

The Ups and Downs of Chicago's Bascule Bridges: From transport necessity to placemaking resource

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While the city of Chicago is less than two hundred years old, it has survived and thrived during periods of population growth and decline, as well as technological transformation. The city's trunnion bascule double-leaf bridges (more than 30) were a response to multi-modal (river, road, rail) conflicts and changing priorities. As a navigable river connecting the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River the Chicago River, which bisects the central business district (CBD) of Chicago, was a source of wealth for that place. However, the very location of the river also divided the developable land into three parts: central/south, north, and west.

In this paper, I argue that this unique bridge infrastructure has proven resilient in the face of technological and economic change, largely through the efforts of local civic leaders in balancing interests, as well as envisioning new possibilities for the infrastructure.

During the nineteenth century, principal economic activity occurred in the central/south district. Center-pier swing spans and tunnels were the primary means for connecting the city's districts. Each had its problems. The bascule bridges, first introduced in 1890, satisfactorily addressed transport and economic connectivity. However, these bridges too, had a downside. Their slow movement and resulting disruption to surface traffic was a regular source of political tension and shaper of economic investment and disinvestment.

Beginning in the latter part of the 20th century a decline in water-borne commerce – and improvements to alternative navigation routes circumventing central Chicago – have resulted in much less frequent raising of the bridges, and the mitigation of transport conflicts. Still a navigable waterway, and governed by federal commerce laws assuring passage, the bridges continue to operate. However, today their movements are largely restricted to seasonal passage of pleasure sailcraft from winter storage yards on the river to summer berths on Lake Michigan. The raising of the bridges has become pageant, often viewed from the recently constructed Riverwalk, and also a potent symbolic reminder of urban change.



Figure 1 Jackson Boulevard Bridge - Reproduction Number: HAER ILL, 16-CHIG, 126--2

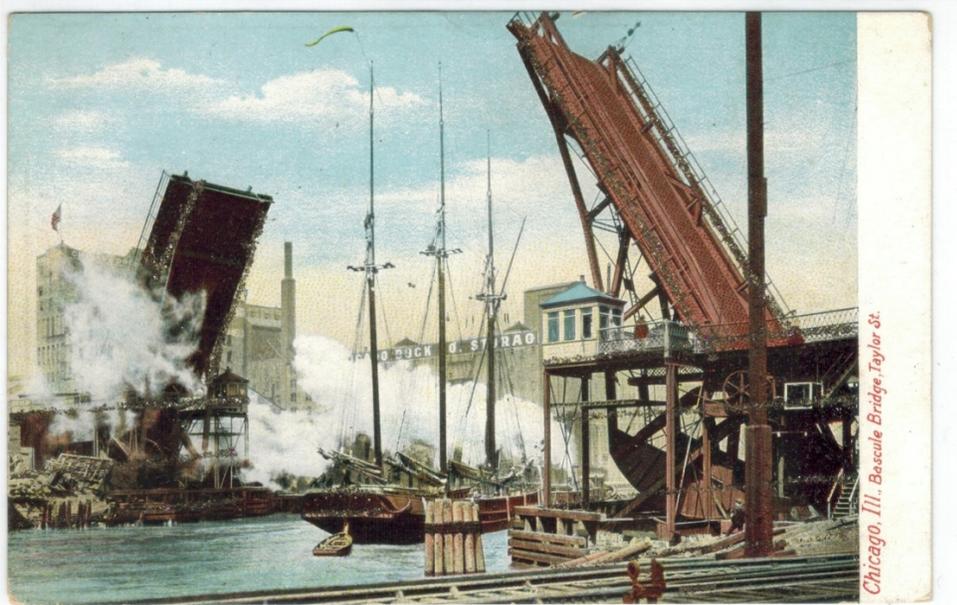


Figure 2 Chicago Ill. Bascule Bridge, Taylor St. Postcard scan- H.C. Leighton Co., Portland Me. No. 686