

# 106 SUCCESS STORY

## Historic Walnut Street Bridge: Symbol of City's Modern Rebirth Chattanooga, Tennessee



“The Walnut Street Bridge is today one of Chattanooga’s signature features, and a steady stream of walkers, joggers, and bicyclists use it to get from Downtown to the North Shore. But it once came perilously close to being torn down.”

— JOHN WILSON  
The Chattanooga, August 13, 2010



### THE STORY

Completed in 1891, the Walnut Street Bridge over the Tennessee River in Chattanooga is Tennessee’s oldest non-military highway bridge. Built of six camelback through trusses with an iron viaduct, the 2,376 foot-long bridge connected the predominantly white community on the river’s south side with the African American workforce on the North Shore. Considered a structural engineering feat, the bridge was documented for the Historic American Engineering Record and listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1990. In 1978, the bridge was closed for safety reasons.

### THE PROJECT

In the late 1970s, the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) planned to replace numerous bridges with funds provided through the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1978. The infusion of federal money for these projects brought about the first serious interest in attempting to identify and preserve historic bridges, and the preservation of structures like the Walnut Street Bridge hung in the balance.

### THE 106 PROCESS

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process for the Walnut Street Bridge replacement project under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects are likely to ensue.

TDOT, in its first experience with a large historic bridge under modern environmental laws, and FHWA consulted with Chattanooga officials on the need for replacement of the Walnut Street Bridge. TDOT’s original plan was to replace the bridge on its existing alignment and proposed demolition of the old bridge. However, a community campaign led by activists, civic leaders, and historic preservationists proposed that it be kept and turned into a pedestrian bridge to help advance downtown revitalization. After the bridge was determined eligible for the National Register, the group advocated

Photos of the bridge, old and new  
(courtesy River City Company)

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Left: Looking at the Walnut Street Bridge © Bradford Lumley - Fotolia.com; Above, aerial view of the city (photo courtesy Chattanooga Area Convention & Visitors Bureau)

its preservation with city, state, and federal officials, including the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP).

Initially, the City, FHWA, and TDOT asserted that maintenance costs would be excessive, and the U.S. Coast Guard expressed concern that the old bridge would be a navigation hazard. FHWA consulted with the ACHP, which recommended changing the new bridge alignment and separating demolition from the new bridge construction, thus allowing the new bridge to be built while studies were done on retention of the old bridge. After considering its options and community interests through the Section 106 process, FHWA informed TDOT and the City that it was withdrawing the demolition funds for the existing bridge. In late 1979, the Chattanooga City Council voted to accept the modified project and began studying the bridge's reuse. Through the efforts of Chattanooga Mayor Gene Roberts, Congresswoman Marilyn Lloyd, and Senator Al Gore, FHWA made available \$2.5 million for rehabilitation, which was matched with \$1.5 million in city and private funds.

## THE SUCCESS

In the years since the original preservation effort, the Walnut Street Bridge has emerged as a lively centerpiece for Chattanooga. Since it reopened in 1993, the bridge has been a destination for holiday light displays and fireworks viewing, a commuter link to the downtown area, and a connection among the city's arts and cultural attractions.

This bridge also required TDOT to address two critical planning issues. First, those who considered the bridge eligible for the National Register had no state or local context for evaluating the significance of Walnut Street and other bridges. Second, this project highlighted the need for early identification of historic resources to ensure balanced project decisions. In response, TDOT and the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Office developed a survey methodology to guide bridge decisions statewide.

The community coalition formed to preserve the bridge led to the creation of Cornerstones, Inc., Chattanooga's non-profit historic preservation organization, and The Parks Foundation. Their establishment is a testament to how the Section 106 process can foster discussions about what is important to local communities.

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### Consulting Parties:

Federal Highway  
Administration  
ACHP  
Tennessee State Historic  
Preservation Officer  
Tennessee Department of  
Transportation  
City of Chattanooga  
Landmarks Chattanooga

For more about Section  
106 and the ACHP go  
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