



"Traffic stalled, horns blew, cars hit, blue lights flashed and everybody was late. What a Monday morning!" - from an article describing the commute from Mount Pleasant over the Cooper River bridges - Jan. 10, 1977

BY ARLIE PORTER
Of The Post and Courier Staff

Maybe it was the traffic that day. Maybe it was the big trucks on the old, narrow bridge and the prospect of many more to come when the new Wando shipping terminal was built in Mount Pleasant. Maybe it was the rust and corrosion on the old bridge, which years earlier had been supported by a steel cable lassoed to the pilings of the new bridge under construction. Maybe it was fear, described by the woman who sat "high-rumped" to keep her weight off the bridge as she drove over. Or maybe it was Patricia Ann Gethers, a 7-year-old girl, killed when her family's station wagon exploded after it was rear-ended on the two-lane John P. Grace Memorial Bridge.

Whatever it was, sometime in the 1970s, the Lowcountry snapped. It's difficult to say who first demanded a new bridge over the Cooper River between Charleston and Mount Pleasant — but only because the chorus had become shrill. The Grace bridge, built in 1929, was decrepit and obsolete. Commuters backed up daily behind trucks that occupied both lanes. At the ceremony opening the three-lane Silas N. Pearman Bridge in 1966, public officials were already predicting the need for a third bridge "in the near future." That near future turned out to be 35 years later. The story of the effort to get a new Cooper River bridge is full of politicians who arrived like the cavalry and faded away — and a few who saw the project through to the end. It's a story of heartache and frustration, caused for the most part by the struggle between the state, which demanded that local residents help pay for a new bridge, and political lead-

ers in Charleston and Mount Pleasant, who refused. It's a story rooted in a lack of vision when the bridges were built in the early and mid-20th century, which prompted a long debate over the role of a new 100-year bridge in the 21st century. And it's a story whose final chapter begins today, when in a public celebration, federal, state and local political leaders break ground on a new landmark, a new Cooper River bridge, for all of Charleston. This is the story of how we got here. **A BRIDGE TOO SMALL** When the Grace bridge opened Aug. 8, 1929, it was hailed as an engineering marvel and a thrill to drive over. But to some, the John P. Grace Memorial Bridge was a horror. U.S. Sen. Fritz Hollings, D-S.C., laughs that he didn't see the bridge the first time he went over it as a 7-year-old. He was covered on the floorboard of his family's car. Buck Limehouse, the former highway commissioner, recalls

talking to J.T. Green, an 87-year-old St. George man who told the story of trying to get his Ford Model-T up its roller-coaster heights. Green started at the toll booth, but couldn't get enough speed to get over. He backed up, got a running start, but that didn't get him over. Then he remembered that the reverse gear had more pull. So Green went up the bridge backward to the top, turned around and went down it. "The bridge story is about the little engine that could. When I talked to J.T. Green, I knew it could be done," Limehouse said. The Grace bridge was built for the Ford Model A in a time of horse-drawn carriages. When it opened, there was a sign banning livestock from crossing. But by 1930, America had gone mobile. Less than 30 years after the first motor carriage, almost every working family in America owned a motor car. In the years after World War II, Americans began buying cars in record numbers. Automobiles became bigger, faster and more powerful.

By the 1950s, the bridge built for Model As had become absurdly narrow under the tires of Thunderbirds, Buicks and Cadillacs. So began the Grace bridge's legendary obsolescence. As the number of head-on collisions increased and public concern over safety mounted, state officials periodically reassured the public that the bridge was structurally sound. "Despite bumper-to-bumper traffic and a continuing rash of mishaps, the bridge is as solid and enduring as store-bought teeth," a 1957 Post and Courier article said, quoting highway officials. The state, however, recognized even then that a new bridge was needed. Silas N. Pearman, the state's powerful chief highway engineer, initially proposed a four-lane bridge — but scaled it back to three when bids came in too high. Even while the new bridge was being built, the old bridge showed signs of its age when its roadway buckled. This did not exactly inspire confidence in

