Eighteenth Century Tolling Dispute

Transportation costs are hot button issues for residents, businesses, shippers and travelers in New York City and its surrounding region. This is particularly true at this writing, given the recent public debate over the first-in-the-nation congestion pricing charge for vehicles travelling below 60th Street in Manhattan. Proponents and opponents weighed in for months prior to the initiation of the congestion charge in January 2025. A variety of lawsuits were filed, and thousands of public comments submitted as part of an extensive environmental assessment. The public discussion of the charge—which had been advocated for years—was prominent on newscasts, in print articles, and various social media channels and platforms.

Generally, transportation is prominent in the public policy debates of contemporary New York. A present-day New Yorker would likely view transportation issues, conflicts and debates as functions of modern society. That New Yorker might be surprised to learn of transportation issues in the deeper history of the region which mirror the present day. One prominent example can be found during the earliest days of European colonization in northern Manhattan and the northwest Bronx.

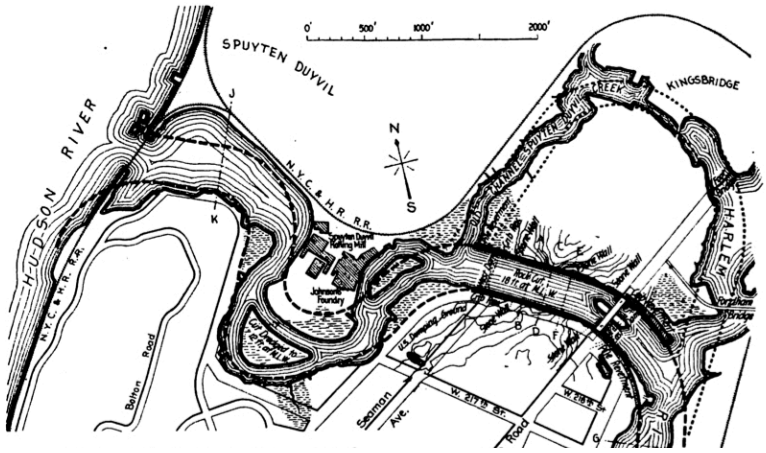
New York City and its surrounding region are situated on three islands—Manhattan Island, Staten Island and Long Island—and the adjacent mainland in three states. It is therefore subdivided by various water bodies—rivers and estuaries, wetlands, a major harbor and the Long Island Sound. Consequently, waterways and water crossings have always played a role in human mobility in this region, beginning with the movement and settlement of indigenous people who inhabited the region for over 10,000 years since the last glacial maximum.[1]

Native American pathways for travel by foot, as well as settlement and camp locations that were optimal to travel by water, developed based on the needs and trading habits of indigenous tribes. Remarkably, some traces of these mobility systems can still be found among contemporary roads and water crossings.

One example of indigenous peoples' travel paths was the *wading place*, a tidal ford of the Spuyten Duyvil Creek then separating Manhattan Island from the mainland in what is now the northwest Bronx. The creek was landfilled in the early 20th Century after the completion of the Harlem River Ship Canal connecting the Hudson and Harlem rivers to its south rendered it superfluous.

[1] Anne-Marie Cantwell and Dianna diZerega Wall, *Unearthing Gotham, The Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001) pages 37-42

Figure 1 - Late Nineteenth Century Map of the Spuyten Duyvil Creek and the First Phase of the Harlem River Ship Canal



In his 1912 work *The Story of the Bronx*, Stephen Jenkins of the Westchester County Historical Society described the ford:

> *Nature had placed in the middle of Spuyten Duyvil Creek a reef which was bare at low tide, and which had been from time immemorial a ford, or wading place, to and from the mainland.*[2]

Early Dutch settlers in this area took note of and used this ford to cross between Manhattan and the mainland areas to its north and northeast. Interestingly, this ancient crossing is possibly the source of the name of John Archer's land holding in the vicinity —which he called *Fordham*, meaning *ford near a settlement* [3] —although some sources identify a similar ford of the Bronx River to the east as the origin of the name.

