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CENTRAL AVENUE BRIDGE BECAME A KEY PART OF ROUTE 66 HISTORY

By Roger M. Zimmerman



The road that would become Route 66 zigzagged through the state in the early 1920s. (Courtesy New Mexico Route 66 Association)

New Mexico officials in 1926 took the first steps toward straightening the S-curve of Route 66 through the state. One result was a new bridge over the Rio Grande at Central Avenue in Albuquerque. It was essential for transcontinental highway traffic to travel efficiently through New Mexico, and it motivated federal officials to spend on new road construction in the state.

"This Central Avenue crossing was instrumental in getting Route 66 to actually go through Albuquerque from east to west," said Leslie Naji, the City of Albuquerque's principle planner for historic preservation.

In the 1920s early motorists traveled from Tucumcari to Santa Rosa, then north to Romeroville, near Las Vegas. Leaving the plains, they skirted the Sangre de Cristos to Santa Fe and headed south to Bernalillo, Albuquerque and Los Lunas and then west towards Laguna Pueblo, Grants, Gallup and finally the state line – a distance of 506 miles.¹

By 1925 there were proposals to straighten the road with cutoffs at Santa Rosa and Laguna. The Santa Rosa-Laguna Shortcut is that section of Route 66 that was shortened by 107 miles by the construction of the Santa Rosa and Laguna cutoffs. In March 1925, the New Mexico Highway Commission voted to include the cutoffs in the state highway system and called the straightened road State Highway 6. Governor A.T. Hannett (1925-1927) initiated construction of the Santa Rosa cutoff to Albuquerque and it was cleared and graded late in his administration in 1926. This clearing and grading saved 90 miles. Clyde Tingley, then superintendent of maintenance for the highway commission and later governor (1935-1939), proposed the Laguna Cutoff in June 1925, and in December 1926 the commission approved construction. Tingley also promoted the construction of the Central Avenue Bridge in 1930 and got the state to build it in 1930. With the completion of the bridge, the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads in 1931 accepted both cutoffs for federal funding. It took six more years for both to be constructed. In October 1937 the 399-mile-long Route 66 was officially rerouted along the new shortcut.²

With the rerouting came the need for a bridge across the Rio Grande at Central Avenue in Albuquerque. Previously, Route 66 followed 4th Street north and south through the center of downtown, parallel to the railroad tracks. With the changes, the shortest route was to use Central Avenue and build a new bridge near Old Town, and that required a short road up the hill on the west side to intersect a convenient alignment over Nine Mile Hill into the Rio Puerco valley.³

RIO GRANDE FLOODING

The Rio Grande begins high in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado. Due to snowmelt, the river flows much higher every spring. In 1930, there were no dams on the river, and the spring runoff would barrel south through New Mexico, resulting in major floods.

This had long been a problem. In 1874 flooding was so severe that Old Town became an island, and the entire area where downtown Albuquerque now stands was under water. That's because the area is a floodplain that was once the river channel. A deviation of the river occurred some 1,000 to 2,000 years ago.

Originally, the river flowed down the east side of the valley. Seasonal flooding caused the river to divert west above the community of Alameda, about eight miles north of downtown. The new channel flowed west about a mile and then turned south at the bluffs. This detour went for about 10 miles; then the river returned to its original channel below Bernalillo, about 2 miles south of downtown. This change in the floodplain affected more than 17 square miles.⁴



A flood in 1900 destroyed a railroad bridge in Albuquerque. Courtesy Herbert E. Gregory Photograph Collection, J. Wilard Marriott Digital Library, University of Utah



This levee and drainage ditch, which date from the 1930s, are located just north and east of the present Central Avenue Bridge abutment.



Gov. Richard C. Dillon, 1927
Courtesy Library of Congress

After the railroad came in 1880, citizens contributed money to a county fund to build a dike near Alameda to reinforce the westward turn in the river. The dike successfully withheld a major flood in 1884. Citizens continued to be concerned about Rio Grande flooding and helped establish the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD) in 1925. It is responsible for the stretch of river from Cochiti in Sandoval County in the north to Elephant Butte Reservoir in the south.⁵

Designers would have to create a bridge that would carry a major transcontinental highway through a challenging

flood zone and provide an all-weather road through the state. That's how the Central Avenue Bridge became the first bridge in Albuquerque that was designed by the state Highway Department in concert with the MRGCD.

