



Bridging the Rappahannock

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary Year
of the Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge

Supplement to the Southside Sentinel and the Rappahannock Record

Dreams of a bridge spanning the lower Rappahannock River had been in the minds of Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula folks for generations, but in the 1940s there was a strong feeling this dream could become reality—and there was an urgency for it to happen.

On these pages are recorded the story of how it finally happened, how the bridge has changed this part of Virginia over the past 50 years, and how we celebrated the Golden Anniversary of this landmark during 2007 and 2008.

The culminating event of the 50th year celebration unfolds Saturday, August 23, 2008, when the town of White Stone hosts the first annual Bridge Fest. Everyone is invited. (Details on page 20)

Thanks to those who served on the steering committee for the 50th anniversary of the Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge for assistance and guidance in preparing this supplement, and thanks to photographers living and deceased for capturing a mass of steel and concrete in so many interesting ways.

Julie H. Burwood | Design & Cover Photos

Published as a public service by the Rappahannock Record, P.O. Box 400, Kilmarnock, Va. 22482 and the Southside Sentinel, P.O. Box 549, Urbanna, Va. 23175.



Bridging the Lower Rappahannock: 50 Years of the Norris Bridge

by Ammon G. Dunton, Jr. *

Reprinted with permission of the Northern Neck of Virginia Historical Society Magazine, December 2007

Fifty years ago, on August 30, 1957, the bridge connecting Middlesex and Lancaster Counties was opened to the public. It seemed to me that, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the bridge, it would be appropriate to reflect upon access to and from the lower Northern Neck and particularly, how the bridge across the lower Rappahannock has affected the Northern Neck.

Being nearly surrounded by water has had the effect in recent times of isolating the Northern Neck. However, in the earliest colonial days the Rappahannock River was not viewed as an impediment to travel but rather as the means of access to Lancaster County, which was located on both sides of the Rappahannock until the creation

of Middlesex County. The original Lancaster County courthouse was at Queenstown, on the Corrotoman River, because of river access by sail to both sides of the Rappahannock. During this time there was considerable visiting from one shore to the other by sailing ships, using the river as a convenient highway.¹

As road networks developed within Lancaster County the need for ferries across the Rappahannock became apparent. Ferry operations, licensed by the county court, were established to provide a crossing near White Stone and a second crossing from the Corrotoman peninsula. By the end of 17th century Mottram Wright had established a ferry from the site which was subsequently called Pop Castle.² By the mid 18th century this ferry was called Gilbert's Ferry and in 1766, Gilbert's Ferry was taken over by Rawleigh Shearman, who married Gilbert's daughter. Fur-

ther upriver Chowning's Ferry, which operated from the Bertrand area at the end of Corrotoman peninsula in Lancaster County, provided regular crossings of the Rappahannock River for man, beast and wagons during the colonial period.

The arrival of the steamboats in the mid 19th century created a new means of crossing between Middlesex and Lancaster. The steamship companies operating on the Rappahannock immediately recognized that there was a need for travel not only from Lancaster County to Baltimore or Fredericksburg, but also from Lancaster to Middlesex and vice versa. Therefore, the stops were arranged so that the steamboat went back and forth between the two sides of the river as it progressed up river. The Rappahannock River boats stopped first at Westland (now Windmill Point) in Lancaster County, then at North End in Middlesex, then at White Stone Wharf

1. E.g., Diary of Col. James Gordon, I (1758-1763), *William & Mary Quarterly* Vol XI, No. 4 and Vol XII, No. 1, 1903.

2. *Traveling the Roads and Waterways of Early Virginia* by Parke Rouse, Jr., 1973.



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in Lancaster County, then at Mill Creek in Middlesex, then at Irvington and Weems in Carter's Creek, then at Burhan's Wharf in Middlesex, then at the Corrotoman River stops (Millenbeck, Ottoman, and Merry Point), then at Urbanna in Middlesex and then on to Monaskon and Moratico in Lancaster County, in this way creating a much more elaborate ferry system than had ever existed in the colonial days. This system continued until the devastating storm of August 23, 1933 which saw the destruction of most of the steamboat wharves along the Rappahannock. The steamboats were already suffering from the economic effects of the Great Depression and from competition with trucks (which could deliver directly to users), so the elimination of many landings led to the collapse of the last steamboat line on the Rappahannock, the Western Shore Line. Thus ended the cross river service by steamboats.

Even before the demise of steamboats the need to provide ferry crossings in the lower Rappahannock was recognized. On May 15, 1924 a private ferry system was established by Harry L. Garrett between Irvington and Urbanna. This service was initially offered three times daily (8:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.) and took

considerably more than an hour each way. The "Francis B. Garrett," with a maximum capacity of eight cars or four trucks, left for Urbanna from the ferry pier in Carter's Creek near the Irvington Beach Hotel. This ferry was subsequently purchased by Capt. Stanley Adams (who also owned the Potomac River ferry near the present location of the Potomac River bridge), and he shifted the route from Urbanna to the area of Locklies Creek to shorten the run. This reduced the time of the crossing from nearly an hour and a half to approximately forty-five minutes, and more frequent ferry service was achieved.

There was a demand for more frequent service and for less crossing time. In the mid 1930's the state highway department began planning the new crossings of the Rappahannock from Grey's Point to White Stone. The road to Grey's Point was constructed and a pier erected. It was soon determined that much faster service could be achieved if a second new ferry pier could be built at White Stone, directly across from Grey's Point. Two smaller ferries which had operated from Irvington were replaced by larger ferries, the "Virginia" and the "York." A new road was built to that site and the pier constructed, whereupon much more frequent

service was established with larger ferries. In 1941 the State of Virginia was persuaded to operate the ferry system. The "Virginia" had a maximum capacity of thirty cars, and the "York", which was a backup ferry, could accommodate twenty-four cars. In 1955 these vessels carried an average of 827 cars per day across the river. The crossing took about twenty-five minutes in good weather. This became the location of the Norris Bridge.

