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NEW NEW BRIDGE

By Mary McAuliffe

After years of painstaking renovation, the old Pont Neuf—New Bridge—is like new again

I leaned against the protective fencing along the Quai du Louvre, watching the workmen below me chip away at the block-and-mortar underpinning of the Pont Neuf, or New Bridge. The four-centuries-old span across the Seine was once the newest bridge in Paris; now it's the city's oldest. Or is it?

History certainly is on the Pont Neuf's side. Its genesis goes back to the reign of Henri III, who laid its first stone in 1578. According to a 1577 painting in the Musée Carnavalet, based on a design approved by the king, this bridge was from the outset conceived as a break with the past. Unlike its neighboring bridges (which can also be glimpsed in the painting), this one would not have houses crowding each side. Nor would it rest precariously on wooden stilts. Instead, it would be house free, built of stone and solidly supported by stone arches.

Spanning the Seine had never been an easy task, and the king and his engineers had a wealth of bad examples to avoid. From the outset, the islanded center of Paris had been linked to both the Right and Left banks by wooden bridges, at the present sites of the Petit Pont and the Pont Notre Dame. These repeatedly succumbed to flood and fire, and at length the original Grand Pont (at today's Pont Notre Dame) underwent so many disasters that Parisians finally abandoned it, building another bridge just to the west.

This created a strange dogleg route for those wishing to cross what now is the Ile de la Cité. But the new Grand Pont (which eventually became known as the Pont au Change, named for the moneychangers who crowded its span) was there to stay. Louis VI emphatically underscored this point by fortifying the bridge's entrance with a stone defensive gate, the Châtelet, and by reconstructing the entire bridge of stone. This not only protected the city from marauders, but also gave some permanence to the bridge itself, which lasted a good century and a half before collapsing in floodwaters. Its successors, although also made of stone, were

lined with houses and jammed with mills between their piles. One of these bridges lasted for almost a century, but another collapsed after only 16 years.

In the meantime, the tiny Petit Pont, linking the island with the Left Bank, was having an exceptionally rough time. For centuries it remained a wooden structure, burdened with



houses and vulnerable to the fierce floods that repeatedly swept it downstream (some six times between 1196 and 1326). It certainly was not a safe place to live, but Paris was crowded, and people persisted in taking their chances. As the years went on and the population crunch intensified, these bridge houses grew taller and taller—some five stories high, according to a model of early Paris in the Musée Carnavalet. No wonder that this top-heavy load so easily collapsed under raging floodwaters.

It was only the construction of the Pont St-Michel, just a bit downstream, that won the Petit Pont a reprieve. The Pont St-Michel, completed in 1387, was a new and modern bridge, built of stone and designed to link the Grand Pont (or Pont au Change) in a direct line with the Left Bank. The Pont St-Michel was a source of immense pride, and its safety and welfare required extraordinary measures. So after careful consideration, the Petit Pont was now rebuilt in stone; not on its own merits, but to prevent it

from sweeping downstream yet again and this time taking the Pont St-Michel with it.

The last of this early bunch of bridges was the Pont Notre Dame, which in the early 15th century finally replaced the link (the original Grand Pont) that had gone missing all those years before. It was an important link, directly connecting the harbor and commercial district of the Right Bank with the Ile de la Cité and the Left Bank. Yet no one seemed to have paid much attention to the centuries of disasters that preceded this bridge, and amazingly enough, the first Pont Notre Dame was made of wood. Not only that, it was poorly built and encumbered with 65 houses as well as a full complement of mills between its piles. But despite years of warning signs, nothing significant was done to prevent disaster, which at last struck in 1499, when a flood carried away the bridge and its many houses. Now at last willing to think sensibly, the city reconstructed the bridge in stone.

Thus when the idea of a new span across the Seine arose, it was this thought-provoking history that led Henri III's engineers to consider an entirely new kind of bridge. A bridge without mills (mills, after all, interfered with the natural flow of the current, sometimes disastrously). A bridge without houses (something that would not transform the other bridges of Paris until 1786, when their houses were taken down). A bridge built solidly of stone. A thing of beauty, and a source of civic and royal pride.

The king was pleased with the idea. After all, a bridge was certainly needed at the western end of the island. For years, the only way across the Seine in this part of town was a ferry (the name Rue du Bac retains this memory). But, unlike earlier bridges, which spanned the Seine at its narrowest point, this one would have a broad stretch of water to cover. Another difficulty would be crossing the marshy tip of the Ile de la Cité, which drifted into inconsequential and flood-prone islets.