In 1669, Johannes Verveelen moved his ferry to the location of the wading place. Verveelen had originally provided this service between the Dutch settlement of *Nieuw Haarlem*—originating in the vicinity of the modern East 123rd Street—and the mainland of the current Bronx across the Harlem River. However, the Harlem ferry, for which fees were charged, was not able to divert travelers away from the wading place, which was seen as more convenient, despite the limitations of the tides, and was of course free.[4]

Losing money, Verveelen was directed by the Harlem authorities to fence off the approach to the wading place, which he did, only to have his fences torn down by travelers on multiple occasions. Harlem officials moved to abandon the ferry, thus potentially heightening Verveelen's financial losses. Alarmed, Verveelen reached out to the provincial Governor (New York was by this time a British colony), who interceded and reached a consensus with the Harlem officials to

[2] Stephen Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1912; page 182
[3] William Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil, A Historical Epitome of the Northwest Bronx* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1968) page 11
[4] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, pages 179-180

move the ferry to the environs of the wading place.[5] This initial interplay of cost and convenience would be a harbinger of future controversy.

Almost three decades later, in 1693, as a result of increasing population and travel, the ferry was replaced by the original King's Bridge, the first constructed connection between Manhattan and the mainland. Thus, a vestige of indigenous mobility patterns was influencing the European development of northern Manhattan and the adjacent areas of the modern Bronx.[6]

Bridges and tunnels are prominent and often problematic components of modern transportation infrastructure. If you ask a present-day New Yorker about the oldest bridge currently in New York City, chances are that the Brooklyn Bridge, opened in 1883, would be their response. Another possible response—from the more historically astute —would be the High Bridge, built in the mid-1800s to carry an aqueduct across the Harlem River between the Bronx and Manhattan.

In fact, the High Bridge is the oldest *existing* bridge in New York City, but not the oldest ever built. The 1693 King's Bridge is the progenitor of all the constructed water crossings so important to modern New York City and its region. Although historically noteworthy, the King's Bridge was structurally insignificant in comparison to the arched bulk of the High Bridge. It crossed the tidal Spuyten Duyvil Creek at the wading place—and supplanted Verveelen's ferry—from modern Marble Hill, then part of Manhattan Island, to the mainland in the modern Bronx.

Figure 2 - King's Bridge Depicted in the Nineteenth Century

Remarkably, the King's Bridge existed in two versions for just over two centuries, from 1693 to approximately 1914, when the remnants of the bridge—stripped of its lumber—were buried in the landfill that ended the existence of the creek.

[5] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, pages 182-183
[6] Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil,* page 16

The original bridge was constructed in 1693 by Frederick Philipse and was maintained as a *toll* bridge by the Philipse family until the American Revolution.[7] Born Vrederick Flypsen in 1626 in the Dutch province of Friesland, Philipse immigrated to New Netherland in 1647 as the *official carpenter* of the Dutch West India Company, a position he left in 1660 and thereafter began a career as a trader. His marriage to the widowed Margariet Hardenbroek De Vries in 1662 increased both his wealth and his trading enterprise, given her independent trading fleet—inherited from her deceased first husband—and experience. Philipse's trade operations included fine textiles, pots, shoe buckles, paper, spices and enslaved Africans.[8]

It is notable—and tragic—that the Philipses, specifically Frederick and his wife, and their son Adolph, were among the largest enslavers in colonial New York. As early as 1680, their trading cargo included African captives, some who were enslaved on their properties while others were sent to sugar plantations throughput the Caribbean. By the 1690s, they were trading African captives with pirates along the coast of Madagascar, an illicit trade yielding tremendous profit for the Philipses and great suffering for many African captives.[9]

With Philipse's wealth growing from the addition of his wife's family affluence and his trading operations in both commodities and humans, he turned to land acquisition. With two partners, he purchased land in 1672 that had been granted to Adriaen van der Donck under the Dutch West India Company's patroonship system. Ultimately, after additional purchases in the 1680s, he owned vast tracts that included what is now the northwest Bronx, the City of Yonkers, and portions of southern and central Westchester County.[10]

The origin of the King's Bridge defined its eventual operation. In response to the increased travel between Manhattan and the mainland, a provincial council called for the construction of a bridge in 1680 and a bill to erect one was introduced in 1691. The provincial Governor recommended its construction by the municipal authorities in Manhattan, who were deterred by the cost.[11]

This municipal inertia led to the offer by Philipse to construct the bridge in 1693 at his own expense on the condition that it would be tolled. A franchise to do so was granted in June of 1693, with the caveat that the bridge would be free for the King's forces.[12] Philipse's offer was likely one of self-interest, given his real estate holdings in the area. His condition that a toll be part of the bridge's operation would be a potent source of revenue as well as a point of contention.

