

The Story of the Gold Star Memorial Bridge: Shaping New London

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Devan Barnum

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The Gold Star Memorial Bridge, looming one hundred and thirty five feet over the Thames River, is impossible to miss as New London comes into view while driving down I-95. The Thames River, which was once a geographical boundary only transversed by ferry, is now the means for 42 million cars and trucks to pass over the river annually. Aiding tremendously in efficient travel along the New England corridor, the bridge tells much more of a story than simply making the trip out to Rhode Island and to Boston easier. The long, strenuous construction of the bridge reshaped a large portion of New London, changing the accessibility of the shores of the Thames River and nearby neighborhoods forever. When discussing environmental justice, specifically at discrepancies in waterfront access for New London's poorest neighborhood, Hodge's Square, it is important to consider the effects the construction of the bridge had on the topic. Arguably the most significant and defining feature of the New London waterfront, the Gold Star Memorial Bridge, through each of its stages, continuously changed the layout of the surrounding city and accessibility of the Thames River.

The history of the bridge began even before the plans for the two spans people know today came to fruition. Beginning in the early to mid nineteenth century, the Thames River posed as a natural barrier on the path from New York to the urban epicenter of Boston, and the popular vacation destination of Rhode Island. Historian Jim Streeter wrote in *The Day*, "In 1821, larger and faster ferry boats powered by teams of four to six horses were introduced into the system...the use of "horse-powered"¹ ferries continued until the late 1840's, when steam powered

¹ Horses were used to either walk in place on a revolving floor or walk in circles to push a capstan, which turned a water paddle(on the back of the ferry) or a screw propeller(fixed to the hull) to power the ferry across the river.

ferries became the norm...With the advent of trains, the lack of a Thames River crossing became a hindrance for passengers commuting between New York and Boston.”(Streeter, The Day 2017). Ferries, which docked in Winthrop Cove, were used to carry passengers, travel gear, and resources across the river as they traveled up and down the coastline. Eventually, the demand became too high and the ferry became an inefficient form of transportation. As railroads were branching out all over the northeast and a track was being built to directly go up the CT coastline, from New York, and to Rhode Island, a railroad bridge was built across the Thames, just south on the river from where the two spans are today. The bridge was completed in 1889, and was thought to be “beyond the engineering and financial resources of the time”(Streeter, The Day 2017) as it held the record for the longest swing span style railroad bridge until 1893(Griggs, Structure Mag 2019). Still as time progressed, the demand and commuter traffic increased, forcing further action to be taken. To add to the growing traffic, the second World War loomed ahead, and New London “developed into a coastal defense hub, and the city was on the rise”(Ruddy, The Day 2018). The bridge was seen as key for defense, given the upcoming war that the U.S. would enter into. The construction for the first span wasn’t easy. There were delays caused by the United States’ entry into World War II, but eventually, given its deemed importance in the wartime efforts, the first span opened on February 27, 1943. It wasn’t until 1973 when the second span was completed, built again to alleviate some of the growing traffic and demand to make travel easier. With such a massive project and infrastructure to allow the bridge to function at its full potential, the nearby area had to be turned upside down.

Hodge’s Square is a great example of how the bridge led to changes in environmental justice for the community, especially when looking at access to the Thames River. Although the original railroad bridge did cause some upheaval of the area, the neighborhood was still sparsely

populated enough to a point where the railroad would not disrupt life too much. This is seen in comparing maps of the layout from 1893 and 1938, a range of years after the first railroad bridge was built and before the construction of the first highway span started. When inspecting the 1893 map, provided by Old Maps Online, it was key to note that the railroad tightly followed the curvature of the New London bank of the Thames. Given that the main rail station was in downtown New London, the rail hugged Winthrop Cove and then took a sharp right to cross the bridge, without disturbing too much of the existing neighborhood.

The construction of the first railroad bridge started a series of rezoning processes that would last for almost a century. When looking at the ownership of the land in the area, it is especially important to look at the immediate access to the Thames River, given the emphasis on environmental justice. Based on zoning and property maps from Old Maps Online, Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, and the City of New London archives, a view into the ownership of the land at each period of the bridge project can be found. While the New London Railroad Company did purchase land up a significant stretch of the west bank of the river, the area around the bridge wasn't majorly affected, as seen in the zoning maps provided by the Library of Congress in concordance with the Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of 1908. Also to note, the New London Railroad Company built the railroad a couple hundred feet away from the shore of the Thames River at certain points near Hodge's Square. While the legality of accessing the few hundred feet of shoreline not owned by the railroad company cannot be determined by the maps accessed, any land that was accessible below the high tide mark of the river was public property.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, New London, at the bridge site, was postcard worthy with nicer houses, big lawns, and a riverside park. The site was just out of reach from the downtown hustle and bustle, creating a nice location for the picturesque suburban neighborhood.

