

A MARVELOUS MASON AND HIS MARVELOUS BRIDGE

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Seldom does a story of this astounding nature emerge in the annals of Masonic Philately. Although we all marvel at magnificent engineering structures, we seldom reflect on the dedicated people who made them possible. In this case, such a person was a Freemason who essentially made his early life a quest to construct one of the most important and significant bridges in the United States. He has long been called from labor, but his story by MW Bro. William E. LeVeque, published in the Masonic Service Association of North America *Short Talk Bulletin* (Vol. 93, No. 2, February 2015) is presented here. CLM

The Mackinac Bridge – Over Troubled Waters

By William E. LeVeque
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I am the 168th Grand Master of Michigan, and only the 9th Grand Master to serve from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Let me put that geography in perspective for you. It takes me less time to travel to Niagara Falls in New York from Lansing, Michigan than it does to travel home to Munising after meetings there. It is closer for me to travel the entire State of Wisconsin, and enter Chicago, than it is to drive to Detroit from my home in Munising.

I can drive to Duluth, Minnesota, again through Wisconsin, in less time that it takes to arrive in Grand Rapids, Lansing, Flint or any city south of those points in Michigan, yet over 83% of Michigan Masons reside south of Flint. With such travel challenges from the Upper Peninsula, it is comforting to know that before 1957, it was much more difficult.

There is one factor that has made my travel easier. It hasn't always been there, and in fact only three of the nine Upper Peninsula Grand Masters have experienced its grandeur.

If you guessed the Mackinac Bridge, you guessed correctly. It is an impressive structure. Not necessarily appealing to the operative Mason within us, but its five-mile long expanse of steel, iron and cabling make it the longest suspension bridge in the Western hemisphere, and this functional Landmark inspires even the most unsuspecting of visitors. Unlike most bridges which are held up by columns or super structures, the Mackinac Bridge roadway literally hangs from the hundreds of cables attaching it to two main cables strung between two magnificent towers, so large, that each tower holds an elevator to ascend most of the way to the top.

The Mackinac Bridge Project had many stalwart supporters. However, the project actually became a reality through the determination of one man -- Prentiss Marsh Brown, a member of Saint Ignace Lodge in Michigan -- at the time Chairman of the Mackinac Bridge Authority. Brown, a former United States Senator and Chairman of the Board of the Detroit Edison Company, refused to accept defeat when it seemed inevitable. Brother Brown just wouldn't stay licked.

His energetic determination to get the Mackinac Bridge financed is undoubtedly due to the fact that he was born and raised in the midst of a daily realization of the need for the bridge. At 64 years old, Brown spent a lifetime in his old hometown of Saint Ignace, Michigan.

He was once a bellhop at the old Astor Hotel on Mackinac Island. Probably the bridge idea would have died completely, if it had not been for an incident that happened to Brown 34 years before.

When Brown was 30 years old and then a lawyer, he was scheduled to appear before the State Supreme Court in Lansing to argue a case.

Brown had to get across the Straits to catch a train at Mackinaw City. However, both of the ferryboats were stuck in the winter ice. He and another hardy voyager, who also had important business on the other side of the Straits, hired a horse and a cutter. They started across the ice. They ran into ice hummocks 10-feet high and had to send the cutter back to Saint Ignace. They proceeded on foot.

They ran into 50 acres of open water, like a big pond, and had to circle it. All in all, they hiked four miles across the ice. The wind was blowing up a small gale. It was snowing. By the time they had spent most of the day walking - well, they missed their train.

Brown said in a recollection before his passing, "That bitter hike across the Straits made a lasting impression on me - the need of a bridge across the Straits."