The MRGCD was then planning to use levees to control the Rio Grande channel through Albuquerque. The agency created a plan in 1927 to address flood protection and channel improvement in Albuquerque. Initially, part of the plan was to construct levees spaced from 1,500 to 2,000 feet apart, which would outline the Rio Grande. Within this span, there would be an inner-flow channel that was 600 to 750 feet wide; its function would be to pass the high floods, which may occur every 15 to 20 years, and prevent overflow to adjacent lands. It would also help with silt buildup.

Higher levees, with adjacent drainage ditches, would provide additional protection from floods. The material removed to build the ditches would provide fill for the levees that could be eight to ten feet above the low-water elevation of the river. The levee and ditch would have a minimum berm of 20 feet to keep the functions separate. Mechanisms would be instituted to protect the levees from scouring (eroding from water friction). Drainage ditches would also help reduce the elevation of the high groundwater table. Levees and drainage ditches can easily be seen at any of the bridges crossing the Rio Grande.

By 1935, the MRGCD had built almost 200 miles of levees along the riverbanks and a system of jetties and checks to protect against floods.

MRGCD construction drawings indicate that the open waterway portion of the new Central Avenue Bridge in 1930 was 1,326 feet long, and the distance between drainage ditches, located on both sides of the river was 1,674 feet.⁶

SHORTEST ROUTE

From a highway standpoint, there were better places to cross the river.

The existing Barelás Bridge was convenient to the original north-south alignment of Route 66, but it was getting old. Between 1927 and 1929, officials from the city and the state Highway Commission worked on a plan for Route 66 traffic through Albuquerque and beyond. The Chamber of Commerce got involved. At the time of bridge construction, the road over the bridge connected with existing highways running north and south on the west side of the Rio Grande.⁷



The Central Avenue Bridge was completed in 1930. (Courtesy Albuquerque Museum, Alabama Milner photographer, museum purchase)

One of the added attractions for constructing a bridge on Central over the Rio Grande was to make a road to the new Albuquerque Airport, located on the West Side and served by Western Air Express. A road to the west on the shortcut towards Laguna was also needed.

In December 1929, Governor Richard C. Dillon conferred with officials of Western Air Express and supported the alignment and improvement of the Laguna Cutoff from the new bridge as far as the airport. This decision essentially locked in the shorter route along Central Avenue for the Laguna Cutoff. The bridge across the Rio Grande and road improvement to the airport could start.⁸

The new route favored Old Town retailers, but it would bypass existing retailers in Atrisco, who expected to lose tourist revenues.⁹

Out-of-state highway planners wanted the shortest and most efficient way through the city, and they continually provided this advice to the state Highway Commission.¹¹ In the end, the state chose the shorter route from the Central Avenue Bridge to a point about five miles west of the Barelás Bridge.¹⁰ This is the current intersection between Bridge Boulevard and Central Avenue on the West Side.

The new NM 6 would take this shortcut and continue in the alignment originally defined on the Laguna Cutoff to the west. A consideration in locating NM 6 in Albuquerque was that Central Avenue had

an 80-foot right of way while other downtown streets only had a 60-foot width.¹¹ This feature alone made it possible to widen Route 66 as needed. A desirable outcome was that Route 66 traffic would pass near Old Town on Central Avenue.

BRIDGE 1557

The contract for the construction of the Central Avenue Bridge was awarded in 1929⁸ and called for using New Mexico labor. The State Highway Department called it Bridge 1557, Old Town Bridge, on construction drawings.¹²

Bridge construction was well underway in May 1930. At that time, the pile driver had completed its span across the river and the piles had been laid. The timber piles, 60 feet long, were driven about 45 feet into the riverbed and capped with huge timbers in a manner common for such river crossings. Then heavy steel was laid horizontally along the length of the bridge. A steel and wooden framework was erected on which the concrete flooring could be placed. There were 54 spans of this bridge with a 25-foot distance between them, for a total bridge span of 1,350 feet. The bridge had a 20-foot-wide roadway and a six-foot-wide sidewalk.¹³

The Central Avenue Bridge was completed in the summer of 1930. It was built with state funds, and its existence made the intersection of 4th Street and Central Avenue the starting point of the Laguna Cutoff. Now a new



An old postcard shows the parallel bridge built in 1952 to carry more traffic.