The Lower Rappahannock Bridge Association was organized in Kilmarnock on November 16, 1938. The Association was sponsored by the Town Council of Kilmarnock, the White Stone Businessmen's Association, the Kilmarnock Chamber of Commerce, and the Kilmarnock/Irvington/White Stone Rotary Club. The Potomac River Bridge had been completed only a few months before and the possibility of bridging the lower Rappahannock came to be understood as a real possibility. The Association's object was to provide a means whereby citizens and local officials could promote the construction of a bridge across the Rappahannock between Grey's Point and White Stone. Most of the leading citizens of Lancaster County were involved as well as some prominent citizens of Northumberland



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County.³ Hundreds of letters and many resolutions of public bodies were forwarded to the highway department and members of the General Assembly. Economic and health issues were stressed. It will be remembered that there was no hospital in the Northern Neck and therefore if there was need for emergency hospitalization or treatment beyond the means of a local general practitioner one would have to depend on the ferry system, which did not operate around the clock and was slow at best, or one must drive to Tappahannock and then to Richmond. Responding to the many communications received by the legislature, Senator R. O. Norris, Jr. introduced a bill for the construction of a bridge across the lower Rappahannock. Delegate W. Tayloe Murphy introduced a similar bill in the House of Delegates. These bills provided for a bond issue for the construction of the lower Rappahannock bridge, and for other bridge projects.

A special commission was created by the General Assembly to consider the needs of the Commonwealth known as the Weaver Highway Study Commission. Much attention was given by the Lower Rappahannock Bridge Association to insuring that the Weaver Highway Study Commis-

sion included the Rappahannock Bridge in its recommendations. While the York River Bridge was the number one project of the Weaver Highway Study Commission, it did include the possibility of building a bridge across the lower Rappahannock at White Stone. In 1940, the General Assembly voted to include the proposed Rappahannock River Bridge in the State Revenue Bond Act of 1940. This Act called for the issuance of \$25,000,000 in bonds to fund the York River Bridge, the lower Rappahannock River Bridge and a bridge tunnel across Hampton Roads. World War II, however, intervened and all such construction was deferred.

On April 9, 1946 representatives of 15 counties and four cities of Tidewater met and formed the "Tidewater Bridge and Ferry Association." Leading citizens of all of these jurisdictions were enlisted to support the construction of various proposed bridges and the acquisition of various ferries not yet in the state system. Also, in 1946 a public hearing was held in White Stone relating to possible construction of a bridge across the Rappahannock. Senator Robert O. Norris, Jr. was by this time Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Virginia Senate. Despite the more immedi-

ate needs for the lower York River crossing and the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel crossing, Senator Norris was successful in combining all three projects in the same bond issue, with the further understanding that tolls would be continued on all bridges until the bond issue was discharged. Had it not been for Senator Norris (and W. Tayloe Murphy in the House) it is highly questionable whether the Rappahannock River Bridge would have been included in the bond issue.

In 1940, the Rappahannock River bridge was anticipated to cost \$3,000,000. By the mid 1950's, the cost of the project had increased to \$15,000,000. In preparation for bridge construction the highway department authorized soundings of the river and preliminary borings were completed in 1950. A second and more detailed boring contract was authorized in 1953 and was completed by May 1st of that year. The McLean Construction Company of Baltimore was awarded the contract for road grading and approach work. This was completed by September 3, 1954. The biggest job involved the substructure construction, which was awarded to the Diamond Construction Company of Savannah, Georgia and was finished on November 5, 1956. The contract

3. George W. Cutler, Frank C. Hatch, R. O. Norris, Jr., R. Hill Fleet, Daniel Weymouth, W. B. Sanders, Judge E. Hugh Smith, Dr. B.H.B. Hubbard, Dr. Lee S. Liggon, Dr. W. H. Lowe, Ammon G. Dunton, Sr., G. Raynor Dunton, Charles N. Lawson, G. N. Reed, and George Hinton.



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for the superstructure was awarded to Bethlehem Steel of Baltimore, which was completed on April 16, 1957. There remained the concrete paving, which was completed on July 24, 1957. Painting, construction of toll plazas, erection of signs took place during the following days leading up to the opening of the bridge on August 30, 1957. The bridge is 9,984.8 feet from abutment to abutment and consists of 17 beam spans, 12 girder spans, 14 truss spans, and 1 fixed center span. The center span provides clearance of 110 feet over mean high water and was designed to permit the largest menhaden fishing vessels to pass under the bridge safely.

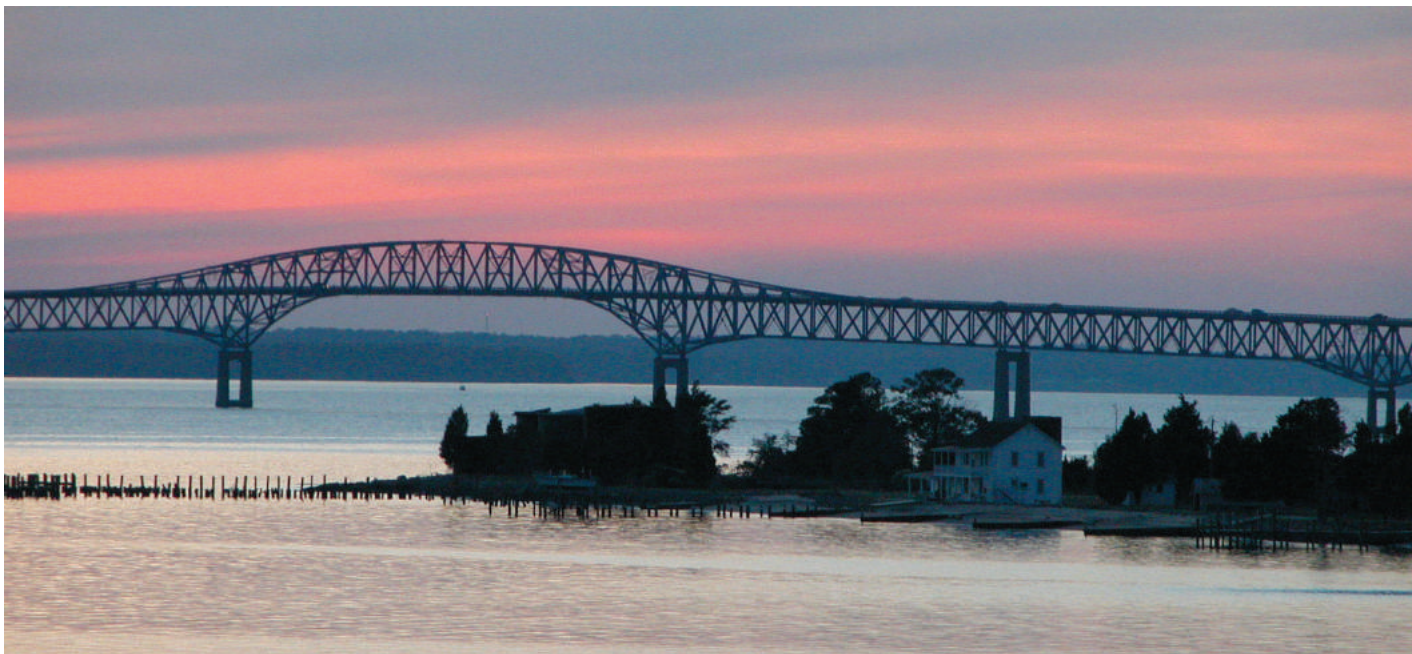
In view of the importance of the new bridge to the area, a carefully planned opening ceremony was held on August 30, 1957. T. D. McGinnes opened the ceremony and the National Anthem was played by the U.S. Navy Band. Dr. Peyton, pastor of the Harmony Grove Baptist Church, pronounced the invocation, after which Ammon G. Dunton, Sr. introduced former Senator, William A. Wright of Tappahannock, a member of the State Highway Commission. Senator Wright presented former Senator, R. O. Norris, Jr., who seventeen years before had been the chief patron of the act authorizing construction of the bridge in 1940 and who ten years later had been so influential in developing the funding for the newly

