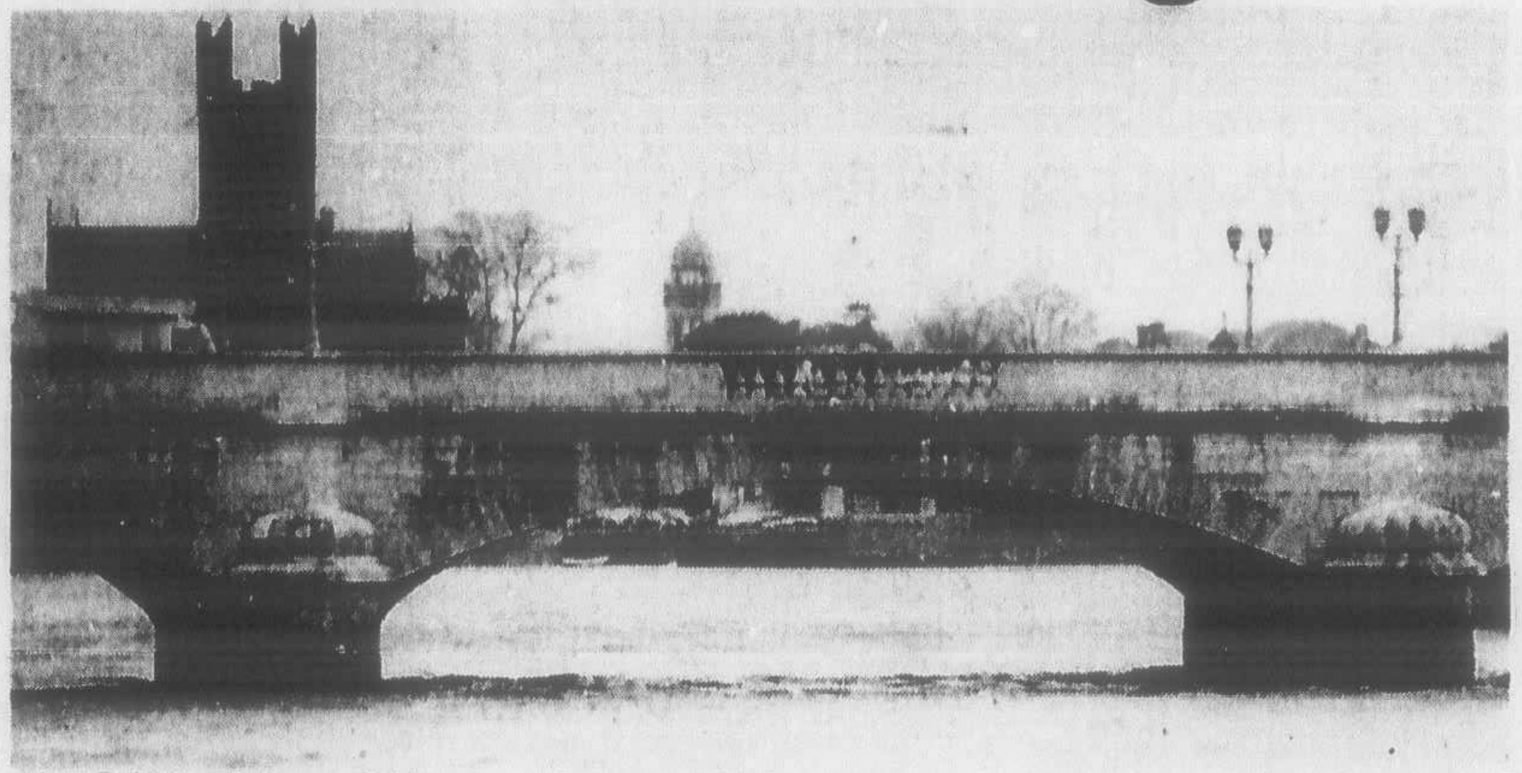
PHOTONOTES OF OLD LIMERICK

The last bridge



SARSFIELD BRIDGE is the last bridge over the River Shannon on its way to the Atlantic, 60 miles down the estuary.

Formerly known as Wellesley Bridge, it was the last to be built in Limerick city. It was started in 1824 and completed in 1831. Architects were James and George Pain — of Limerick city — who also were the architects of Baal's Bridge (1831) and Athlunkard Bridge (which joins Limerick's suburbs with Co. Clare, at Corbally) and Thomond Bridge (1840).

An elegant bridge, its blank stone parapets are punctuated by a series of inset balustrades, it's modelled on the Pont Neuilly, one of the bridges of the Seine in Paris.

During the construction of Wellesley Bridge, Eugene O'Curry, a young exile from Kilbaha, on The Loop Head peninsula, Co. Clare, was employed as a timekeeper.

Eugene O'Curry's father was a famous and prosperous small farmer and hedge-schoolmaster in the Loop Head area, until the disastrous collapse of the price of corn that followed the British defeat of Napoleon's French Army at Waterloo, which ruined hundreds of farmers throughout County Clare and Limerick — as elsewhere in Ireland.

Young Eugene O'Curry was forced to emigrate to Limerick City seeking employment. After working as a timekeeper during the 1824-1831 building of Wellesley Bridge, he got a job as a superintendent at the Lunatic Asylum (now St. Joseph's Hospital), Mulgrave Street. A man of kindly character, O'Curry, while an official of this institution, alleviated the sad conditions there for many of the inmates by making wooden whistles and flutes for them and entertaining them with selections of traditional Irish airs from his native Clare.

While a superintendent at Limerick Lunatic Asylum, O'Curry became a friend of Mr. John Fitzgerald, of Grange, Lough Gur. As a guest of Mr. John Fitzgerald (and his brother), O'Curry frequently visited Lough Gur's Stone Age monuments and other archaeological sites.

The enigmatic character of these monuments led him to declare: "What manuscripts we have here, if we could only understand them."

O'Curry — a native Gaelic speaker, and a worthy inheritor of Gaelic literary and historical lore from his father — was later appointed by Colonel Larcom, head of the Irish Ordnance Survey, to a position on the survey staff, which was more congenial to O'Curry's cultural temperament.

With John O'Donovan (a Kilkenny Gaelic scholar), O'Curry, while on the Irish Ordnance Survey staff, rescued many valuable ancient Irish manuscripts from almost inevitable oblivion.

When Cardinal Newman founded Ireland's first Catholic University (in Dublin) he appointed O'Curry Professor of Celtic Studies there.

Today, the Irish archaeological, historical and literature studies enjoy a deserved popularity at home and abroad.

With John O'Donovan, Eugene O'Curry, the poor Clare exile who worked as timekeeper on Wellesley Bridge, early in the 18th century, was a founding father of today's Irish studies widespread popularity.

☐ Photo: JOHN WRIGHT.
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Anglers probing pollution of lake