The Rio Puerco Bridge, completed in 1934, is one of a few Parker through-truss bridges left in the state. (Sherry Robinson photo)

alignment was needed for the Laguna Cutoff from the Central Avenue Bridge to US 66.

Completion of the Central Avenue Bridge in 1930 helped federal officials accept NM 6 as the official alignment for Route 66. In March 1931, the Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce pushed to secure the Santa Rosa-Laguna shortcut and promoted the acceptance of NM 6 as a Federal Aid Project. This meant that federal funds could be used for new construction and paving. In July the state Highway Commission officially requested that the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads designate the Santa Rosa and Laguna cutoffs as certified public road mileage for Federal Aid Projects.¹⁴ Funds for future NM 6 grading, paving and other work were provided on October 31, 1931.¹⁵

One of the first projects funded with help from the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads was the Rio Puerco Bridge on the Laguna Cutoff. The Rio Puerco had always been difficult to cross, and extra measures had to be taken to establish a reliable highway crossing. This was accomplished by erecting a Parker through-

truss bridge that had a 250-foot clear span. This bridge was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1999.¹⁶

BRIDGE IMPROVEMENTS

The Central Avenue Bridge function has changed with time, and different bridge structures have been built to accommodate changing needs. Bridge 1557 was designed to accommodate additional through-traffic in Albuquerque that would be generated by Route 66. Some early traffic counts at the east and west state lines indicate that interstate traffic more than tripled between 1937 and 1941. Even with the Depression, people were traveling.

Traffic exploded after World War II. The state Highway Department realized it had a traffic problem in Albuquerque, and a separate parallel bridge was constructed in 1952. This was Bridge 5226. It had 18 spans of 75 feet composed of structural steel beams and a concrete deck. The piers and abutments were concrete supported by timber piles. Bridge 1557 carried westbound traffic and Bridge 5226 carried eastbound traffic.¹⁷

This dual bridge doubled the traffic capacity of the Central Avenue Bridge. Over 23,000 vehicles per day were recorded in 1952. It wasn't subject to significant amounts of transcontinental traffic after about 1970, when Interstate 40 was completed through Albuquerque, but local traffic increased. (In 1970 Albuquerque had four main bridges across the Rio Grande: Barelás



The current Central Avenue Bridge sits between levees and drainage ditches, as originally configured in 1930, and was integrated into the MRGCD flood control system. Three of the 16 spans are devoted to main channel flow, and the other spans are held in reserve for heavy flooding. (Norman Falk photo)

(Bridge Boulevard), Central Avenue, Interstate 40, and Alameda.)

After World War II, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, Albuquerque's population expanded north and west. In 1983, the state replaced both bridges with a new structure composed of two separate bridge deck units.¹⁸

The current Central Avenue Bridge spans 1,200 feet with 16 segments that are 75 feet long. It's shorter than the 1952 dual-structure bridge, as the Rio Grande finally got a flood-control dam (Cochiti Dam) above Albuquerque. Each deck unit has three 12 foot-wide traffic lanes, an eight-foot-wide emergency stopping lane, and a five-foot-wide sidewalk.

The new bridge has continued to provide for Central Avenue traffic over the Rio Grande since Route 66 was decommissioned in 1985.

The Central Avenue Bridge over the flood-prone Rio Grande was essential for transcontinental highway traffic to pass efficiently through New Mexico. Completion of the bridge in 1930 was the last event that helped federal officials accept NM 6 as the official alignment for Route 66 in 1937. After additional construction the final realignment of Route 6 occurred in October 1937.

Roger Zimmerman, a civil engineer, is past president of the Albuquerque Historical Society. He is New Mexico's representative on an American Society of Civil Engineers' committee to nominate Route 66 as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark.

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