

The Disasters and Politics of the Wheeling Bridge

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Day 38

Background

- **Constructed in 1849**
- **It was the longest suspension bridge in the world at the time of construction**
- **Caused a legal battle between Pittsburgh, PA and Wheeling, WV**
- **First bridge to span the Ohio River**
- **Connected the National Road between West Virginia and Ohio**
- **Destroyed in 1854 by a storm and reconstructed in 1860**
- **Oldest vehicular suspension bridge still in operation**

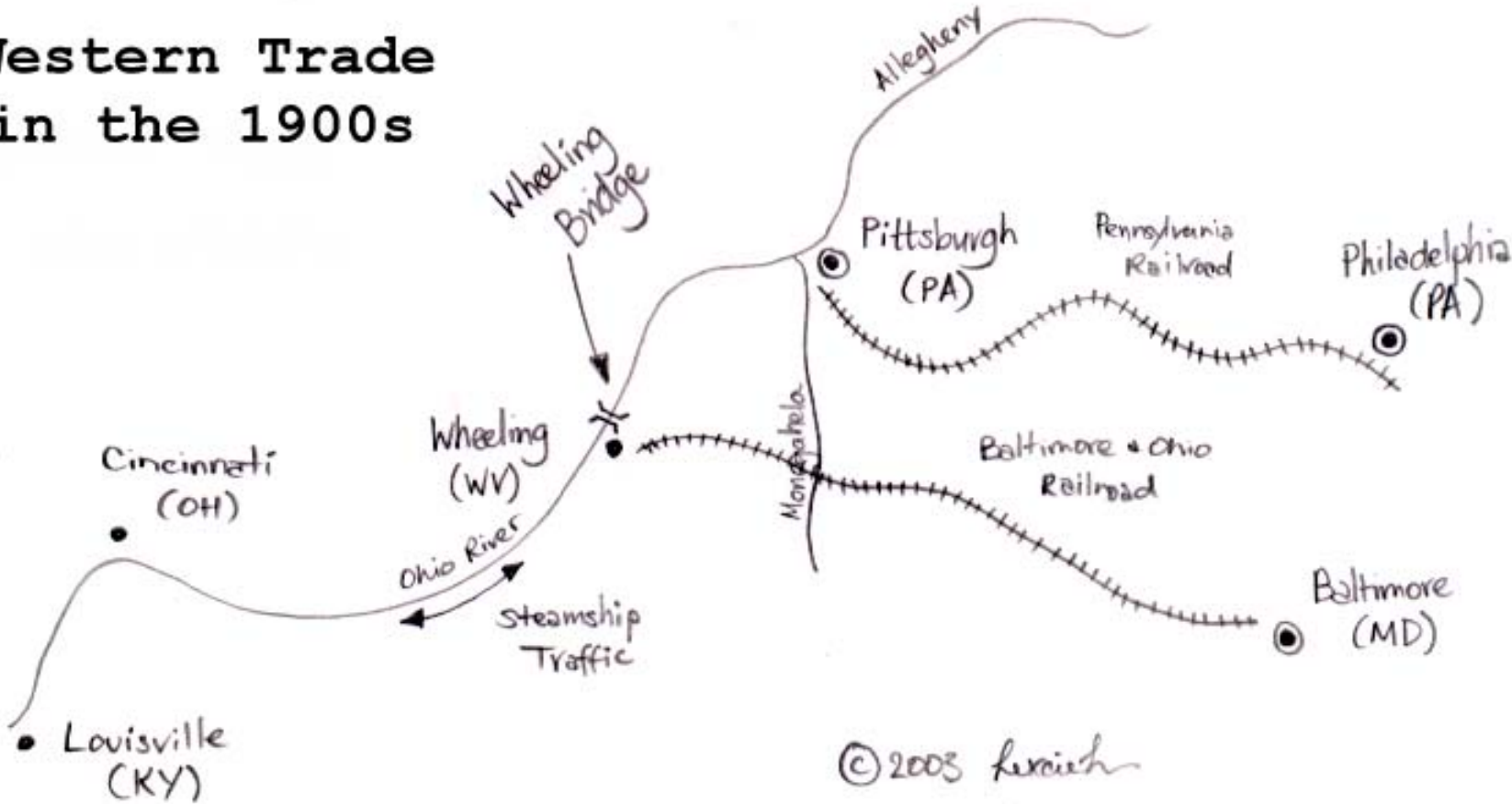
Major Costs of Wheeling Bridge

- **Total construction costs including rebuilding were about \$400,000**
- **Bridge impeded some steamboat traffic on the Ohio River**
- **The Pittsburgh steamboat and rail businesses were negatively affected by the opening of the bridge**
- **The bridge caused an extremely costly legal battle between Pennsylvania and Wheeling that threatened to bankrupt the Wheeling Bridge Company**
- **The ferry company which existed before the bridge was built went out of business**

Major Benefits of Wheeling Bridge

- **Boosted the Wheeling economy**
- **Prompted the B&O Railroad to choose Wheeling as its terminus**
- **Increased inter-state trade by connecting the eastern and western sections of the National Road**
- **Advanced bridge technology by constructing the largest single span suspension bridge in the world**

