

METAMORA ASSOCIATION FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

NEWSLETTER

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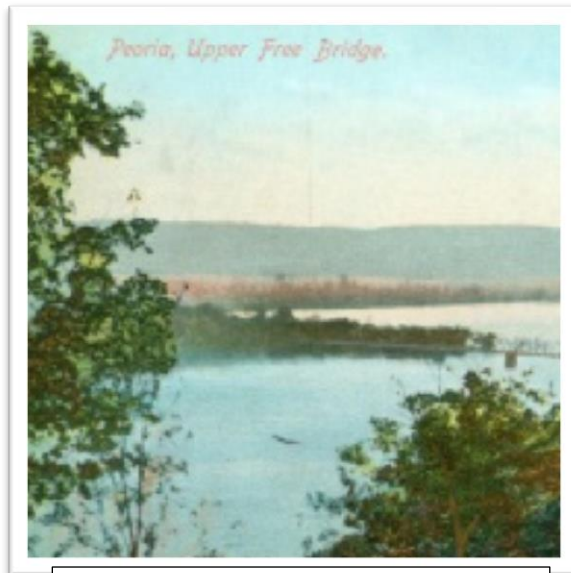
What's Old...

But new at the Stevenson House

- Wedding photo of Charles Benjamin Heinzmann (1866-1913 - deceased in a car wreck in 1913)
- Cardinalis year books – 1982, '83, '84, '88



Upper Free Bridge 1888



Upper Free Bridge 1906

Upper Free Bridge

You've probably driven past the sign on Route 116 a zillion times – "Upper Free Bridge." Ever wonder about it? Here's a little about its historic past...

The wood floored Upper Free Bridge was built near the location of McCluggage Bridge in 1888. Before construction of the bridge, people would cross the river by ferry at a rate of six and a quarter cents for foot passengers, 25 cents for a man and a horse, and wagons at 37 cents. It is believed that Abraham Lincoln crossed the river on this ferry during one of his first trips to Peoria.

The citizens of Peoria Township voted to construct the bridge on August 31, 1887. A parade was held from downtown to the site of the newly planned bridge. This parade was the beginning of what has since become the oldest continuous parade in the United States. It is known today as the Santa Claus Parade. December 4, 1888 marked the second parade in celebration of the completion of the new bridge.

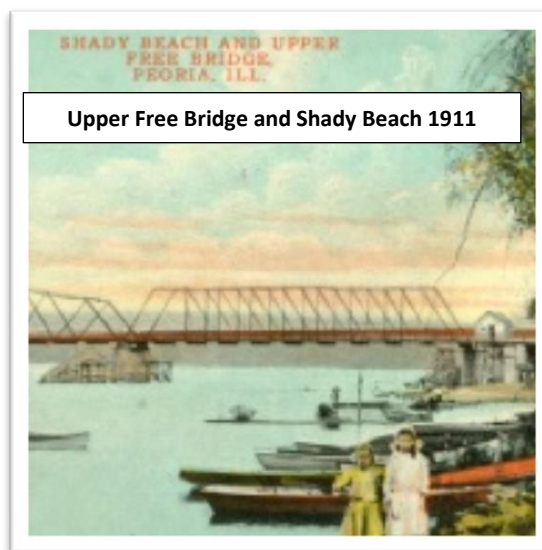
The bridge was a 450-foot-long swing span and had a man-powered turnstile. The bridge was a level 1,323 feet across the river with its road only 16 feet above the water when the river was at its normal level.

On February 27, 1943, the bridge was struck by the towboat, "Sylvia T." It was repaired, but right before its reopening on May 17, 1944, the "Sylvia T." struck the bridge again and put it out of business for good. The bridge was demolished in 1947, with only the west side pier remaining today.

"It's how we went to Peoria..."

Former Board Member Don Harbers recalls using the bridge...

"We lived in Germantown when I was in grade school and used the bridge to go to Peoria. The bridge was wood and very narrow. When one of the floor planks would need replaced, they didn't always match the thickness of the existing planks so the ride was very rough. In the middle of the bridge was a turnstile that two men with a "key" would manually turn 180 degrees to let boats through. Because it would take a long time, we would often just turn around and use the Franklin Street Bridge. The gravel road that led to the bridge had an old tavern called the Snake Pit Tavern. It was in a low area and prone to flooding. Much earlier, when Dad was a kid, the boys used to swim across the river at the Narrows. The water was pretty clear back then and in fact they used to harvest ice in the winter down close to where Bemis Bag was."