Prentiss Brown never forgot. This is the reason that 20 years earlier Brown became legal counsel for the first Mackinac Bridge Commission, back in 1933 under Governor William Com-

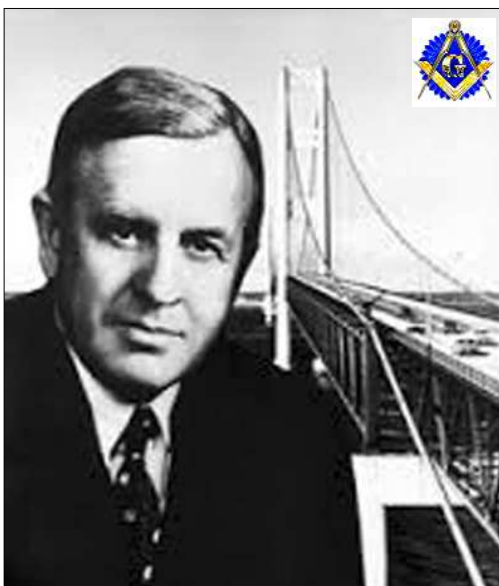


stock. And Brown worked for love. He would accept no money. He eventually would become chairman of the Mackinac Bridge Authority in 1951 a position he held until his passing. By 1952, it looked like the Reconstruction Finance Corporation would finance the bridge across the Straits, whereupon, a New York investment broker offered to organize a private syndicate in October 1952, to do the financing.

Brown tried to float the Mackinac Bridge bonds in March and again in June 1953. Both times he failed. As a matter of fact, it looked like the bridge project would fail, for lack of financing. But Brown refused defeat. The project was revived on the New York bond market in November and ultimately a check for \$98.5 million to finance the Mackinac Bridge was put into Brown's hands. A total of 150 investment brokers underwrote the sale of revenue bonds.

Actually, the deal went through with just 13 days to spare before the offer of State maintenance for the bridge would have expired. In a four-year battle under Brown to get the bridge financed - this was a slim margin to win a victory.

The bridge opened to traffic on November 1, 1957, on schedule, despite the many hazards of marine construction over the turbulent Straits of Mackinac. The last of the Mackinac Bridge bonds were retired July 1, 1986. Fare revenues are now used to operate and maintain the Bridge and repay the State



Bro. Prentiss Brown and his bridge.

of Michigan for monies advanced to the Authority since the facility opened to traffic in 1957.

The presence of the Mackinac Bridge has made my travel as a Grand Master much easier, due primarily to the vision of Brother Prentiss M. Brown, who made it happen. This same passion to succeed burns within many of us as Freemasons. Thinking men always have a vision -- a vision of paths untraveled.

Millions cross the Straits of Mackinac annually on this awe-inspiring bridge. It stands as a witness of one Brother's vision to make a difference, no matter the cost or how long the project takes. It is a testament of how one man's efforts can affect millions of people for decades. A bridge over troubled waters is the result of a visionary.

Prentiss Marsh Brown was born in Saint Ignace, Michigan on June 18, 1889, raised a Master Mason in 1913 in Saint Ignace Lodge No. 369, and granted life membership in 1953. His was a full life, being admitted to the bar in 1914, then serving as prosecuting attorney of Mackinac County from 1914 to 1926 and as city attorney of St. Ignace from 1916 to 1928. He was elected from Michigan's 11th Congressional District to the United States House of Representatives for the 73rd Congress and reelected to the 74th Congress, serving from March 1933, until Novem-

ber 1936. He then served in the United States Senate from November, 1936 to January 1943. He was chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Claims in the 77th Congress and also a member of the Banking and Currency Committee. In this capacity, he was instrumental in helping Franklin D. Roosevelt achieve his desired wage and farm price controls. He passed away on December 19, 1973 in Saint Ignace at the age of 84 and is interred there at Lakeside Cemetery.



First US postage stamp depicting the bridge. It was issued in June 1958.

About the Author: William E. LeVeque was born in Munising, Michigan in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, was raised a Master Mason in 1983 in Grand Island Lodge No. 422 in Munising. He served as WM in 1989, was elected Grand Marshal in 2008 and was elected Most Worshipful Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Michigan in May 2014. He has worked for the Munising Public School District for over 32 years. Since becoming a Master Mason and being active across the State of Michigan in all Masonic Bodies, LeVeque has crossed the Mackinac Bridge more than 850 times.

(Stamps illustrated: USA #4438, 1109)



Dignitaries pose for a photo on bridge opening day, November 1, 1957. Bro. Brown is 4th from the left.