The original bridge was a wooden structure twenty-four feet wide which crossed the narrow tidal strait close to the current intersection of West 230th Street and Broadway. It was fitted with a

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[7] *The Story of Two Forgotten and Buried New York City Bridges.* Stuff Nobody Cares About, 2019. www.stuffnobodycaresabout.com

[8] *The Philipse Family*. Philipse Manor Hall. www.philipsemanorhall.com

[9] *The Philipse Family and the Slave Trade*. People Not Property. www.peoplenotproperty.hudsonvalley.org

[10] Dennis J. Maika, *Philipsburg Manor* in Peter Eisenstadt (ed.) *Encyclopedia of the State of New York* (First ed.) (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005) page 1199

[11] Thomas H. Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge, Now Part of the 24th Ward, New York City* (New York City: privately printed, 1887) page 15

[12] Ibid

gate at one end and with a draw to allow the passage of maritime traffic. A bridge keeper collected tolls at the gate. A public house was opened on the mainland adjacent to the bridge's original landing.[13]

In 1713, the provincial Assembly authorized that the bridge be moved to its second location to the west of the original, proximate to the modern intersection of West 230th Street and Kingsbridge Avenue, due to flooding at high tide on the Manhattan side at the original site.[14]

Ownership of each version of the bridge continued in the Philipse family, passing down to Frederick's great-grandson – Colonel Frederick Philipse -- until finally ending when forfeited as the Revolution was drawing to a close.[15] In 1779, the then State Assembly sequestered the Philipse's manor lands "on account of the treason and disloyalty of Colonel Frederick Philipse", the aforementioned loyalist great-grandson. As of this forfeiture, the bridge toll was permanently removed.[16]

The existence of tolls on the bridge and its limited operation overnight became increasingly contentious as northern Manhattan and areas to the north in the current Bronx and southern Westchester County continued to develop. The bridge provided critical access to the Albany and Boston post roads to the north and east; post roads which prefigured the modern Interstate 87 and Interstate 95.[17]

Access to the post roads only served to heighten the debate over the operation of the King's Bridge. As Willian Tieck notes in his exhaustive 1968 history of this area of the current Bronx:

> *The sturdy pioneers who settled the region smarted under its tolls far more than we do under those exacted from us. The charges mounted to 'a grievous Imposition'. Equally galling was the fact that the tolls went into the coffers of the opulent Philipse family, who owned everything practically from the bridge to the Croton River.*[18]

By the 1750s, discontent with the tolls and the limited operation of the King's Bridge was growing. A movement arose to build a free bridge, spearheaded by Benjamin Palmer, a notable and entrepreneurial figure in the mid-1700s. Palmer was the son-in-law of Thomas Pell, an English physician who obtained significant land from indigenous people in and around what is now the Town of Pelham in Westchester County. Palmer purchased what is now City Island in the east Bronx in 1761 with the intention of turning it into a rival port city to Manhattan.[19]

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[13] Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge,* pages 15-16
[14] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, pages 187-188
[15] Edsall, *History of the Town of Kingsbridge,* page 16
[16] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, page 188
[17] Ian Frazier, *Paradise Bronx, The Life and Times of New York's Greatest Borough* (New York: Picador; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024) page 51
[18] Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil,* page 21
[19] Larissa Zimberoff, *City Island: The Closest Little Island in NYC You Didn't Know About*. Untapped New York, June 10, 2014. www.untappedcities.com

In 1756, the discontent with the bridge peaked. The French and Indian War was in progress and British troops were moving into and out of New York City. Farmers on the mainland were among those supplying the military and the bridge tolls were becoming a greater burden, as well as a source of additional revenue for the Philipses.[20] Seizing the moment, Palmer started a popular subscription to raise funds for the construction of a free bridge between Manhattan and the mainland to counter the King's Bridge.[21] As Tieck describes:

> *It remained for Benjamin Palmer . . . to challenge the powerful Colonel Frederick Philipse and his monopoly. This Palmer did in May 1756, by publishing a ringing declaration in which he accepted the leadership of the free bridge forces and urged the public to support the cause through subscriptions. His temper is further evidenced by the fact that he sought neither authority nor approval from the Crown.*[22]

This eighteenth century example of *crowdfunding* raised capital for the construction of a public good. There would be no financial return to the subscribers. Instead they would share access to a free public facility—the free bridge—which would be available to all who desired to make passage. The free facility would directly compete with a privately owned and tolled facility controlled by a wealthy trader, slave holder and owner of enormous tracts of land. And it would be undertaken without any official designation from municipal or provincial authorities. A bold and democratic endeavor indeed.