Almost all the people in the neighborhood had access to the river as most of the land was undeveloped and was publicly owned by the town of New London. There was even a natural swimming pool, Perry's Pool, that was filled in to accommodate for the first span's approach and infrastructure. Major change to the layout of New London came with the proposal for the first span. The construction plans for the bridge led to the destruction of or a change in location of many buildings, a church, a fire station, etc. Articles from *The Day* and work done by Connecticut College faculty highlight the effects the construction process had. Based on information from banks and independent company records, Connecticut College faculty were able to conclude that "in November 1940, a six-million dollar bond was secured from Halsey, Stuart & Co. Any properties that were in the way were acquired and construction began." (Conn College, 2018) John Ruddy, from *The Day*, puts the scenario in a much more dark manner when he writes, "Homes in the way of the bridge were doomed as the state bought or condemned more than 100 properties. There was little protest beyond the occasional quibble over monetary awards." (Ruddy, *The Day* 2018). As Hodge's Square, the small neighborhood now cut off from the rest of New London, tried to overcome the uprooting created by the construction of the bridge, the neighborhood became impoverished and deteriorated quickly.

Before the construction of the first span, a major access point for the local residents to the west bank of the Thames River had been the quaint Riverside Park. As ramps, exits, and overall infrastructure was added to develop the bridge, more and more public land was sold off to private firms and construction companies. An article produced by the historic preservation group of Connecticut History wrote, "Riverside Park, a popular destination in the early 20th century, also wound up on the "wrong side" of the highway. Early postcards show winding drives, grassy lawns, and spectacular views of the Thames River, but by the 1970s, the park became much

reduced in size and few amenities remained.”(Conn History, 2021). Even before the second span was erected in the 70’s, access to public land uses was decreasing. The purchase and construction of the Coast Guard Academy infringed on Riverside Park. The park was reduced by many acres, nearly eleven², due to the buyout from the Academy. Losing this land was significant to residents, as part of the land sold included the swimming beach, which the Coast Guard used to launch small sailcraft.

With the loss of one of two remaining waterfront access points, looking into the fact that there may have been a factor of environmental injustice, or even racism, over a couple of decades is plausible. Currently, 41.1% of residents in Hodge’s Square currently live with income underneath the poverty level. Historically, the area was predominantly a Polish immigrant community shortly after the construction of the first bridge span(Professor Ebbin). Presently, 31% of the population is white, while minorities account for the other 69% of the population (City-Data, 2021). Based on the ever changing demographics of the area, if there were any forms of environmental racism, in terms of waterfront access discrepancies for minorities, it was not done on purpose. Rather, minorities didn’t have the same opportunities for work for a higher wage. Subsequently, the only housing they could afford in the area was the housing in Hodge’s Square. There may have been a lack of motive from the city to step in to create access points though, as money was being used in efforts to add infrastructure to the downtown area, not poor neighborhoods that could be given the blind eye.

Today, the only public waterfront access, a boat launch, is located beneath the two spans. While it is relatively maintained, it is not the most pleasant place to spend the day having a picnic, going for a swim, which is not allowed, and fishing. Being surrounded by concrete, the sounds of vehicles directly overhead, and people constantly launching boats in the water does not

² Acreage according to/provided by the Riverside Park Conservancy

give residents a chance to enjoy the nature around them . The launch is owned by the state, not New London, so limits to just New London residents cannot be implemented. Finally, with a significant percentage of residents in the close proximity living under the poverty line, it can be assumed that they do not have the funds to have their own watercraft vessels. As hinted to earlier in the paragraph, the only forms of recreation allowed at the launch are boating and fishing. This limits residents to zero access points in the immediate area that allow them to wade and swim, a summer pastime for many families with children.

In conclusion, the Gold Star Memorial Bridge was and continues to be a defining factor in the public access to the Thames River, especially for the residents of the Hodge's Square community. With the major emphasis for the TREDs project being on the "recognition that access to the amenities and advantages of waterfront areas has not historically been equal for people of different colors and income levels, nor has (or is in the present) exposure to environmental injustices been equal"(Project Oceanology, TREDs 2021), the history of Hodge's Square clearly exhibits this problem. While some action has been taken to reverse or at least provide limited waterfront access to the residents, the enormous amount of infrastructure, purchased properties, and lack of available land still pose a major barrier to providing equal environmental justice. By raising awareness to this specific location, it is possible that rezoning and reuses of the current land could occur. Given enough pressure, seen in the past as the redistribution of land due to the immense urge to create a bridge, it is plausible that an immense urge to provide equal access to the marine waterfront would be in the seemingly unforeseeable future.

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