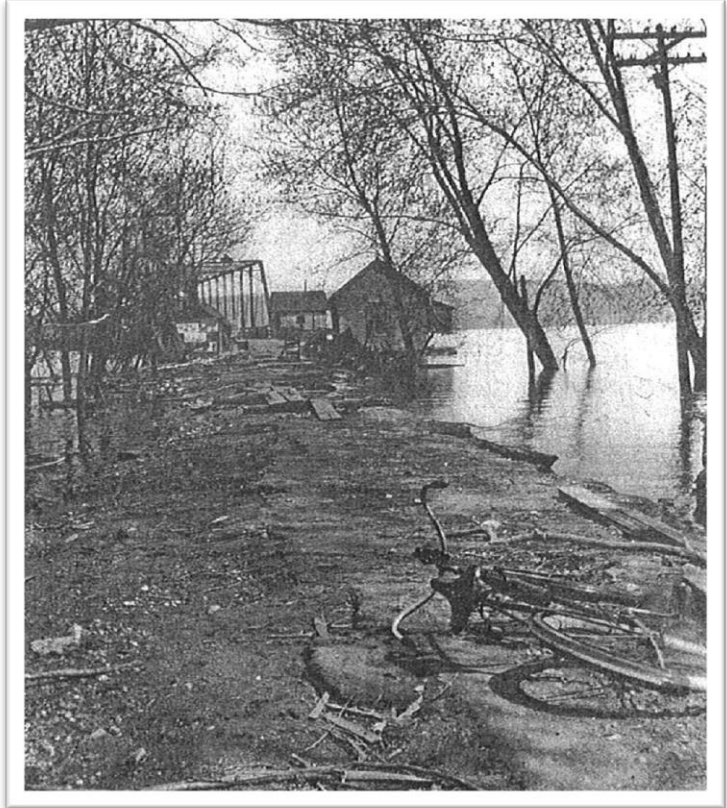
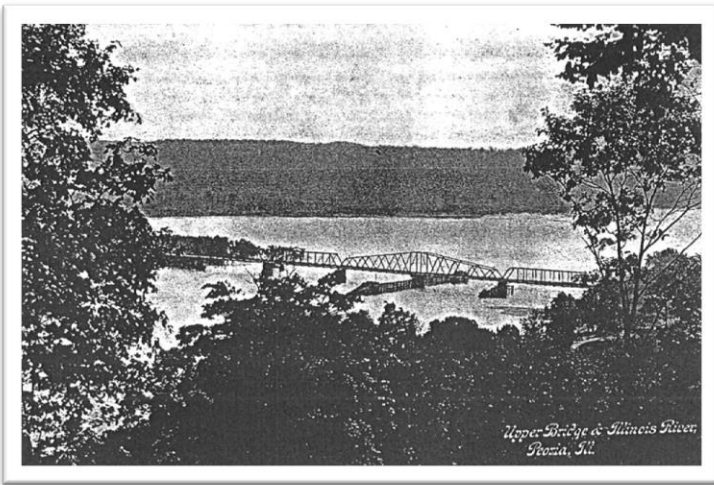
Upper Free Bridge and Shady Beach 1911

“My sister and I prayed many Hail Mary’s ...”

Former Board Member Shirley Adams traveled the bridge in the 30’s...

“Living seven miles west of Metamora, my family would drive to Peoria several times a year for needed seasonal apparel we did not order from the Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalogs. I will never forget the fear I had as my Dad neared the narrow Upper Free Bridge. In the spring of the year following rains the high water was lapping up on the wooden planks of the bridge and Dad carefully guided the car across the shaky span.

“My sister and I prayed many Hail Mary’s in the back seat of our car for a safe trip across to the other side. The sound of the water and the trembling of the wood on the old bridge are sounds I will never forget. Sometimes we hid our faces so we would not see the water.”



Above left – this post card belonging to Shirley Adams shows the turnstile open. It was manually operated by two men and rotated 180 degrees to let boats through.

Above Right – this picture was taken during the flood in April, 1922. Can anyone help identify which side of the river it’s on?

Lower Left – this picture was taken in the late 30’s or early 40’s. Wonder what happened when a large truck needed to cross?!

But Before the Bridge Was Built...

On his way to Metamora, Lincoln traveled this way on the ferry...

The operation of a ferry across the Narrows, between the lower and the upper lakes of the Illinois River near Peoria, began in 1833. The operation of the ferry was started by a man named Balliance. The boat house was located on the Peoria side of the river and the ferry crossed over to the Tazewell side to a little settlement known as Detroit. At that time, Peoria was a small town and was incorporated two years later. In 1858, when **Lincoln** came to Metamora to make a speech, while campaigning for U.S. Senator, he crossed this ferry and came to Metamora by stage coach. The ferry was probably abandoned in 1888 when the Upper Free Bridge was built.

The Upper Free Bridge was the quickest way to Peoria, if you were traveling by horse and buggy. The old Germantown Hill road wound around Ten Mile Creek and then down a sandy lane leading to the bridge. The last tavern, in a chain of five such inns between Metamora and Peoria, was located on this lane and was known as "The Snake Pit." Farmers took their produce and livestock to Peoria over this bridge. The trip into Peoria from Metamora took several hours.

Contact Us

Questions, ideas - Love to hear from you

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