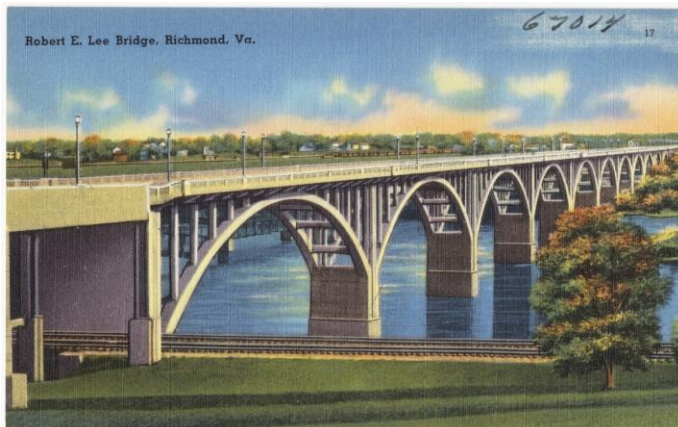


3-5-96

The Bridges of Richmond

The Lee Bridge, connecting Belvidere on the north side of Richmond to Cowardin on the south side, was the first Richmond bridge I noticed. We had probably crossed it any number of times when we were living in Chapel Hill or later in Dallas when we traveled on U.S. Highway 1 on our way to Washington, D.C., but it started having real significance in December of 1971. Early the first morning of our short stay on the twelfth floor of the Holiday Inn Downtown, I stood at our south-facing window and watched rush hour unfold in its slow way. Paul had already left for a breakfast interview, the first of many in three days for the position of Dean of Arts and Sciences at Virginia Commonwealth University, and I was waiting for my breakfast date with a realtor who had volunteered to take me on a tour of the city. I located the James River, quite a contrast to the usually thin Trinity River which bisected Dallas into north and south segments in a manner similar to the function of the James in Richmond. I began picking out landmarks which I later was able to identify as the attractive white colonial headquarters of the Ethyl Corporation on Gambol's Hill and a gloomy-looking red brick building surrounded by guard towers and razor-wired fences, the old Spring Street State Penitentiary, both prominently laid out in front of me. Just to the west of those two contrasting buildings was a long bridge which crossed the James River, a bridge with closely packed automobiles inching their way north. I watched the slowly moving cars and knew that, if Paul's interview should be successful and we decided to move to Richmond, nothing could persuade me to live in any area that would make us have to use that bridge daily.



My host, Tom Jefferson, was indeed a realtor but all of his selling that first day was indirect, as he drove me about the city, serving as a Chamber of Commerce enthusiast, identifying various neighborhoods and landmarks. He assured me that the realty business was always slow in December and that he was happy to show me his native city even if we might not decide to locate here. He drove me across the old Lee Bridge, the one which had hypnotized me that morning. There was little traffic when we were on the bridge, but I was disappointed that the high, solid railings kept me, as an automobile passenger, from seeing the river. He also managed to cross the James on the Boulevard,

or Nickel, Bridge, the Huguenot Bridge, and the old Manchester Bridge, the only bridges serving Richmond then except for a rickety bridge at Fourteenth Street.

Later when Paul and I decided to come to VCU and Richmond, I told Paul that I did not want to live south of the river, because of the morning and evening traffic congestion. He thought the rush hour traffic was not a good reason for limiting our search for a place to live. During one visit to the campus, Paul had fallen in love with the hills, trees, and winding streets in the Stratford Hills area, on the Southside, of course, and when I came back with him to house hunt, he persuaded me at least to look at the south side of the river. With Tom Jefferson's help I became attracted to the north side of the river, especially Seminary and Hawthorne Avenues. The level terrain was similar to the Dallas terrain we were leaving, although those straight Northside streets had magnificent trees which were scarce in Dallas. However, none of the houses in the Northside was practical for our family, and Tom and I quickly found three on the Southside that I asked him to show Paul before we left town. Like Paul, I had found that the many hills and the gorgeous old trees were irresistible. Together, Paul and I chose the house we live in today, despite my lingering misgivings about Paul's ability to get to VCU without spending long times in transit.



I was right, too. Forty-five minutes was the shortest commute he could find, either by way of the Huguenot Bridge or the Lee Bridge, but more bridges were under construction. The first one to open was the RMA bridge for the Powhite Parkway, connecting I-195 with the newly opened Downtown Expressway. For forty cents (now seventy cents), Paul was able to reach his office at VCU in about ten minutes, although the return trip sometimes took a bit longer. Meantime the toll on the Nickel Bridge was raised, first to ten cents and then again to twenty cents, although the bridge had been paid for years before. The reason for the increased toll was said to be a ploy to keep all bridge traffic from using the Boulevard rather than the RMA bridge. Both routes to VCU proved attractive, with the Boulevard (still called Nickel) bridge taking a bit longer but having the advantage of attractive scenery through Byrd Park, a fact that enabled us both to enjoy the changing seasons when I later joined Paul in the daily round trip to VCU.



In the meantime, the old Manchester Bridge was replaced by a sparkling new four-lane bridge, an attractive alternative for many Richmond drivers which relieved the Lee, Boulevard, and Huguenot Bridges of a great deal of congestion but had no influence on our best route because it was far out of our way. Then, the Lee Bridge was replaced with a spacious four-lane bridge, a "free" way for us to get to VCU or any other of a variety of places north of the river. Moreover, we discovered a lovely scenic route by way of Riverside Drive, giving us brief, exciting glimpses of the James River as well as beautiful homes and some of Richmond's most beautiful spring and fall foliage vistas. Another bonus that took us often to the somewhat longer route by way of the Lee Bridge was the spectacular view we had of the growing number of buildings in downtown Richmond. On a sparkling, clear morning, the approach to the bridge, with the river in the foreground and the city in the background, furnished an inspiring sight before work. (Another bridge which has only recently been opened is the Willey Bridge, but like the Manchester Bridge it does not figure in getting to VCU; nevertheless, we find it a delightfully quick substitute for the Huguenot Bridge when we need to reach the West End.)

As our residence in Richmond has reached our twenty-fifty anniversary, we are uncomfortably aware that the growth of the city and adjacent counties is making all the bridges, indeed all the major thoroughfares, uncomfortably crowded. The attractive view of the Lee Bridge from the twelfth floor of the Holiday Inn Downtown must now include the handsome buildings and landscaping of the enlarged headquarters of the Ethel Corporation which replaced the State Penitentiary complex, but, alas, it soon will include the slowly moving dual-lane rush hour traffic on the Lee Bridge.