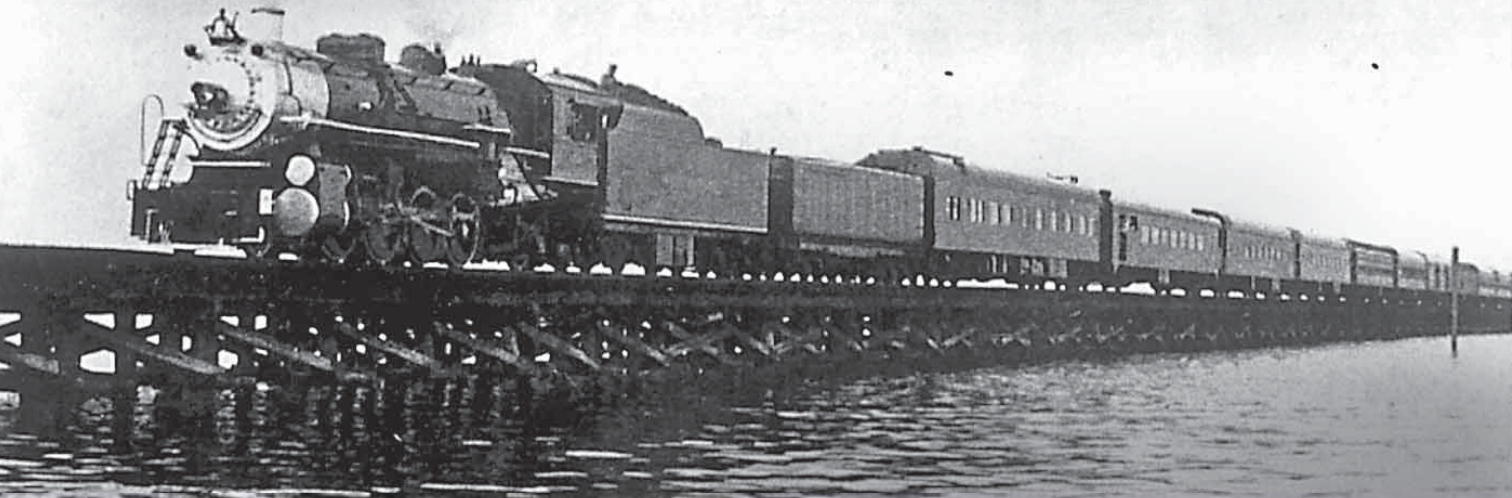


Taken in 1974, this image documents the last steam locomotive to cross over the bridge. The occasion was a one-way excursion trip between Richmond and Raleigh sponsored by the Old Dominion Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society. (Van Camp, "Edenton and Chowan County")



THE LONGEST

CONTINUOUS RAILROAD BRIDGE IN THE WORLD

The eastern North Carolina bridge across Albemarle Sound cost \$1 million to build in 1910 and lasted 76 years.

By Fred W. Harrison

While its historical impact is too often overlooked, the 1910 opening of the Norfolk & Southern Railroad Bridge across the Albemarle Sound marked a significant milestone in the economic and industrial development of eastern North Carolina.

An engineering triumph of its day, the 5-mile-long trestle cost more than \$1 million dollars to build, a mammoth sum for the time, and was hailed as the longest continuous railroad bridge in the world.

Expansion of what evolved as the Norfolk & Southern Railroad into North Carolina began in 1881, along a path from Norfolk, Va., through Elizabeth City, Edenton and across the Albemarle Sound via transfer barges to points south. The transfer barges were first put into operation on June 1, 1891. Pulled by tugboats, these vessels could only handle two railroad cars per barge, making the task of delivering an entire train from shore to shore a very slow process.

A revolution of sorts took place in 1899, when the steamer John W. Garrett was ushered into service. The Garrett, a truly superlative train ferry by all accounts, was capable of carrying 23 loaded freight cars. The 351-foot vessel with 41-foot beam had a double pilot house, eliminating having to turn it

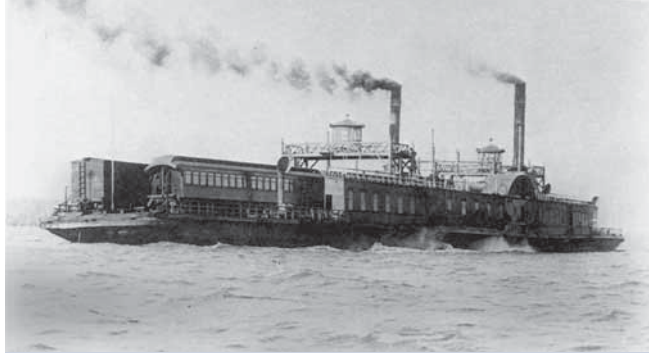
around when docking. Passengers also enjoyed the advantages of an onboard restaurant, making the 1 hour, 45-minute trek one of the most favored excursions along the route.

