

The building of the Sarsfield Bridge

The westward expansion of Limerick and the growth of its commerce made the construction of a new bridge across the Shannon and the improvement of the harbour facilities a vital necessity. A movement to further this objective soon developed and, accordingly, the people of the city petitioned Parliament for a new bridge and floating dock.

The decision to build the bridge was taken in 1823 when the Wellesley Bridge Act was passed at Westminster and forty-seven people were appointed to carry out the terms of the Act. These men were known as the Limerick Bridge Commissioners but were, in effect, the port authority: they supervised the building of the bridge and later improved the quays on both sides of the river, levying tolls and dues to help finance this work. Since 1847 this body has been known as the Limerick Harbour Commissioners.

The preamble to the Act set out the wealth and importance of the city, the increase of its commerce and the want of direct communication with the counties Clare and Galway except by the very old and narrow Thomond Bridge, "inconveniently remote from the new and trading parts of the city". Thomond Bridge, which was to be rebuilt a few years later, was so narrow that no pathways had been provided only small recesses over the pillars where pedestrians could take refuge from vehicles passing each other.

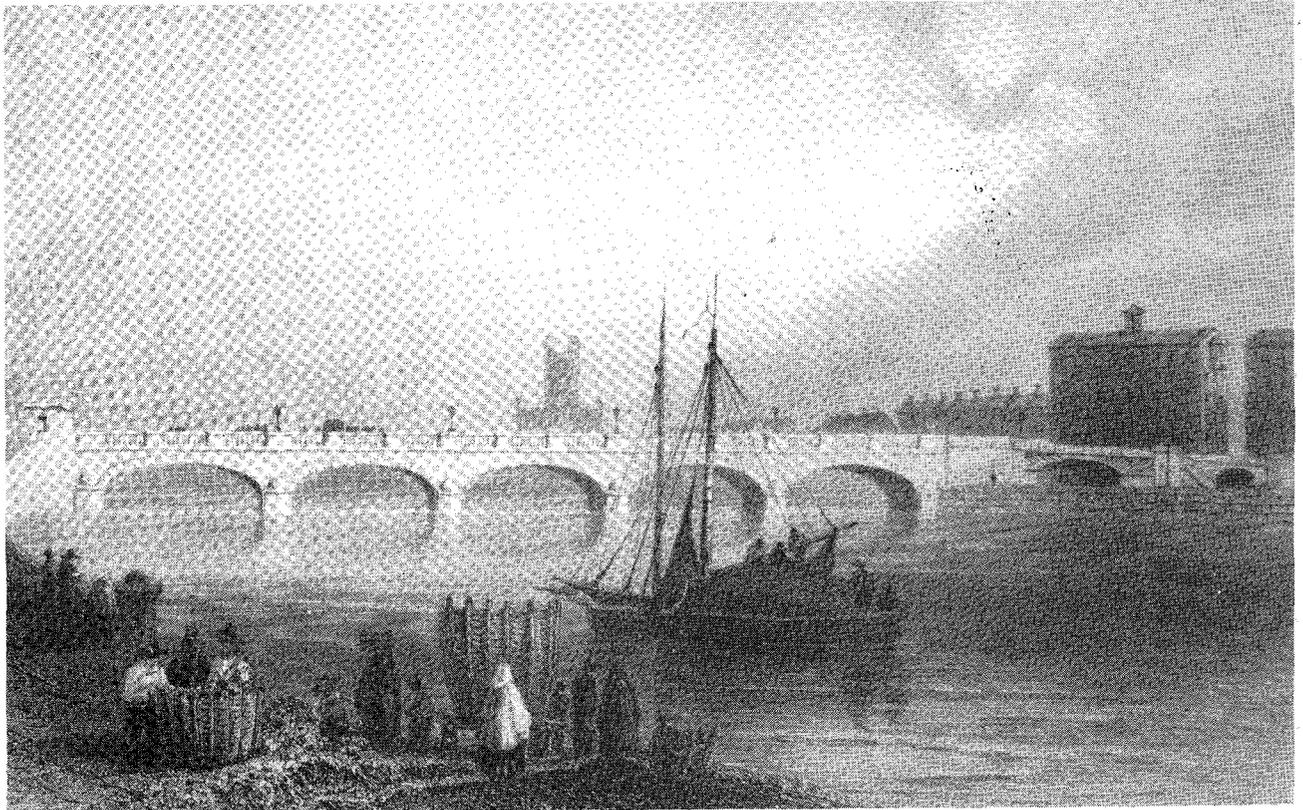
The petition to parliament, in making the case for the new bridge, described the expansion of the city and the increased trade at the port and concluded:

by Pádraig Ó Maidín

That the only passage from the Province of Connaught and County of Clare into the City of Limerick is by a narrow Bridge erected upwards of six hundred years situate at the upper extremity of the Old Town at a considerable distance from the New town where the Merchants Ware-houses stand, and which Bridge is in a very ruinous condition in danger of being carried away by the Winter floods, and extremely narrow not only to cause frequent obstruction but considerable danger to the passengers.