the old bridge — but then, the new, modern bridge was coming. **ANOTHER BRIDGE TOO SMALL** P.G.T. Beauregard's sword was missing. This was no small matter, since the sword of the Confederate commander of the forces that defended Charleston was to be used to slice the ribbon to open the new Silas N. Pearman Bridge on April 29, 1966. The sword never turned up, but the thousands who paraded in the rain through the streets of Charleston didn't notice. The three-lane sister bridge was hailed as a defining moment in the city's history. Developers predicted that Mount Pleasant would likely grow five times faster with the new bridge. Former Mount Pleasant Mayor Cheryl Woods-Flowers, who was 11 years old at the time, recalled that her family celebrated the new bridge with a rare trip out for dinner. See BRIDGE, Page 8A

21st century bridge features white cables, futuristic lights

BY ARLIE PORTER
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In about 60 days, a contracting team the size of a small army will descend upon Charleston to build a new bridge expected to last 100 years. At the ground-breaking today, public officials will describe the pivotal moment the bridge represents in the area's history. As surely as the old Cooper River bridges have defined Charleston since the first bridge opened 72 years ago, the new bridge will become a symbol of the historic city and rapidly growing Mount Pleasant. Consider what some have to say: Charleston Mayor Joseph P.

Riley Jr.: "It's a community achievement because we have succeeded in building the biggest construction project in our state's history and one of the biggest in the country." Mount Pleasant Mayor Harry Hallman: "First impressions are very important. When people see those old rusty bridges, it's not a good impression of the community." And Gov. Jim Hodges: "Like the Golden Gate bridges is to San Francisco, I think a beautifully designed bridge will be an identifying landmark in the Charleston community." The new bridge, with towers that are 570 feet high, will dwarf the existing bridges. But other than one rendering

of the bridge released by the S.C. Department of Transportation, no one in the Charleston area knows what it will look like. This week, architects and designers of the bridge released new renderings to The Post and Courier and explained what they had in mind as they drew up plans. "The main idea behind it, with a cable-stayed bridge, was to evoke a sail motif," said Riyad Ghannam of McDonald Architects in San Francisco, among companies designing and building the bridge. "We tried to keep it simple and elegant by focusing on the form of the towers and the intricacies of the cables. I think we

achieved that," Ghannam said. The towers will seem like masts, and the cables attached to it and the roadbed like translucent sails, Ghannam said. The two concrete towers will be slender and tapered at the top, and from a distance appear as if cut from a single stone, he said. The cables will be covered with a white plastic sheath, he said. The bridge's 128 cables will stretch from both sides of the towers to both sides of the roadbed, giving motorists a sensation of passing under a ship's rigging, Ghannam said. The primary and most noticeable architectural feature on the bridge are the light fixtures

at the top of each tower. "It's certainly the only cablestayed bridge I know of that includes this. The fixture itself, I can say that I have never seen anything quite like it," he said. Ghannam described the lights as gems. "The light will appear in the day as a shining glass scrim while at night can be lit to represent any occasion or event in Charleston," he said. "This lighting feature will become an icon for the bridge... and more of a landmark for Charleston." Ghannam said the light is conceptual, but agreed that it's likely to become the subject of debate in Charleston. A bridge design committee

formed by Riley has asked to meet with designers to discuss details of the bridge design. The designers are also expected to hold public hearings. The S.C. Department of Transportation has promised that the public will play a role in the color, lighting and architectural details of the bridge. Area residents should see the bridge begin to emerge out of the Cooper River in a year or less. "That bridge is going to be on everyone's eyes every day for five years," said Elizabeth Mabry, director of the transportation department.

THE KEY PLAYERS

U.S. SEN. FRITZ HOLLINGS, D-S.C.

What he did: Money didn't exactly flow freely from the federal government. Hollings, with U.S. Congressman Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., playing a supporting



role, snatched money here and there, and in the end corralled \$96.6 million — a pretty good chunk of change given the fierce competition for federal transportation dollars. **Quote:** "It took entirely too long. I was ready for it when we started with a toll." of proposals made as far back as 20 years ago for a bridge funded with tolls.