Western Trade in the 1900s



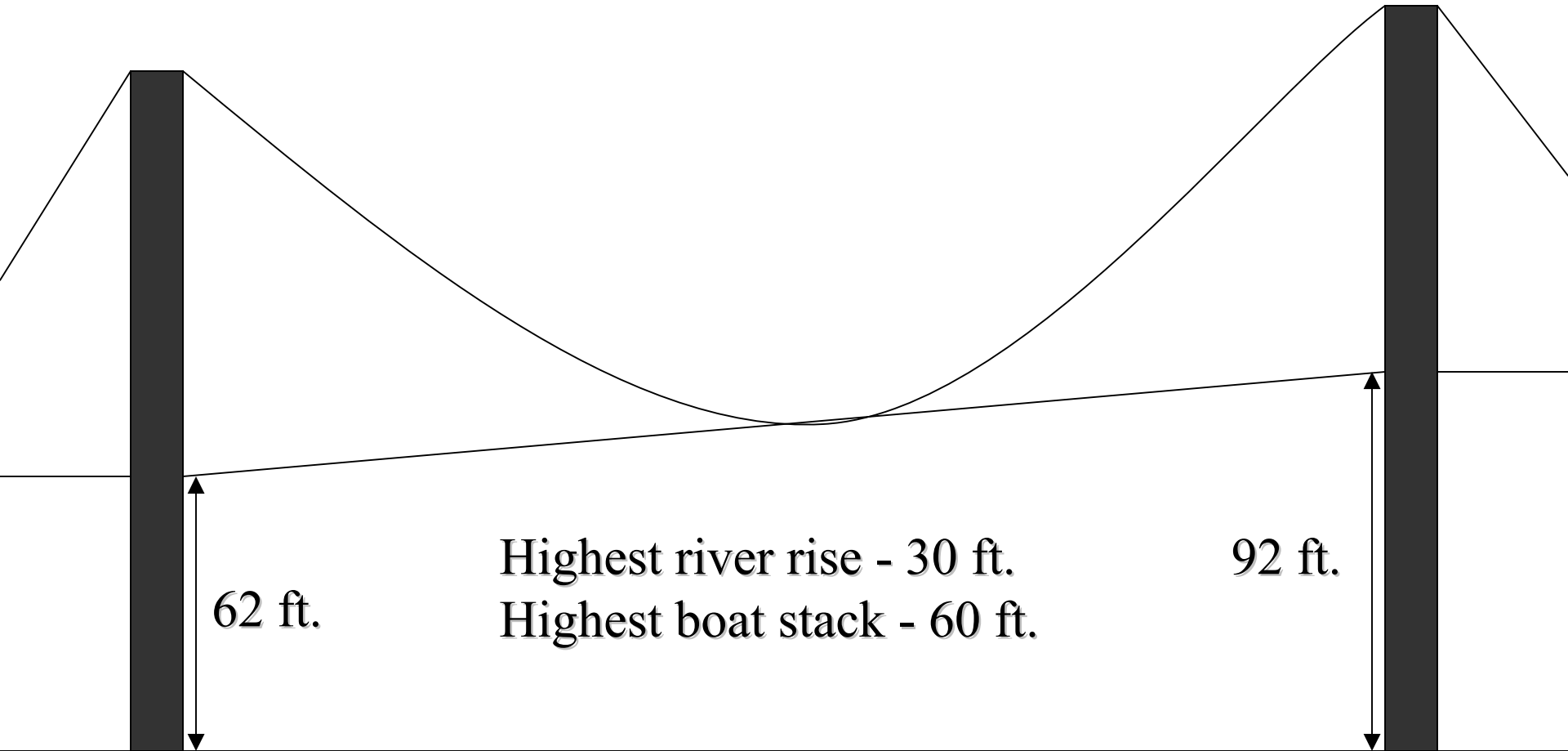
Financial Analysis

- **Total construction cost was approximately \$400,000**
- **Length of construction was 24 months for the first bridge and 12 months for the second**
- **Funded through sale of stock and loans**
- **Annual revenues from tolls were approximately \$50,000**
- **Wheeling Bridge Company began making profit approximately 20 years after construction**
- **Although the return on investment was approximately 12%, the bridge was not very profitable in the beginning due to legal costs**
- **Invention of car greatly increased toll revenue**
- **Bridge was sold to the City of Wheeling in 1927 for \$2.15 million dollars**

Legal Battle

- **Pittsburgh claims that the bridge obstructs navigation on the Ohio River**
- **Pittsburgh goes to the U.S. Supreme Court to seek abatement of the bridge**
- **In May 1852 the Court rules in favor of Pittsburgh**
- **Wheeling goes to Congress to ask for the bridge be declared part of a postal and military road**
- **In August 1852 Congress agrees thereby saving the bridge**

Wheeling Bridge Diagram



Natural Disaster

- **Mother nature did what Pittsburgh could not**
- **In May 1854 a strong wind storm destroys the bridge**
 - **“For a few moments we watched it with breathless anxiety, lunging like a ship in the storm; at one time it rose to nearly the height of the towers then fell, and twisted and writhed, and was dashed almost bottom upward. At last there seemed to be a determined twist along the entire span, about one half of the flooring being nearly reversed, and down went the immense structure from its dizzy height to the stream below, with an appalling crash and roar.”**
-The *Wheeling Intelligencer*, May 17, 1854

Legal Battle Continues

- **When the bridge falls in May 1854, Pittsburgh once again goes to the Supreme Court to ask for an injunction preventing reconstruction of the bridge**
- **Since Supreme Court is not in session, Chief Justice grants injunction**
- **Wheeling Bridge Company ignores injunction and continues reconstruction since it is backed by Congress**
- **When the Supreme Court is back in session in December 1854 the majority sides with Wheeling thereby ending the costly legal battle**

Summary

- **The Wheeling Bridge Company was able to successfully capitalize on the great demand to link the eastern and western United States**
- **Although the project suffered many setbacks, such as the legal battles and natural disaster, it eventually became profitable and was a major factor in the development of the Wheeling economy**

References

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<<http://wheeling.weirton.lib.wv.us/landmark/bridges/susp/bridgdex.htm>>
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- **Monroe, Elizabeth Brand.** *The Wheeling Bridge Case*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992.