and-brick/section-3-coal>
- ⁴ Mandan Pioneer, Jan 14, 1904, pg 2.
- ⁵ Hannaford, Jule. Letter to H. Horn. Northern Pacific Railway Company. Jun 16, 1904.
- ⁶ Mandan Times, March 21, 1904, pg 2
- ⁷ The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican, April 13, 1904, pg 12.
- ⁸ "Wanbliska Bridge Company". Bismarck Daily Tribune, June 7, 1904, pg 2.
- ⁹ "Joseph Hare Pioneer Citizen Died Sunday". The Bismarck Tribune, Feb 11, 1918, pg 1.
- ¹⁰ "Washburn=on=the=Soo". Washburn Leader, May 14, 1904, pg 1.
- ¹¹ Bismarck Tribune, October 13, 1904, pg3.

COMING EVENTS:

NOVEMBER 6, 2019

Erik Sakariassen:
**ONE WEEK IN SEPTEMBER:
 SITTING BULL, FAKE NEWS, & THE
 NORTHERN PACIFIC RAIL BRIDGE**

NOVEMBER 13, 2019

**BISMARCK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
 ANNUAL MEETING**
 The Year in Review
 Additional info was mailed
 out mid-October

DECEMBER 11, 2019

Ben Kubischta:
THE A.W. LUCAS BUILDING

JANUARY 8, 2020

Tom Atkinson:
**BATTLE OVER CITY WATER
 IN BISMARCK**

FEBRUARY 12, 2020

Winston Satrom:
**PROGRESSIVE CHANGE IN THE
 HISTORY OF CORRECTIONS**

MARCH 11, 2020

Carolyn Twingley & Ann Vadnie:
**BUILDING AN ARCHIVE FOR
 BISMARCK HISTORY**

APRIL 8, 2020

Nancy Brown:
BROWN HOUSE TOUR
 Note the location: 1022 N 5th St
 Bismarck, ND

Important Note: All programs, unless noted otherwise, will begin at 6:30 and be held in Room A at the Bismarck Public Library.

NEWSLETTER SUBMISSIONS

Do you have an idea for a great historical article or story that would be a perfect fit on the front page of this newsletter? If you've got an original piece you'd like to have considered for print you can by submit it to Evan Laib at ejlaib1@gmail.com. Pieces may also be considered for sharing on our website or Facebook page

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