That the erection of a Bridge across the River Shannon further down and more commodious than the present and of a Floating dock to accommodate sharp vessels would greatly increase the Trade and Commerce of Limerick, and by increasing the facilities of communication between most agricultural districts would be not only of local but of general advantage.

"No one applied himself more zealously to the successful realization of this project than Mr. Thomas Spring Rice, M.P.", concluded Maurice Lenihan. Commissioners were soon appointed.



From an old painting of Sarsfield Bridge.

ted for building the new bridge, which was called after the Lord Lieutenant of the time, the Marquis of Wellesley. A grant of £60,000 was approved for the work and for the construction of the proposed docks. It was decided to build the bridge from Brunswick (now Sarsfield) Street, across the Shannon to the North Strand. A Scottish engineer, Alexander Nimmo, who had built the imposing Spring Rice pillar in the People's Park, was chosen to design the bridge. He selected as his model the beautiful Pont Neully over the Seine which, incidentally, had been the model in 1789 for the first St. Patrick's Bridge in Cork, which was demolished in 1839. The original Pont Neully was destroyed during the Siege of Paris in 1870.

The foundation stone of the new bridge was laid on October 25, 1824 by John Fitzgibbon, Earl of Clare, son of the notorious "Black Jack", and "was attended with all possible ceremony and eclat". The Fitzgibbon family had another link with the bridge. A monument to a grandson of "Black Jack", Lord Viscount Fitzgibbon, was placed on the bridge in 1855 to commemorate his death, in the Crimean War. This statue has been replaced by the 1916 memorial.

The bridge had five arches of equal span, a swivel bridge, and also two land arches for the convenience of quay traffic. It took eleven years to complete and cost £89,061, that is 50% more than estimated, and was opened by the then Lord Lieutenant Mulgrave, on August 5, 1835. The work gave much needed employment but there were many who saw the bridge as an advantage only to the landed gentry on the Clare side of the city, and indeed as being a disadvantage to the real interests of the citizens.

As the construction of the bridge got under way, a poor young man came down from the Clare hills seeking employment. He was Eugene O'Curry, later to be recognised for his scholarship and public service. At this time, however, he was glad to obtain work as a timekeeper on the bridge building contract.

Maurice Lenihan records that during the years spent on building the bridge, the new docks that had been promised below the bridge and which had been provided for in the Wellesley Act of 1823, lay in abeyance, and the merchants of the city were forced to pay exorbitant dues for an unfinished bridge which inconveniently interfered with the traffic of the port. They viewed the proceedings of the Bridge Commissioners with dissatisfaction, more particularly as the bridge and the port were separate undertakings; the bridge to benefit the landed gentry and the docks to improve trade and commerce.

A memorial was presented to the Commissioners by the city merchants in 1833 complaining of the dangerous condition of

the harbour caused by the encroachments of the bridge and the diversion of monies, which should, they claimed, have been spent on the promised docks and not on the bridge.

The parapet of the bridge at the west (or Clare) side was originally much handsomer than at present, being an exact replica of the east side. What brought about the change was the damage caused to the western parapet and a number of ballustrades during the terrifying storm of January 6, 1839, when some ships were battered against the bridge. The Commissioners decided to be pennywise and forever foolish in replacing the broken parapet with solid 'sparrow-picked' stone.

The tolls on the bridge proved irksome and injurious to trade and eventually in 1883 it was made free of toll. Immediately, the Corporation held a meeting and changed the name of the bridge from Wellesley to Sarsfield and erected a plaque in the centre of the east parapet giving the new name. It was remarked at the time that the Town Council 'had many who are of the National League and Home Rule type, who desire a severance of the Union'. A remark which had at least the merit of being obvious.

A report published on July 16, 1831, gives us an insight into the state of society in Limerick during the building of the bridge. We learn of citizens stratified into "commen men", "gentlemen", and "landed gentry", we hear of "young bucks" who spent their leisure (i.e. their lives) boating on the Shannon, parading on the Crescent with the ladies, enjoying at least one glass of punch with their dinner, after which they retired to cock-fighting, billiards playing, and a late sojourn at Martin Power's Oyster Cellar in Shannon Street.

Such living was bound to end in a brawl occasionally, particularly when all the amusements took place on the one day, as they did on May 2, 1831 when John and Edgar Clements, sons of the contractor for the new bridge, became involved with Roger Scully, jnr., and two of his followers, Michael Stack and Patrick Wallace, in the Oyster Cellar, which was also known as Tattersalls. Into the brawl on the side of the Clements brothers came "common men", so described by Martin Power's wife, who got herself a "lick" on the occasion.

One of the witnesses, Thomas Morony, an intimate of Roger Scully, denied that he had taken twenty-six tumblers of punch at his dinner that evening. He was unable to say how many he had taken because he had not counted them, but stated that he would be "obnubliated" after ten tumblers. He distinguished various stages of inebriation, as he had experienced them: Being impudent, extremely impudent, excited, wildly excited, and basely drunk.



Sarsfield Bridge in the 1940s.