constructed bridge. Senator Norris in turn introduced the Governor of Virginia, Thomas B. Stanley, one of the principal speakers of the day. After the Governor's address, W. Tayloe Murphy, the Northern Neck's delegate, and John Warren Cook, delegate from the Middle Peninsula, were introduced. Delegate John Warren Cook then introduced General James A. Anderson, the State Highway Commissioner, who made another major address. A crowd of more than 3,500 listened to the speakers on a cloudless and very hot day, which caused one of the speakers to remark that he "knew of only one place that might be hotter." The local citizens surrounded the toll booth plaza to hear the program which lasted an hour and a half, after which time the entire party moved to the end of the bridge where James Raynor Dunton, age 4, grandson of one of the early supporters of the bridge project, cut the ribbon and the official party led by the Governor and General Anderson drove across the bridge to another ribbon cutting on the Middlesex side by James Warren Hurd, 4 year old son of Mr. and Mrs. Norton Hurd of Deltaville. A flotilla of pleasure and naval vessels crossed under the bridge and a military aircraft flew over the bridge during this time, after which those who wished to walk across the bridge from one county to another could do so. Later in the afternoon the bridge was opened to vehicular

traffic (without cost) and 5,579 vehicles crossed the newly opened bridge that day. Tolls, at seventy-five cents per car, were in effect the next day.

Two crews had operated the ferries, each with a seven man compliment. Some of the senior members of the ferry crews were offered positions as toll takers. The toll was viewed as quite expensive at the time, the seventy-five cent toll being equivalent of approximately \$8.00 in today's currency. Truck tolls were significantly higher, causing many trucks to "go around" by way of Tappahannock. While recognizing that the bridge was a major advantage to residents and to others seeking to come to the Northern Neck, the tolls had the effect of restraining traffic growth. Often one would cross the bridge without meeting a single car coming in the opposite direction. Although commuter's books, priced at fifty cents per crossing, were available this did not encourage much in the way of traffic. It was not until the tolls were removed following the discharge of the bond issue that traffic increased materially. Late in 1957 approximately 1,000 cars crossed the bridge daily. By 1965 the count had risen to 1,275, and by 1970 the count was 1,660. In June 1976 the tolls were suspended, and by 1980 the traffic had increased to approximately 5,000 vehicles per day.

Immediately after the opening of the bridge a



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movement commenced in Lancaster County to have the bridge named in honor of former Senator Robert O. Norris, Jr. The Board of Supervisors of Lancaster County, the Kilmarnock Town Council, the Irvington Town Council, and the White Stone Businessmen's Association strongly endorsed the idea as did many local citizens. Middlesex County, which had never been represented by Senator Norris, did not agree and its board suggested that the bridge continue to be called the Rappahannock River Bridge. Nevertheless, so great was the affection for Senator Norris in the legislature and so highly was he regarded by the officials of the Highway Department that the bridge was in fact named the Robert O. Norris, Jr. Bridge in 1958 by action of the General Assembly.

By 1993 the concrete deck which had been installed in 1957 was seriously deteriorating. The Highway Department proposed to close the bridge each night for nearly a year in order to undertake a reconstruction of the roadway surface. By this time the bridge had become such an essential feature for both Lancaster and Middlesex residents that they voiced widespread opposition to such a plan. Later that year the Commonwealth Transportation Board awarded the project to rehabilitate the bridge deck to the McLean Construction Company of Baltimore, who had been involved in the original construction. Over that winter the Virginia Department of Transportation and McLean developed plans to use a "turtle back shaped ramp" to go over the work sites so as to

enable traffic to keep moving 24 hours a day. However, traffic was restricted to one lane of traffic in the areas of the construction on the bridge which caused substantial delays. These lane closures commenced in March 1994 and continued until December 1995. The merchants in Kilmarnock reported that difficulty in getting across the bridge significantly reduced business and some felt that even after two way traffic had been resumed the volume of commercial business coming to Kilmarnock did not return to prior levels for several months. The resurfacing project cost \$22,000,000.

Traffic has expanded significantly in recent years so that today approximately 11,300 cars cross Norris Bridge daily. In a commercial sense Kilmarnock, and to a lesser extent White Stone and Irvington, are the beneficiaries of this increased traffic. However, Middlesex County has also benefitted from traffic originating in the Northern Neck as many persons now shop in Urbanna, play golf on the Piankatank, and enjoy restaurants and other facilities in Middlesex County venues. Before the bridge it would have been unthinkable for persons from Lancaster County to go to movies in Gloucester or to shop there or even in Newport News. Yet there is now regular traffic to the south from the lower Northern Neck. The hospital in Kilmarnock and the many restaurants and shops in Lancaster and Northumberland are also benefitting from Middle Peninsula traffic.