STATE SEN. ARTHUR RAVENEL, R-MOUNT PLEASANT

What he did: The joke goes: "There's real money. And then there's Arthur money." The former Congressman saw money where no one else did, but his infectious optimism and behind the scenes finagling drew clashing egos and interests together. And in the end, the money finally added up right. His colleagues named the new bridge after him. **Quote:** "We're just delighted with our lifestyle. We're delighted with who we are. We're delighted with how we look. We're delighted with how we sound. We're so very pleased with ourselves. I don't know why those people resent us so," of perceived Upstate sentiment against Charleston getting a new bridge (while refusing to pay for it).



CHARLESTON MAYOR JOSEPH P. RILEY JR.

What he did: Riley called for a new bridge in 1980 but resisted state efforts to get the city to pay. Stronger than anyone, Riley called the bridge replacement a state responsibility and stuck it out to the end. While Charleston County did agree to pay for a small portion of the bridge cost (if it hadn't, the ground-breaking wouldn't be happening today), Riley got what he wanted — and it doesn't have tolls on it. **Quote:** "We don't want to be a community that only half-way could get something done," blasting what he called a "half-baked" transportation department proposal to build a four-lane instead of an eight-lane bridge.



CHERYLL WOODS-FLOWERS, FORMER MAYOR OF MT. PLEASANT

What she did: During critical funding discussions, Woods objected to tolls even more vigorously than Riley. It's a primary reason the bridge is not proposed to have tolls now, but their opposition also led to years of delays in getting a new bridge. **Quote:** "This community is not going to put a toll on a facility that the state should have replaced 20 years ago."



HARRY HALLMAN, MAYOR OF MT. PLEASANT

What he did: As a state representative, Hallman was among local officials who in the 1990s helped convince the federal and state government that A) the Grace bridge wouldn't last forever, and B) to send money. Hallman carries the anti-toll baton today. **Quote:** "I don't think there was ever a time that the community and the state weren't unified in knowing that we needed to replace the Grace bridge. The catalyst it took to get it done was for someone to roll up their sleeves and make it happen."





The Cooper River bridges today.



An artist's rendering of the new Cooper River bridge.

A look at the new Cooper River bridge

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"I never had an idea as a child that it would come to be laid on my lap," she said.

The predictions of rapid growth came true. In 1960, Mount Pleasant was a sleepy village of more than 5,000 people. By 1970, it had grown to just 6,879 residents, according to Census figures.

Between 1970 and 1980, the population doubled, reaching 14,209.

The day the Pearman bridge opened, political leaders publicly predicted that a third bridge would be needed to accommodate the burgeoning population.

"The Pearman bridge helped fuel a residential construction boom east of the Cooper. And it wasn't long after it opened, people began to wonder if it was already inadequate," Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr. said. By the mid 1970s, at peak periods, traffic was already backing up. Accidents brought traffic to a standstill for hours at a time. Trucks, meanwhile, continued to use the older and more narrow Grace bridge.

Against this backdrop, the State Ports Authority announced plans to build a new port terminal at the Cooper and Wando rivers in Mount Pleasant. The new port would result in 400 more trucks using the Grace bridge every day by 1980, an environmental report concluded.

Mount Pleasant residents objected, prompting then-mayor John Dodds to question the structural integrity of the Grace bridge.

State highway officials dismissed the concerns, comparing more trucks on the bridge to "a fly walking across a table."

A year later, after the Ports Authority obtained federal and state permits to build the terminal, an inspection revealed serious problems with the Grace bridge.

The bridge had weakened over the years and would not bear the 15 tons it had been designed to support. The report recommended that trucks be banned, and the state immediately began diverting truck traffic to the newer Pearman bridge.

Arguments then flared over the use of the bridge's reversible lane. Motorists wanted the lane reserved for rush-hour traffic from Charleston to Mount Pleasant. Truckers and the State Ports Authority opposed it, since it left no way for trucks to get from Mount Pleasant to Charleston.

That forced truckers to get from Charleston to Mount Pleasant via Moncks Corner, 30 miles away. Noting the incon-

venience and cost, the state refused to reverse the Pearman lane.

