

A SMALL METAL OBJECT LINKS FATHER AND SON TO AN EVENT AND IGNITES A PASSION FOR HISTORY

by Harlan B. Radford, Jr.

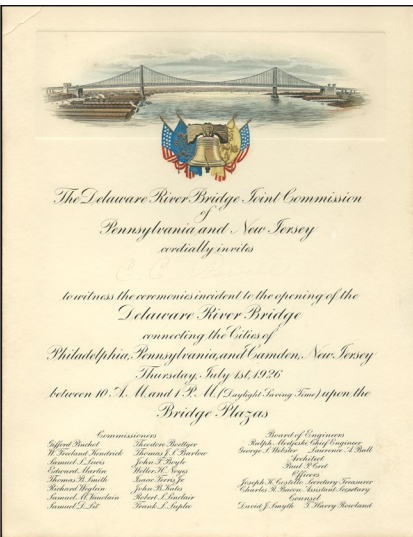
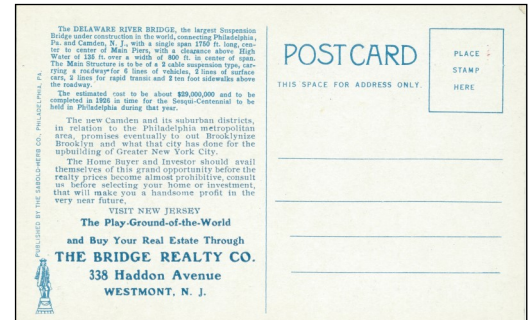
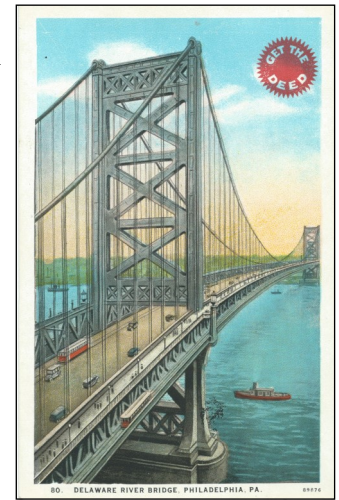
This story is about the Delaware River Bridge, now known as the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, and how after 56 years a father and his son celebrated an important moment in time.

In 1944, the Board of Chosen Freeholders of Camden County, New Jersey released a published report entitled "Camden County Centennial 1844-1944." In it the freeholders emphasized the importance of the Delaware River Bridge, proudly referred to as the "Camden Bridge," and went on record to state:

The greatest single stride in the development of Camden County as a metropolitan area was taken on July 1, 1926, when the Delaware River Bridge was opened to the public. The \$37,000,000 suspension bridge proved a sesame in that it opened to the city and county new possibilities, and a new era.

The Camden Bridge revitalized the county resulting in newer and wider highways, expanding suburbs, and the development of new residential centers, thus invigorating industry and commerce.

After four-and-a-half years of actual construction, July 1, 1926 saw the completion of the Delaware River Bridge, and on that date the bridge first "opened" to pedestrians for one-day immediately following the official ceremonies at both the Camden and Philadelphia plazas.



My grandfather, C. C. Powell, who worked at The Hurley Department Store in Camden, was one of the prominent Camden and Philadelphia persons to received this beautifully engraved invitation.

Engraved invitations served to admit persons wishing to attend one or the other opening ceremony. Sources estimated that some 100,000 persons strolled leisurely across the new bridge during the course of that [inaugural day](#). Among that number of walkers was my father (age 8 at the time), along with my father's mother, his step-father, as well as his step-sister.

While engaged in this jubilant family bridge crossing, my father noticed a small piece of metal lying on the bridge roadway at his feet and picked it up.

A souvenir!

Later, my father, using a red crayon, wrote the words "The New Bridge" on the shiny piece of metal.

At 7:00pm on that first day authorities cleared the bridge of pedestrians and made preparations for opening the bridge to vehicular traffic at midnight that evening.

At that time, the toll for an automobile to cross the bridge was twenty-five cents. Riders on horseback paid a fifteen cent toll and pedestrians leading a horse paid twenty cents. Even more notably, the Delaware River Bridge became, albeit briefly, the world's longest suspension bridge.

Fast-forward 56 years to August 1982, during a visit to my parents in Moorestown, when we decided to re-enact my father's 1926 crossing. By then, the [Delaware River Port Authority](#) had long since re-christened the former Delaware River Bridge as the [Benjamin Franklin Bridge](#).



postcard - Delaware River Bridge Foot-Path, Philadelphia, PA

On this occasion, we trekked across the bridge using the [pedestrian walkway](#) on the north side of the bridge. As we crossed, Dad recalled his original 1926 traverse as an 8-year old lad. Upon reaching the half-way point on the bridge, we stopped, father and son, and posed for a photo to serve as a lasting memento.



postcard- Delaware River Bridge between Philadelphia, PA and Camden, NJ

Continuing on, we approached the Philadelphia side and espied the weathered but still recognizable WILBUR'S Chocolates sign marking the building between Second and Third Streets in which they were once manufactured.

After reaching Philadelphia, we returned to Collingwood via Camden riding in the comfort of the Lindenwold high speed train.

Later that day, my father went to his bedroom dresser and retrieved from a top drawer the small, two-ounce metal object he had found on the bridge roadway back in 1926. He had been saving it, and now after 56 years, he handed that metal object to me, still bearing the red crayon writing.

Now I became the official caretaker of this family artifact.

Understandably, our family's 1982 re-creation of Dad's crossing and hearing about his boyhood bridge crossing first-hand sparked my interest to read and learn more about the famous bridge connecting Camden and Philadelphia.

But, how could Dad know that his casually picked up keepsake, now decades old, would kickoff a growing personal collection of Delaware River Bridge related relics including postcards, books, medals, collectibles, souvenirs, and associated ephemera?

Thanks in particular to postcard shows and online collectible sites like eBay, I have been fortunate to enjoy many rare glimpses into our treasured past. I am delighted to share this personal account with you via the Historical Society of Riverton website and encourage others to share their personal moment in time.



Dad and me - crossing re-enactment mid-bridge, August 1982



metal object picked up by my father (age 8) off Bridge Road Deck on July 1, 1926