At fifty years of age the Norris Bridge has be-

come outdated. Being a high, narrow bridge with no walkways or shoulder lanes, its design is now obsolete. From time to time the bridge is closed because of wind, snow or ice conditions. Some drivers decline to drive across the bridge because it is so narrow and high. Thus far, the bridge has been able to sustain the current traffic load. There is seldom a wait to cross the bridge except when inspection or repair work is involved on the structure. However, the volume of traffic on the bridge has been growing sharply in recent years. Local governmental bodies are beginning to urge that the bridge be replaced with a larger and more commodious structure. After fifty years, it is perhaps appropriate to begin planning for the next crossing of the lower Rappahannock. ■

** Ammon G. Dunton, Jr., a native of the Northern Neck, received his undergraduate degree in American history at Yale and his law degree at the University of Virginia. After a few years at a large Wall Street law firm, he returned home to practice at our area's oldest and largest law firm, Dunton, Simmons & Dunton in White Stone. A noted historian and speaker, he has served as President of the Mary Ball Washington Museum and Library and the Northern Neck of VA Historical Society; and at various times the Chairman of the Lancaster County Bicentennial Commission and the County's Landmarks Commission. Recently, he has been involved on the committee which published the history of Lancaster County.*



A dream comes true

by Larry S. Chowning

The entire Tidewater region had received a tremendous economic setback in the 1930s when the steamboat lines stopped frequenting the landings on the north and south sides of the Rappahannock.

Three days a week, the economy of the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula was fueled by steamboats zig-zagging across the river. The steamers were the lifeblood of the area's economy.

The steamboats brought goods and services from metropolitan areas and, in return, rural commodities were sent to the cities. A Sunday shirt or a favorite tablecloth could leave Reedville on a Monday, reach a Chinese laundry in Baltimore on Tuesday, and be delivered back cleaned and pressed in Reedville on Wednesday.

The Baltimore Sun, which was no more than two days late at any time, was the main daily

►**Photo:** This aerial view of the river was taken while the old ferry landings were still intact. (Courtesy of W.A. Haislip and the Rappahannock Record)

newspaper for the region, and it was delivered by steamboat.

Every dock had a wharf agent who was often a commission merchant. People would carry commodities to the dock to sell, such as chickens, eggs, snapping turtles, cows and calves, and the commission merchant would in turn send these items, via steamboat, to buyers in Baltimore.

Improvements to automobiles, trucks and the shift towards land transportation cut into steamboat profits. But it was the 1933 "August Storm" that sank the ailing steamboat industry. Overnight, that storm washed away all but a few of the steamboat docks. Residents everywhere had to revamp their way of thinking.

With the demise of the steamboat, the lower Northern Neck was isolated. Suddenly it was at an economic disadvantage. The Middle Peninsula was not impacted as much because it was connected to metropolitan areas through the railroad at West Point.

The state as a whole, however, realized that roads were taking the place of water transportation and efforts were under way to find ways to finance a large

highway building project that would put bridges in place to tie the Tidewater region together.

In 1940, just three years after steamboat Capt. John Davis made his last run down the Rappahannock in the "Anne Arundel," the Virginia legislature enacted what is known as "The State Revenue Bond Act" for the purpose of upgrading or building nine Tidewater-area bridges and ferries, and to bring some under public ownership.

The nine projects listed in the act were York River Bridge, Rappahannock River Bridge, Claremont Ferry, James River Bridge at Hopewell, James River Bridge at Jamestown, Kings Highway including the Nansemond River Bridge, Old Point Ferry, the Nansemond River Bridge at Chuckatuck, and Newport News Ferry.

It was the beginning of a new era. As history's chapter on the steamboats closed, a new chapter opened with the introduction of state-owned and maintained bridges and ferries.

It would still be 17 years before the bridge across the lower Rappahannock River would be completed. ■



1957—The year of the bridge

by Larry S. Chowning

The Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge over the Rappahannock River between Lancaster and Middlesex counties and the Urbanna Creek bridge were both completed and dedicated in 1957.

Hailed as “one of the biggest events in the history of the area,” the dedication of the Norris Bridge provided lifelong memories for many on the Northern Neck and in Middlesex County.

Nearly 5,000 people gathered on August 30, 1957, to celebrate the dawning of a new era. Virginia Governor Thomas B. Stanley told the crowd, “When traffic begins to flow across the two-mile length of bridge, it will tie together more closely than ever before the great regions of the Middle Peninsula and the Northern Neck. The bridge will serve as an enormous incentive to the further development and growth of the whole of Tidewater Virginia.”

At the time, the name of the bridge was uncer-

tain. Local officials in Lancaster County wanted it named after Norris, a former state senator from Lively who was instrumental in getting state funds to build the bridge.

The Middlesex County Board of Supervisors wanted the bridge to be named simply the Rappahannock River Bridge. Although Middlesex supervisors did not get their way, many people still refer to the bridge as the Rappahannock River Bridge.

On the day the bridge opened, many gathered to ride the ferry one last time. The state closed the ferry to automobile traffic at 8:20 a.m. so many Middlesex residents rode through Tappahannock and parked on the Lancaster side.

On the day of the dedication, each side of the bridge held a ribbon-cutting. On the Middlesex side, Norton Hurd’s 3-year-old son, Jack, was chosen to do the honors. Norton Hurd was chairman of the Middlesex County Chamber of Commerce and had served on the bridge committee.

When young Jack went to cut the ribbon, Norton gave him a helping hand. Suddenly, Jack started crying and complained to his father, “You pinched my finger with the scissors.” In any event, the ribbon was successfully cut on

the Middlesex side and little Jack Hurd ushered in a new era for Middlesex and the Northern Neck.

On the Lancaster side, James Raynor Dunton, the 2-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. G.R. Dunton II of Wilmington, Delaware, and grandson of the late Mr. and Mrs. G. Raynor Dunton, did the honors.

The bands played and dignitaries made their speeches, but as much as anything people came to witness the changing times.

“It was one hot day,” remembered Norton Hurd. “It was an exciting time though and people knew it was the beginning of something good for everyone.”

Many people came over by boat. The late John Bareford said in a 1987 interview celebrating the 30th anniversary of the bridge that he and his wife, Marden, rode across the river in a yacht with the late Ben Hurley and his wife, Virginia.

“We had a delightful day,” said Bareford. “Ben was mayor of Urbanna and I was town attorney, so we were both invited to the official luncheon at Tides Inn. The ceremony and the entire event was delightful. There was a Navy band playing. We were just excited about the whole thing.”

The bridge dedication gave area residents an opportunity to look to the future. ■



Beginning of a new era

by Larry S. Chowning

In the 1930s the need for the bridge over the lower part of the Rappahannock River came to the forefront as roads improved and cars took the place of boats as the primary means of transportation.