With sufficient subscriptions in hand, Palmer initially sought to construct the free bridge in the vicinity of the site of the 1693 King's Bridge. However, this would require landing the bridge on the mainland within the Philipse's manor holdings, and the Colonel of course objected. Philipse's opposition to the project was fierce. As Palmer's papers themselves describe:

> *. . . I was twice pressed in one year as a soldier, to go to Canada, there then being a war between England and France; therefore, I was obliged to hire two men to go in my place. . . . [This was] supposed by people in general, as well as myself, to have been the orders of Colonel Philipse; because he knew it would stop his bridge from taking toll. Notwithstanding this, I continued building the free bridge until finished.*[23]

Palmer turned to two sympathetic landowners in order to locate the bridge - Jacob Dyckman in Manhattan and Honnas Vermilye on the mainland. The eventual bridge, coinciding with the modern West 225th Street to the east of modern Broadway, crossed at a wider location than the area of the 1693 King's Bridge to the north, which roughly doubled its cost.[24] Regardless, the bridge was completed by the end of 1758 and opened for travel on New Year's Day 1759; an

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[20] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, page 190
[21] Blake A. Bell, *More About Benjamin Palmer's Involvement with Raising Funds for a Free Bridge from Manhattan.* Historic Pelham, May 17, 2006; www.historicpelham.blogspot.com
[22] Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil,* page 22
[23] Ibid
[24] Ibid

event celebrated with a great barbeque and general rejoicings. A road was built on the mainland connecting the bridge to the Albany and Boston post roads.[25]

Figure 3 - 1777 British Map Showing Locations of the King's Bridge and Free Bridge (noted as "Dyckman's Bridge")

The impact of the free bridge on the King's Bridge was what one might expect. As Jenkins describes:

> *The toll bridge fell into disuse, the gatekeeper gave up his position, and Colonel Philipse had to advertise for a new lease. From this time forth, it was virtually a free bridge also.*[26]

As discussed earlier, the toll on the King's Bridge was officially terminated in 1779 with the sequestration of the Philipse's lands and holdings.

The original free bridge did not survive the American revolution as it was destroyed during the British occupation. Jenkins relates that it was rebuilt after the war and—like the King's Bridge—existed into the early 20th Century.[27]

[25] Jenkins, *The Story of the Bronx*, page 191
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid, page 192

Figure 4 - The Free Bridge (noted as Farmer's Bridge) in the Early Twentieth Century

NO. 14B—FARMER'S BRIDGE OVER SPUYTEN DUYVIL CREEK (DISCONTINUED AUGUST, 1911) NOW FILLED IN.

The result of this eighteenth century tolling dispute is a fascinating historical example of the creation and operation of infrastructure for the public good. In one case, an affluent landholder used private wealth to create and control infrastructure that was limited in operation and costly to both travelers using it and farmers moving their goods. In the other case, popular dissent led to private contributions being pooled to create infrastructure that was then open to all at no cost. Beyond a legislative action and issuing a franchise in the first case, governmental entities had little involvement in the construction of these facilities.

It is also an early example of democratic resistance to the quasi-feudal manorial system that had carried over from the original Dutch colony, resulting in a shift away from private ownership toward collective public ownership of infrastructure. Tieck's summation of this saga in local and state history is indicative of the forces at work:

> *Palmer had originally endeavored to finance the project by subscription, but in the end he had to take a heavy personal loss in spite of repeated attempts to recover from the state and even though, as he pointed out, his free bridge "had saved many thousands of pounds to the people."*
>
> *More important were the social and political consequences of the venture. Wealthy hauteur was made to bow before the will of the commonality. The power and prestige of Frederick Philipse, third lord of the manor, could not prevail over the "spirited exertions of Mr. Palmer," a yeoman. Entrenched privilege had been shaken by the gathering forces of democracy.*

Commenting on Palmer's accomplishment many years later, an editorial in the New-York Gazette *summed it up in the declaration that the free bridge "was the first step towards freedom in this state."*[28]

[28] Tieck, *Riverdale, Kingsbridge, Spuyten Duyvil,* page 24