The improved ferry service likewise added much to the growth of Edenton and Mackey's Ferry in Washington County as major ports for water traffic along the Albemarle Sound.

"WITHOUT A GIVE OR A TREMBLE"

By 1906, railroad officials had come to the conclusion that the enormous potential for increased traffic over the sound would not be practical with the aid of another transfer steamer and as such began preparations for the construction of a 28,000-foot bridge.

Work was begun on July 20, 1907, but was discontinued on Nov. 18 of that year due to lack of funds. Under direction of a federal judge, the project was refinanced with the issuance of receiver's certificates, though work did not resume course until Feb. 20, 1909.



Named for Baltimore railroad magnate John W. Garrett, the Garrett ferried trains across Albemarle Sound between Edenton and Mackey's from 1899–1909. (Van Camp, "Edenton and Chowan County")

According to an account from the Charlotte Daily Observer from Jan. 20, 1910:

The completion of the Albemarle Sound Bridge has required more than three hundred cars of lumber, nearly one thousand cars of piles and two hundred and fifty cars of steel, a train load of spikes and bolts and exactly three hundred and sixty-five days of active labor. The piles used in the construction of the bridge were all in excess of seventy feet in length, the longest being ninety-five feet. These were driven into the bed of the sound forty to sixty feet, and no other fact is needed to give assurance as to the stability of the structure. At high tide the deck of the bridge is thirteen feet, two inches above water.

The bridge was equipped with one Scherzer roller-lift draw with 140 feet of open space and one swing draw with clearance of 35 feet on either side.

On New Year's Day 1910, a train carrying company officials made the first crossing over the structure, the bridge opening up for regular traffic a couple of weeks later on January 17th.

It appears from newspaper reports of the time that the bridge project had not come without some home resistance. On Jan. 8, 1910, the Charlotte Daily Observer noted:

The Greenville Reflector "wonders if there was not premeditation in running that barge against the bridge" of the Norfolk & Southern Railroad over Albemarle Sound the other day, wrecking several feet. There was much local opposition to the building of the bridge, but we would find it hard to believe that there was deliberate intent to destroy it. That bridge...cost an immense sum of money and it adds greatly to the convenience of traffic in the northeastern part of the state.

A reporter once described his ride over the newly built bridge as being "without a give or a tremble, though the sound of the waters were rough and rolling... There remained with us at all times a sense of perfect security, but it made nervous women hold handkerchiefs over their eyes and grab their seats with hands—as if it would aid the bridge in accomplishing its work."

For many years, untreated timber used in the bridge's construction required continuous maintenance. The railroad operated numerous shops, warehouses, sawmills, etc., on both sides of the structure to provide the necessary support to keep both trains and trestle in running order.

For whatever reason, by the 1950s, needed repairs had become less frequent. In July 1957, a northbound train of 77 cars was about halfway across the trestle when the pilings of one section gave way, sending the train's two diesel engines, a mail car and two passenger cars plunging into 20 feet of water. Two deaths resulted from the accident. A report later stated that the Interstate Commerce Commission had been warned as early as 1952 of the trestle's hazardous condition and lack of oversight.

Though significant safety improvements would be made with additional challenges brought on by weather and storms, changing patterns of business activity would eventually dictate the final chapter of the landmark's history.

By 1986, the expense to maintain the then 78-year old bridge had grown to such an extent that Norfolk & Southern could no longer justify keeping it. The firm estimated nearly \$19 million at the time to rehabilitate it to serve an area producing less than \$500,000 annually in operating costs.

Still touted as one of the largest rail spans of its kind in the country, the bridge was finally closed on Jan. 3, 1987. Traffic was rerouted through Greensboro and Lynchburg, Va.

Since demolished, only high-voltage power lines and pylons set alongside the bridge remain to mark its path, visible reminders of an ever evolving landscape. ⓘ

Fred Harrison is on staff with the Langford North Carolina Collection, a repository and cultural heritage archive for eastern North Carolina located in East Carolina University's J.Y. Joyner Library.

FURTHER READING

For additional information about the culture and heritage surrounding Albemarle Sound's famed railroad bridge read "Washington County, NC: A Tapestry," edited by Betsy Modlin; Louis Van Camp's "Edenton and Chowan County," and Bob Spruill's article for the Norfolk & Southern Historical Society titled "Norfolk & Southern Railroad at Mackey's Ferry." Also visit East Carolina University's Joyner Library's North Carolina Collection at www.ecu.edu/cs-lib/ncc.

"Edenton and Chowan County" is available from Arcadia Publishing at www.arcadiapublishing.com or by calling (888) 313-2665.