By 1938, residents and officials in Lancaster County were lobbying the State Highway Department for the necessary money to build a bridge to service the lower end of the Northern Neck.

One of the proponents was G.W. Cutler, who is credited with being the first person to suggest a bridge be built. Cutler and others formed the Lower Rappahannock Bridge Association to promote the idea of the structure. He and others worked diligently, writing over 300 letters to state officials in support of a bridge.

►**Photo:** The last span of the Robert O. Norris Bridge is installed in 1957. The new bridge linked the Middle Peninsula and lower Northern Neck for the first time in history. (Courtesy of VDOT)

State Senator Robert O. Norris Jr. introduced a bill in the Senate and Del. W. Tayloe Murphy Sr. introduced a bill in the House of Delegates providing for a bond issue for the construction of a bridge across the lower Rappahannock.

The Northern Neck legislators had participated in the Weaver Highway Study Commission that included the possibility of building a bridge across the Rappahannock.

The York River bridge was the number one project on the Weaver Highway Study Commission list and recommended for immediate attention.

Success came in 1940, when the General Assembly voted to include the proposed Rappahannock River bridge in a revenue bond act. At the time, its estimated cost was \$3 million.

In the 1940s act, the total bond was for \$25 million and this included funds for the lower York River bridge, lower Rappahannock River bridge and a bridge tunnel across Hampton Roads.

After World War II, work began on the bridge

tunnel and the York River bridge, and the Coleman Bridge over the York River opened in June 1952. The Twigg Bridge over the Piankatank River was also completed in 1952.

In 1946 a public hearing was held in White Stone. At that hearing representative groups of people from all over Tidewater appeared in the interest of the bridge. It was also learned that the number one priority, the York River bridge, was going to be successfully financed.

The Rappahannock River bridge had been stalled because no project could begin in the Tidewater region until the York River project was successfully financed, and the Department of Interior and the Navy delayed a decision due to concerns over the Naval Mine Depot near the York River bridge site.

When that hurdle was cleared, planning work began on the Norris Bridge in 1950 with engineering studies of the river bottom. Construction began in November, 1954 and the cost of the project eventually reached \$15 million.



The bridge is 9,985 feet long and rises 110 feet above the river channel. It took 12,855 tons of structural steel, 363 tons of reinforced steel, 480,200 bags of cement, 78,400 tons of gravel, and 50,150 tons of sand.

Once opened, the bridge replaced a state-operated ferry service between White Stone in Lancaster County and Grey's Point in Middlesex County. The 30-car ferry "Virginia," and its 24-car backup, "York," had been doing a booming business. In 1955, two years before the bridge opened, the ferries averaged 827 cars a day.

The ferry service that was replaced by the new bridge started service in 1922, and the state took it over in 1941.

Ferry service across the Rappahannock dates back to Colonial times when a major ferry operated between Senora in the Ottoman area and Middlesex County.

August 30, 1957, was the beginning of a new era, but it was the end of the ferry boat rides across the river. The late John M. Bareford of Saluda was on the Middlesex Bridge Committee along with Horace Norton of Deltaville and Lewis Jones Jr. of Urbanna. "I loved the old ferries," said Bareford in a 1987 interview. "On Sunday afternoon when my children were small we would take them over on the ferry and ride around White Stone and Kilmarnock, but we all realized the bridge was the best thing for people on both sides of the river."

The day the bridge opened 5,579 vehicles

crossed it. When the toll booths opened the next morning, an unidentified man in a pickup arrived early in the morning and waited for the toll booth to open so he could be the first to cross and pay the toll.

Traffic on the bridge leveled off at 1,024 cars per day in 1957. State highway figures show that by 1965 the count had risen to 1,275, and by 1970 the daily count was 1,660.

The tolls were dropped in June 1976. By 1978, the average daily traffic was 2,560. In the 1980s, it jumped to around 5,000 vehicles, and now over 11,000 vehicles cross the bridge on a daily basis.

"We really didn't know what impact the bridge would have on us back then," said Norton Hurd of Deltaville, who was the president of the Middlesex Chamber of Commerce in 1957. "The bridge probably helped Kilmarnock more than this side, but it did bring the communities closer together. We didn't know anybody over there and the only time I ever went to Lancaster was to play in a baseball game.

"We were close together but really far apart," continued Hurd. "The bridge connected us and has made it better for everyone. People on the Northern Neck now come over here to shop and eat, while we go over there to do the same."

Another positive aspect is that the bridge brought employment to many people. Several made careers working for Diamond Construction

Company, the builder of the bridge, after the project was completed.

"For many, jobs were scarce," said Bareford. "Several men in the county worked the bridge project until it was over and went on to retire from Diamond."

Jim Harris of Hartfield, who worked on the bridge from October 1955 until it was completed, said there were 50 people working in foundation work, 35 iron workers, 12 painters, 10 deck rebar workers, and 20 concrete workers.

"There was a total of 150 people working on the bridge throughout the entire process," he said. "It was great for me. It was just a few miles from home and good money for the times."

Harris said he made \$1.75 an hour. "That was good money in those days," he said. "Most folks were working for around a dollar an hour."

During the dedication of the bridge, workmen were still painting the sides of the bridge. "People were walking all over the bridge that day and I was painting," said Harris. "I was painting the side rail on the outside of the bridge. There are scupper holes for water to run off the bridge near the bottom of the sides, and I had my hand through the hole as people came by walking. They saw my hand and didn't see me. I heard them say, look there's a man's hand. I wonder if it was one of those men that got killed. He walked over and stepped on my hand. I said, 'Get your damn foot off my hand.' I scared that fool to death." ■





Several died building the bridge

by Larry S. Chowning

The Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge across the Rappahannock River has had a checkered history when it comes to fatalities.

Before the bridge was completed in 1957, several workers were killed while the bridge was being built, and there have been two fatal accidents as a result of vehicles going off the bridge.

During the construction of the bridge, a piling was being lowered down when suddenly the piling slipped three feet, knocking down scaffolding and throwing one worker into the river to his death.

Three other workers were killed when a caisson (mold) fell and killed them, remembered Jim Harris of Hartfield, who worked on the bridge. “It was a horrible thing but in those days it wasn’t unusual for accidents to take the lives of construction workers,” he said. “There weren’t the safety regulations like there are now. It was dangerous work working on that bridge.”