To many observers, banning trucks from the Grace bridge was a pivotal moment in the history of getting a new Cooper River bridge. For the first time, the state had recognized in dramatic fashion that the bridge had to be replaced.

"Traffic counts. The size of automobiles. The volume of traffic. There were a lot of people who moved here when the Pearman Bridge opened, and that (Grace) bridge scared them to death. That had a lot to do with it," said Bob Harrell, a transportation commissioner who represents the Charleston area.

Prompted by public outcry, Dodds and other local politicians called for a new bridge. But the state said it didn't have the roughly \$250 million to build it.

State Sen. Tommy Hartnett proposed toll roads. Scarborough pushed for a hike in vehicle registration fees. Some proposed higher gas taxes.

A year later in 1980, a News and Courier article pointed out a 19-inch shift in the alignment and published pictures of cracked and corroded supporting pilings.

A state consultant declared the bridge "absolutely" safe.

A bridge engineer hired by the newspaper had a different opinion: "I don't know what's making it lean, but I can tell you what's fixin' to happen. The damn bridge is going to fall in the river," said J. Thomas Triplett of Chester.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

As Hurricane David bore down on the coast of South Carolina in 1979, Robert Scarborough was reminded that for East Cooper residents, there was no easy way out of town.

To evacuate, thousands would have cross over the Cooper River bridges to Interstate I-26, the only route upstate. This prompted plans for an easier evacuation route, an interstate loop around Charleston, from Charleston, through West Ashley and North Charleston, to East Cooper.

The loop is now known as the Mark Clark Expressway.

While local officials put their efforts into finding money for the project, a new Cooper River bridge fell to the wayside.

While the old bridges were structurally sound, traffic accidents had become such a daily hassle that Mount Pleasant and Charleston stationed tow trucks at the foot of the bridges.

Then in August 1989, a four-

foot hole appeared in the Pearman bridge. State engineers patched the hole and said the bridge was safe, but motorists were clearly alarmed by the idea of looking through a bridge road deck and seeing water 150 feet below.

By 1990, Mount Pleasant's population had doubled again, to 30,108.

FINDING THE MONEY

Well before 1990, politicians had framed the key issue in the debate over funding a new bridge. With no money in hand to pay for it, state officials suggested it be funded with a toll. Local leaders objected.

Then in June of 1991, the Grace bridge suffered one of the greatest indignities that could befall a steel bridge — it had to be braced with wooden supports for temporary repairs.

The Federal Highway Administration however, declined to conduct another study of the bridge and declared it safe.

With the public still clamoring for a new bridge, Hollings, U.S. Rep. Arthur Ravenel and then-state Rep. Harry Hallman, R-Mount Pleasant, urged funding for a new bridge.

In 1991, Hollings got \$13.8 million, the project's first slice of federal pork and enough to pay for most of the necessary preliminary studies.

But the following year, the Mark Clark Expressway bridges over the Cooper and Wando rivers opened, connecting Mount Pleasant to North Charleston. With bridge traffic more dispersed, the effort to replace the Grace lost much of its urgency.

Meanwhile, attempts to get the bridge funded through a statewide gas tax couldn't get past two powerful foes: legislators from rural counties, who would get no benefit from the increase, and the trucking lobby. Additionally, the state transportation department complained that it didn't have enough money to maintain existing roads, much less build new roads or bridges.

Through the 1990s, state transportation officials insisted the bridge would not get built unless local elected leaders agreed to pay for it with tolls or taxes.

Then, in 1995, state officials revealed that out of a score of 100 being a completely functional bridge, the Grace bridge rated a 4.

The comment floored those at the meeting, who interpreted the remark as a comment on the structural integrity of the bridge. State officials quickly clarified that the rating was not an assessment of the bridge structure, but of its obsoles-

cence. Ravenel, though, wasn't convinced. "That is the day that I quit going over the Grace bridge," he said.

CLOSING IN

In the end, it was tourists from the North who turned the fortunes around for a new bridge.

Through the mid 1990s, the state continued to insist it didn't have the money to build a new bridge, and Charleston and Mount Pleasant officials continued to insist the state pay.

