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Community Corner (/massachusetts/charlestown/around-town)

North Washington Street Bridge Brought Elevated Rail to Charlestown

The structure was preceded by the Charles River and Warren bridges.

By Helen O'Neil (Open Post) - (<http://patch.com/users/helen-oneil>) December 2, 2012 11:18 pm ET
(<http://my.patch.com/article/13550217/edit>)

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Connecting the new settlement of Charlestown with the Boston mainland was paramount. As early as 1630 a ferry carried passengers between the two points. By 1781 there were four boats, two docked at each side of the Charles River. The ferry was run by Harvard College.



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In 1786, when the Charles River Bridge opened, there were 17,000 people living in Boston and 1,200 in Charlestown. Perhaps the first public bridge in the country, the Charles River Bridge was built as a toll bridge with private funds. According to "The Ferry, the Charles-River Bridge and the Charlestown Bridge," published in the late 1800s by the Boston Transit Commission, to cross the bridge each foot passenger paid 2/3 of a penny; one person and one horse paid 2 pence and 2/3 of a penny; and "swine and sheep were 4 pence for each dozen."

The bridge was 40 feet wide, with a draw opening "at least 30 feet wide." Ships and all other vessels passed free of charge. There were twenty lamps on each side of the bridge, "well supplied with oil." The lamps burned each night until midnight.

In 1828, the Warren Bridge opened. Built only a few yards from the Charles River Bridge and providing a better route to Beacon Hill, the Warren Bridge for a time was free and offered direct competition to the profiteers of the Charles River Bridge. By 1874, however, after the annexation of Charlestown to Boston, both bridges were ultimately under the watchful maintenance of Boston.

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In September 1897, Boston ran its first subway line from Park Street to the Public Garden. This was to be the beginning of the construction of a mass elevated rail line. The first steel structure announcing the coming of the elevated rail to Charlestown was erected on the Charlestown North Washington Street Bridge on March 30, 1899.

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The Charlestown North Washington Street Bridge, wide with three openings, would replace the Charles River Bridge and carry the elevated rail, the Orange Line. The bridge carried the Orange Line for about 74 years, until the elevated rail was dismantled in 1975 and the Orange Line was rerouted.

- **Where is it?** Over the Charles River on North Washington Street
- **When was it built?** The building of the bridge began in 1896.
- **Who built it?** Civil Engineer William Jackson
- **What was it built for?** To replace the Charles River Bridge and to carry an elevated railway.
- **How was it built?** Of steel. It is a "swing through truss bridge"; the swing span "arm's" length is 241 feet. The bridge's length is 1,920 feet; 1,090 feet is over the water. The bridge is 100 feet wide. The two roadways are each 29 feet wide; the central space "for street car tracks" is 22 feet wide.

Information for this article was compiled from various research materials, including:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlestown_Bridge;
bostoncompletestreets.org;
<http://www.celebrateboston.com/mbta/elevated-railway-origin.htm>;
www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMCPCA_Charlestown_Swing_groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/users/rauch/charlestown/postcards/all.h
http://www.baysideengineering.com/bridge_overview.htm;
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/65039623@N05/7581920374/notes>
Ferry, The Charles-River Bridge and the Charlestown Bridge by Boston Transit Commission; notes from Dan O'Neil.

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