On two other occasions vehicles have gone over the sides of the bridge. In March 1978 a Hardyville woman was coming home from work at

►**Photo:** Construction began on the shoreline for the bridge in June of 1954. It took a little more than three years to complete the bridge. (Courtesy of VDOT)

a Callao restaurant when she lost control of her 1972 car, which veered through the guard rail and dropped 100 feet into 50 feet of water in the Rappahannock River.

As the car was falling it ripped through a 110,000-volt Virginia Power line knocking out electricity to most of the Northern Neck for hours. A wrecker had to be positioned on top of the bridge with 200 feet of cable, and a crane from Humphrey’s Railway was used to bring the automobile up from the river bottom.

Another fatal accident was in 1983 when two people were killed after a compact car and a bottling company truck collided on the bridge. The truck then crashed through the bridge railing and fell into the river. The truck took out seven sections of guard rail (about 63 feet) and went off the bridge into about 40 feet of water. A crane was used to bring the truck to the surface.

In an effort to keep these types of accidents from happening again, box beam guard rails were installed several years ago. The guard rails are designed to keep out-of-control cars from running off the bridge.

For more history on the Norris Bridge, visit the Kilmarnock Museum on Main

Street in Kilmarnock. The museum has a 50-year bridge display that tells the story of the bridge through photos and news clippings. ■

Two who died are identified

Frank Douglas, 54, of Muldrow, Oklahoma, an assistant superintendent for Diamond Construction Company, and Desso Montgomery, 40, of Suffolk, a pile driver, were killed on July 23, 1956, while helping to build the Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge.

They were among six men working inside a cofferdam preparing to pour concrete into the caisson for a bridge pier when the caisson sank without warning 25 feet deeper into the river bottom.

The accident in which they were involved was described on the front page of the Rappahannock Record on July 26, 1956. Information on other fatal accidents during the bridge work has not been found.

The Rappahannock Record’s July 26, 1956, story and a follow-up story on August 2, 1956, can be found on the websites RRecord.com or SSentinel.com. ■



Reminiscing: Oral history recorded at two public forums

by Audrey Thomasson

Note: To gather comments from those who remember the ferries that preceded the bridge and how life in this area has changed since the bridge was constructed, two public forums were held in 2008 at the White Stone Event Center. Over 100 attended each gathering.

The campaign to replace the Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge was set aside Sunday, January 27, 2008, as citizens gathered at the White Stone Event Center to reminisce about life before the bridge and

►**Photo:** The bridge replaced the ferry boat "Virginia" that was used to ferry cars from one side of the river to the other. On the day of the dedication, cars were allowed to cross on the ferry for a few hours in the morning. Many people came just to take one last ferry ride across the Rappahannock. (Courtesy of W.A. Haislip and the Rappahannock Record)

celebrate the changes and opportunities presented since its opening 50 years ago.

Calling the panel of speakers "living bridges to the past," moderator Thea Marshall introduced family members of the late Sen. Robert O. Norris Jr. including his daughter, Nancy Norris Foster, and his cousin's daughter, Ruby Lee Norris. Also participating in "Before the Bridge — An Oral History" were Ammon Dunton Jr., Audrey Davis Smith Edmonds and Norton Hurd, whose then 4-year-old son, Jack, cut the ribbon on the Middlesex side of the bridge opening day.

"It was the hottest day, making it a very long day," Hurd said of the opening ceremony August 30, 1957. "I leaned across my son to help him cut the ribbon... and the handle of the scissors pinched his fingers. He screamed to high heaven."

Dunton spoke about the isolation of the Northern Neck prior to the bridge and that the schools had so little funding in the 1940's there were no bathrooms.

"The kids had to use the woods," he said of his White Stone schoolhouse. Dunton noted that schools were separated by race in those days, and that while the black school had even less money, it was the only one that was accredited because its founder, A.T. Wright, "assembled a faculty far superior to the other schools. He hired teachers with master's degrees."

Dunton noted there were a total of 23 schools in Lancaster County, 13 white and 10 black. After the bridge's opening linked the area with the rest of Virginia, he said people began to see "our primitive conditions." He credited the bridge and legislation of the 1960's with turning things around for the area's school system.

"In the early 20th century, there were 79 general stores in Lancaster; nine were in White Stone," Dunton said. "Every crossroads had one with the idea that people could walk or ride a horse there. People sat around the store's wood stove and shared sto-

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ries.” But the bridge spelled doom for general stores where you could just ask the clerk to get your items, Dunton said. “Now you have to get them yourself. The bigger stores drove out all the little stores... moving on to now we have Wal-Mart.”

In referencing the area’s lack of a hospital or specialty care in the first half of the century, Edmonds told the story of her brother becoming seriously ill with acute appendicitis. Her mother had to take him by steamboat to Baltimore for emergency medical care. The ship made the usual stops along the way before they arrived the next morning and then taxied to the hospital, “just in time” to save his life.

Dunton noted that in 1945 Lancaster ranked 94 out of 100 counties in infant mortality.

“After the bridge,” he said, “with the combined population of Middlesex, Lancaster and Northumberland, we got Rappahannock General Hospital.”

According to Hurd, many men traveled by steamboat to Baltimore to work because they couldn’t find jobs in the area prior to construction of the bridge.

Norris said that of the few available jobs locally, most went to men. But she eventually got a job and for two years, “paid 35 cents each way to ride” the ferry to work.

Having a relationship with someone across the river was difficult, Norris said, because if her boyfriend missed the last ferry home her father re-

fused to let him spend the night. The young man was forced to drive through Tappahannock to get home.

Prior to 1957, the Northern Neck was linked to the Middle Peninsula by hourly ferry service. There were tales of ferries lost overnight in the fog, waves splashing onto the deck during bad weather, and a ferry captain who was known for pulling away from the dock when he saw cars hurrying to catch the last ferry across the river.

But there was a romantic side to the ferry as well.

Norris said when there was a dance hall at White Stone beach, “we came in boats... with canopies. Not only did you get to dance, you got a boat ride.”

Talking about the ferry ride, Dunton added, “We used to roll down the car windows with radios tuned into the same station and dance on the deck.”

G. R. Dunton was credited as one of the movers in getting the bridge built, but Ammon Dunton said it was through the efforts of Sen. Norris that the bridge eventually was built.

“Everyone was in favor of the York bridge,” but Sen. Norris was chairman of the Senate finance committee in the General Assembly and “would not call up the vote for the York bridge until he got the Rappahannock bridge.”