In Myrtle Beach, where highways are choked each summer with hundreds of thousands of tourists, businessmen faced the same dilemma.

In 1997, they proposed the creation of a new state board that would use state gas taxes and truck registration fees to fund the six largest unfunded road and bridge projects across the state.

New Myrtle Beach roads would be funded first, and the Cooper River bridge second.

Lawmakers from rural counties, however, objected, saying it didn't help them much.

To get the bill through, legislators included a provision that local communities would have to pay a local funding match, such as tolls or taxes, for their project.

Ravenel recalled that as the vote neared in the senate, proponents realized it wouldn't pass. With one vote short, Ravenel turned to State Sen. Robert Ford, D-S.C.

"I asked Robert to ask (Sen.) Maggie (Glover) to vote for it, and Maggie voted for it, and we carried it by one vote," Ravenel said.

And thus was formed the State Infrastructure Bank.

TOLLS OR TAXES?

Myrtle Beach quickly passed a tax on hotels to raise the money to fund a new Conway Bypass.

In Charleston and Mount Pleasant, political leaders blanched at local taxes to pay for a new bridge.

Riley, meanwhile, challenged the state's ideas for the design.

Noting that a new bridge would last for 100 years and become an icon for the city, Riley wanted more control over how the bridge looked. He and Woods-Flowers also pressed the state for bicycle and pedestrian lanes and additional interchanges, adding to the bridge's cost.

Meanwhile, the funding impasse between the state and Charleston and Mount Pleasant continued into the 21st Century.

If the two cities had not objected to tolls, and had not demanded additional lanes, a new bridge could have been built as far back as 10 years ago, said Tommy Hartnett, a former con-

gressman and state lawmaker.

"I have been appalled at the lack of leadership. Good God, all we're talking about is an elevated road over the water," Hartnett said, adding that he believed that most county residents support a toll.

The resistance to tolls also made Charleston a "laughing stock" to the rest of the state, which had agreed to tolls or higher taxes to get their projects funded, he said.

County and municipal officials, however, did have a plan to raise money for a local funding match.

Faced with the prospect of running out of money by the year 2003, the Charleston Area Rapid Transit Authority needed a source of public money. Conservationists, meanwhile, had embarked on a massive campaign to preserve rural areas from development.

And motorists outside Charleston and Mount Pleasant were demanding road improvements in their cities as well.

Charleston County Council proposed a half-cent sales tax, to be used to build roads and bridges, purchase green space and fund public transportation.

In a referendum last November, by a narrow margin, voters rejected the half-cent sales tax.

Meanwhile, Mount Pleasant's population doubled again from 1990 to 2000. With 47,609 people, it had become the state's sixth largest city.

A CRACK

Last summer, a state bridge inspector noticed what he thought was a crack in the bridge. When Mount Pleasant residents awoke the following day, the Grace bridge was closed to traffic.

Though the suspected crack later turned out to be rust, the event clearly shook the state transportation department.

"That scared the DOT. That really scared them," Harrell said. "The people who had been lukewarm about it in their minds and actions were now convinced the bridge needed to be replaced," he said.

The bridge closure also alarmed local officials, who had begun to realize that the state would not build an eight-lane bridge without a local funding match.

The state Infrastructure Bank Board had raised most of the money for the construction, yet demanded local taxes or a toll.

The transportation department had received bids for the project, but threatened not to build a full eight-lane bridge unless the local match came forward.

All that was needed was local funding.

It came this year in the form of a financial plan proposed by

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Once the groundbreaking celebration ends and the tents are taken down, what's next?

In the coming months, The Post and Courier will be looking closely at the building of the landmark Cooper River bridge and what it means for the Low-country.

► What kind of jobs will be created, and how many? How will the pay stack up? And what effect will the project have on our economy?

► What will the bridge look like? What color will it be, and how will it be lighted at night?

► Will monorails pass over it one day?

► What about mass transit? Can walkers and bicyclists share a 12-foot lane with a commanding view of Charleston Harbor?

► How, exactly, does one build the largest cable-stayed bridge in North America? Earthquakes and hurricanes: How will the bridge be built to withstand these Low-country threats and conversation pieces?