Sen. Norris’s daughter, Nancy Foster, said the bridge has brought some wonderful people to the area, adding that she did not like the term “come here.” She said without people relocating here, there would not be improvements like the hospital.

“I thank them,” Foster said.

Foster recalled stories of her father.

“For a man who was fairly smart, he was absent-minded,” she said.

Foster told a story about her father being given a trout by a friend and then forgetting about it in the back seat of the car. “Tayloe Murphy was in the car a week later and asked what on earth was in that car? It was the decomposing fish,” she said.

Construction of the bridge had a huge impact on the area because at the time there were no hotels to house construction workers. The contractor knocked on the doors of area families seeking to rent rooms for his men. Many of the families also supplied three meals a day, including a packed lunch. A temporary housing facility was built to feed others.

Ruby Lee Norris’s family fed four of the men. She noted how much the workers could eat, especially when it came to dessert.

“No wonder the bridge wasn’t done on time,” she said.

Over the 50 years of the bridge’s existence, Dunton noted the increase in traffic. In 1957 about 1,000 vehicles crossed the bridge each day. The number slowly increased to 1,660 in 1970. However, once the 75-cent toll was removed in 1976, traffic immediately jumped to 5,000 per day. Today an average of over 11,000 cars and trucks cross the two-mile span each day.

Dunton said that by today’s standards, the 75-cent toll would equal \$8.

Audience members took part in the open discus-



sion with one woman saying that she and her husband moved to the area in 1964.

“My husband said that when there are 5 cars on that bridge at one time—we’re moving.”

•••••

In the good old days before the bridge, crossing the Rappahannock River by ferry was a fun and romantic adventure. At least that was the consensus of those gathered at the White Stone Event Center Sunday, July 27, 2008, to reminisce about life before the Robert O. Norris Jr. Memorial Bridge.

However, when moderator Thea Marshall asked if anyone was interested in turning back the clock, there were no takers.

General Assembly records in colonial days document the first mention of ferry boats on the Rappahannock River as early as 1682, according to historian Larry Chowning, one of those on Sunday’s oral history panel.

Prior to 1668, Middlesex was part of Lancaster County, Chowning said. But the river proved to be too big of a divide and when the courthouse ended up on the north side of the river, there was so much grumbling on the south side that the Middle Peninsula was cut loose and Middlesex County was

►**Photo:** Yachts and workboats arrive for the opening of the bridge in 1957. Note the multiple pilings that guided some ferry boat captains. (Courtesy of W.A. Haislip and the Rappahannock Record)

formed.

While competition was squelched by the General Assembly in 1774, by the 1920’s lots of ferries were on the river right up until the day the bridge opened on August 30, 1957, Chowning said.

Tommy Turlington, another panelist, who once worked on the ferry, said when he took his wife to a Richmond hospital to have a baby on August 26, 1957, they crossed the river by ferry. On their return a few days later, they crossed on the new bridge.

Turlington claimed “absolutely no experience was necessary” to get a job on the ferry. As a young man, it was his job to get the vehicles—cars, buggies, whatever—onto the ferry, occasionally angling them to squeeze more onto the deck than the 30-vehicle capacity.

He said most of the ferry captains would wait for people racing to catch the last ferry home at 11:30 p.m. One captain, however, took pleasure in quickly leaving the dock at Grey’s Point when he heard the horn of a late arrival, forcing the unfortunate driver to make a 60-mile road trip home through Tappahannock.

Some captains were more memorable than others, and not always for the best reasons.

Jimmie Lee Crockett did not forget the name of Arthur Messick, a captain who liked to bounce the ferry against the pilings used to guide the boat up to the dock.

“My father had an exposé of words about Messick’s docking,” Crockett recalled.

David Ogle and his brothers were not allowed out of the car when a ferry was docking because

his mother was afraid they would be bounced into the river.

Ogle, who is the Virginia Department of Transportation’s Fredericksburg district administrator, visited Urbanna as a youth and his family liked to take the ferry to the Lancaster side and visit Kilmarnock “for something different to do.”

The opening day of the Norris Bridge, Ogle said, was also the last day for the ferry. “We rode the ferry back and forth across the river several times then took the bridge back. Maybe crossing the river is what led to my career,” he added.

One captain offered free ferry rides for the 30-minute crossing to one young lady by the name of Ruby Lee Norris. But she declined saying she was afraid the captain had other thoughts in mind.

Crockett’s wife, Edwina, said the ferry offered her the opportunity to get driving experience as a teenager living in Urbanna. On the occasions that her father was working on his boats at the Irvington or Weems railway, she was allowed to take the ferry and pick him up across the river.

Robert Major, who worked as a carpenter on the bridge when he was a “young and foolish” 19-year-old, said that some captains did not charge romantic young couples who just wanted to ride the ferry back and forth late at night.

Lillian Dix Smith displayed her high school ring for the Lancaster High School Class of 1958. Dix said students from White Stone, Lively and Kilmarnock high schools attended the new combined high school for the first time in 1957 and designed the ring using the new bridge and a traditional workboat. ■



Art exhibits evoke varied views and moods of river and bridge

by Ruby Lee Norris

Two traveling art exhibits whose central theme is “The Norris/Rappahannock River Bridge” have been on display at several locations on the Middle Peninsula and in Lancaster County. One exhibit representing adult artists from both sides of the Rappahannock opened in May at the Middlesex Art League in Urbanna. It traveled to the Bay School for the Arts in Mathews in June,

to Yates House in Deltaville in July and to the Rappahannock Art League Studio Gallery in Kilmarnock in August.

The other art exhibit representing students from Lancaster Middle School, supported by art teacher Marilyn Sprouse, is on display during August at the Northern Neck State Bank in White Stone. Prior to that it was on display in the school lobby,

at the Mary Ball Washington Museum and at the July 27 Sunday afternoon forum at the White Stone Event Center.

The adult art exhibit, showcasing 35 well-known artists from both sides of the river, is a stunning interpretation of views and moods of the bridge and river. At the exhibit expressions of joy or horror remind viewers of the many responses of travelers who drive to the top of the bridge as they cross the wide expanse of water on the narrow bridge with its uncommonly low railings. Jane Stouffer’s “Gateway,” depicting the approach to the arched span, is an outstanding rendition of this view.

The paintings challenge viewers to identify the shoreline as south side or north side. Viewers rec-

►**Photo:** Karen Hart, executive director of the Mary Ball Washington Museum, studies the “Bridging the Rappahannock River” exhibit now at the museum in Lancaster. It was prepared by the museum for the 50th anniversary celebration of the Robert O. Norris Jr. bridge and may be seen in

the museum’s booth on August 23 during Bridge Fest in White Stone. The three interpretive panels cover (1) Advocacy, Approval, Contracting and Building the Bridge, (2) Crossing the River, and (3) Connecting Counties and Communities. (Courtesy of Marsha Sitnik)



ognize such landmarks as the old Weems crab house. One viewer said, “There’s the White Stone dance pavilion where I spent many a Saturday night dancing to live music.”

Ann Wilcox painted a stunning view from a boat passing under the substructure. Among photographs is Grayson Mattingly’s “Bridge in Fog” in black and white where the end of the bridge disappears in the mist. John Russell Dort’s “Rejoicing the Freedom” dramatic shot of a portion of the structure with bubbles rising against a brilliant background represents lives lost during construction.

“Under the Bridge,” a photograph by Tom Norris, is a clean, stark interpretation. “Strong Connection,” by Marianne Miller, a black and white painting with ominous clouds overhanging, recalls a view of an impending storm that many travelers have seen when crossing the bridge.

“Sunset on the Rappahannock,” by Blanchette Jones, with a perfect oval sunset, highlights a sailboat approaching the bridge. “Romantic Norris

Bridge,” by Jim Hazel, an ephemeral water color, captures March clouds over the bridge and daffodils at a breakwater from a Carter’s Creek perspective.

Unique in the exhibit is a muted woven textile titled “Norris Bridge, 50 Years,” by Sandi Petty, in soft grays and blues. It depicts a geometric segment of the structure. Appropriately it is hung on steel rods. These descriptions represent only a few of the absorbing and varied interpretations of the “Bridge” theme.

The students’ exhibit is so delightful that you will escape for the moment to childhood days. These are dioramas and paintings with some of the impossible worlds that exist only in childrens’ imaginations. Katelyn Abbott’s diorama of an underwater view with an aluminum foil bridge at the side features green flossy fussy sea grass, dark green sea grass with fronds, a purple sea nettle, a red bug-eyed creature floating above and big rockfish blowing sequin bubbles that get bigger as they rise to the surface.

Golf tees form the understructure of Corey Creech’s diorama, while cotton balls float as clouds against the blue sky. Teara Rich entwined red beads around golf tees to form the substructure and a whimsical bright green pipe stem crab looks out with his big white eyes. Natalie Kohlhepp depicts a black superstructure with aluminum wrap edging against a light blue background

where an orange styrofoam sun rises in the east.

There’s a seagull sitting on Matthew Pittman’s painting of a winding curving bridge. Big time action in the sky above and around the bridge amazes the viewer. A motorcyclist is flying through the air over the side, a helicopter hovers near the arch, a four-engine airplane turns toward it while a seagull flies between them. In the river below a seahorse sends out bubbles.

Among the paintings, Allashia Musshetti depicts a road to the suspended bridge, Jonathan Towles’ bridge is a black structure over blue water and against green banks, and Caroline Merryman’s ephemeral structure is set at sunset while two seagulls fly over.

These two exhibits have stirred memories and emotions about the Norris Bridge as the community celebrates its 50th anniversary. ■

Last chances to see the art

Student Artists: Northern Neck State Bank in White Stone through Friday, August 22, then at the White Stone Woman’s Club on Saturday during Bridge Fest.

Adult Artists: On exhibit at the Rappahannock Art League Gallery in Kilmarnock through Labor Day weekend.



Celebrate at Bridge Fest

by Ruby Lee Norris

When Bridge Fest activities in White Stone begin at 2 p.m. on August 23, 2008, it will mark the culmination of many activities during the year to celebrate the opening of the Robert O. Norris Jr. Bridge over the lower Rappahannock River. The Bridge Fest celebration will continue until 9 p.m. Parking and admission are free.

The central location will be off Beach Road in the field behind the White Stone Fire Department, the Woman's Club building and the White Stone Event Center. The Honeywind Blue Grass Band will play until the parade begins.

A caravan of pre-1958 antique cars and trucks will leave from Grey's Point Camp at 4 p.m., proceed across the Norris Bridge and join bands and other units as they come down Chesapeake Avenue from Mac's Auto World to the stoplight. The antique cars will park near the central location for viewing by festival guests.

Other units in the parade, led by Grand

Marshal Dr. David Nichols, a recent Country Doctor of the Year, will be the bands of Lancaster and Middlesex County High Schools marching as one band.

Riding in the parade also will be First District Congressman Rob Wittman, State Senator Richard Stuart and Delegate Albert Pollard in Bob Montague's 1922 Touring Car.

The Lancaster County High School Air Force ROTC will carry the colors as will other units such as American Legion Post 82 in Saluda, American Legion Post 89 in Kilmarnock and the Knights of Columbus.

The Reedville Fishermen's Museum will parade its John Smith shallop, its raffle boat and a deadrise boat. Units from the White Stone Volunteer Fire Department will join the parade along with more antique cars and the Grey's Point Camp Locomotive Train. Military vehicles such as a Hummer with machine guns blocked and World War II Jeeps will parade with Lady Liberty by

Juliette Webb.

The Norris Family representatives will ride in a convertible furnished by Sandy Matthews of Creative DeSigns of Virginia in White Stone. They are Nancy Norris Foster, daughter of Senator Norris, and two Norris cousins, Ruby Lee Norris and Barbara Clegg Priest.

Vendors and food booths will accommodate festival guests as they listen to the Bluegrass band before the parade and to the Fort Monroe Army Rock Band from 7 to 9 p.m.

It is in order at this point to address the ongoing news about the steel truss design and maintenance of the Norris Bridge. The dialogue of the past year highlights the importance of the bridge to the economic and social fabric of this part of Eastern Virginia. While citizens clamor for a new bridge, certain realities must be considered. To maintain the bridge, the Virginia Department of Transportation is currently receiving bids for upgrading the surface of the structure. It also



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VDOT

Watch Videos Online

Portions of the August 30, 1957, videotape showing people and activities during the grand opening of the Norris Bridge may be viewed on the RRecord.

com and SSentinel.com websites. The footage was taken by Davis Ratcliffe and loaned by Clyde Ratcliffe. Another brief video on the RRecord.

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