► How will the bridge connect to existing roads in Charleston and Mount Pleasant, and what disruptions can motorists anticipate?

► What about the homes, businesses and churches at the foot of the new bridge?

Gov. Jim Hodges, who during his campaign had promised Charleston that a bridge could be built without tolls or local taxes.

In his plan, Hodges called on Charleston County to contribute \$3 million a year for 25 years, or \$75 million for a bridge expected to cost as much as \$650 million.

Charleston County Council members grumbled about the payment, but voted for it. The money could be raised with another half-cent sales tax proposal next year.

According to Hodges' plan, the State Ports Authority would contribute \$5 million toward the bridge project. Agency board members, however, agreed to contribute \$3 million, and only if lawmakers signed off on their controversial plan to build a new port terminal on Daniel Island.

Mount Pleasant residents have objected to the new port, in part because of the greater number of trucks.

It's the same bitter debate of the late 1970s, when opponents of the Wando terminal objected to more trucks on the Grace bridge.

To Riley, the long wait, the delays, the frustration and the headache have been worth it to get to the point of breaking ground on a new, eight-lane bridge.

"We hung in there," Riley said. "The new bridge means that we have achieved something in addition to a piece of infrastructure. We have succeeded in overcoming a difficult challenge and have been able to give this community, for generations to come, what they deserve."

THE KEY PLAYERS

HOWARD "CHAMP" COVINGTON, CHAIRMAN OF THE STATE INFRASTRUCTURE BANK

What he did: Seemingly had fun thumbing his nose at Charleston. The outspoken Greenville resident chastised Charleston for refusing to pay for the bridge even as other areas ponied up. While Charleston wined, Covington got money. The bottom line: He has a majority vote bloc on the bank board,



which is paying for most of the new bridge.

Quote: Where to begin? Covington once asked if the bridge really needed a lane for horse-drawn carriages. Then he jokingly confused the Hunley with the Merrimac. Here's just one Champism: "Sometimes I want to tell them to stick it, but I know how important that bridge is - and I really want to get it built."

ROBERT SCARBOROUGH, FORMER STATE REPRESENTATIVE, TRANSPORTATION COMMISSIONER, AND CHAIRMAN OF THE CHARLESTON AREA TRANSPORTATION POLICY STUDY COMMITTEE



What he did: Many of the rest of the crowd were still teen-agers when Scarborough first tried to raise money for a bridge in the early 1980s. The local transportation guru showed that it was possible to get

bridges built in Charleston. Take, for example, the Mark Clark Expressway and James Island Connector (which was named after him).

Quote: "We made a very, very major step today," announcing, in 1985, funding for a study of a tunnel to replace the Grace bridge.

GOV. JIM HODGES

What he did: While previous governors avoided local bridge politics like a colony of lepers, Hodges took up the



challenge by announcing a funding plan. Things fell apart quickly. A transportation commissioner complained he wasn't invited to the press conference.

Charleston County initially balked at the proposal and the State Ports Authority board — which the governor appoints — all but ignored it. But the plan worked, as of today.

Quote: "In the end, everyone worked together."

BUCK LIMEHOUSE, FORMER STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION CHAIRMAN

What he did: Fellow commissioner Arnold Goodstein once referred to



Limehouse as Buck "Tollhouse" for his insistence that the bridge be funded with tolls. But as chairman of the commission and a member of the bank board, Limehouse was instrumental in convincing the state that it was OK to

build a bridge in Charleston. He was among the early proponents of the State Infrastructure Bank.

Quote: "Maybe this will be what returns Charleston to national prominence."

BOB HARRELL, STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSIONER

What he did: Harrell was commissioner for most of the 1990s, which began with a derelict bridge and little federal support



for a replacement and ended (almost) with a new bridge. Harrell argued as passionately as anyone that it was only a matter of time before the Grace bridge was shut down because of safety concerns.

When the state closed the bridge last year after a suspected crack was found, the public — and state — agreed.

Quote: "As painful as this process has been, you end up with the best of what everyone has to offer."