Henri III's elabo- (continued on page 7)

rate scheme, as captured by that 1577 painting, never came to pass—at least, not quite as he (or the artist) originally imagined it. The religious and civil warfare that had been tearing France apart continued unabated, and in 1589, the king himself was murdered. Henri of Navarre, champion of the Huguenots, or French Protestants, claimed the crown but had to fight for it. After unsuccessfully besieging Paris, he at length agreed to convert to Catholicism—a shrewd move that ensured him his coronation as Henri IV. Thoroughly pragmatic, this Henri had no problem with a purely political solution to virtual anarchy. Paris, as he so famously remarked, was well worth a Mass.

Not until 1599 did work on the Pont Neuf really begin—this time under the aegis of a king who dearly loved Paris and who already was embarked on a massive building program to enhance her beauty. Henri IV retained his predecessor's expansive vision, if not his exact specifications, and soon the waterlogged area at the Cité's tip was drained and the islets joined into what is now the much-loved Square du Vert-Galant. A massive terrace was then built to support the central portion of the new bridge—a striking stone structure completed in 1607. Stretching an impressive 912 feet long, the new bridge spanned the Seine's southern arm to the Left Bank in five magnificent arches, while seven more arches spanned the river's northern and far wider arm to the Right Bank.

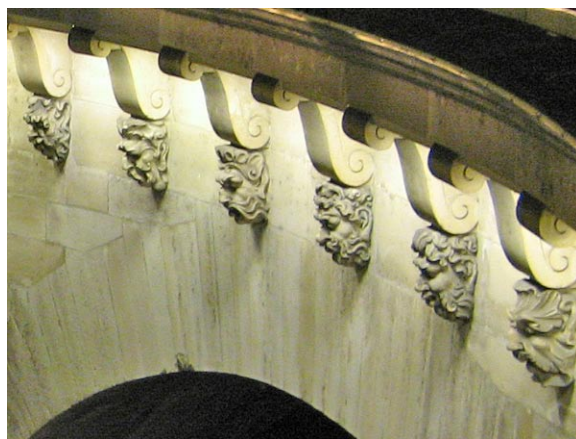
The Pont Neuf was not the first long-span stone bridge with multiple arches to appear in Western Europe. Venice's famous Rialto preceded it by about a decade, providing essential knowledge of the technique of spread footings—multiple timber piles on which stone piers were laid. But the confidence exhibited by the Pont Neuf's architects (primarily Baptiste Androuet du Cerceau and Guillaume Marchand) was exhilarating. With the all-important backing of their king, who seemed to understand these matters, they created a stunning as well as practical structure, one designed for the ages.

Parisians flocked to the new bridge, whose broad central terrace and pedestrian sidewalks drew crowds of strollers and revelers. Small shops quickly sprouted in the semi-circular niches along the sides, while buskers and peddlers gave the bridge a celebrational air. Royalty's presence at the nearby Louvre meant frequent entertainments, and crowds regularly gathered on the bridge to see sumptuous aquatic festivals or fireworks displays under the watchful gaze of a heroic equestrian statue of Henri IV (placed there, after his death, by Henri's queen, Marie de Médicis). With its entertainment value and cachet secured, the Pont Neuf quickly became the place to see and be seen, a kind of Champs-Élysées and Eiffel Tower combined. Its easily recognizable features figure large in any number of paintings

of the period.

While Parisians and tourists enjoyed themselves along the Pont Neuf's walkways, business was being conducted as usual at a lower level. Here mills floated, moored to the bridge's piles—much as with the other bridges along the river's northern arm. But these hazards eventually disappeared, as did the Pont Neuf's public baths, which were popular during the 18th century.

During these years, the Pont Neuf did its bit to increase the quantity of drinking water available to the Louvre and its surrounding neighborhood. Soon after the bridge's completion, Henri IV had a huge water pump built on its western side. It was promptly named the Samaritaine—eventually lending its name to the department store that, more than two centuries later, became a Paris landmark. The



building that housed the pump was attractive, even though the water it supplied was hardly pristine. The more finicky let the liquid settle before drinking it, but no one yet had drawn a connection between the Seine's obvious pollution and the epidemics that regularly raged throughout the city.

After a couple of hard-working centuries, the Samaritaine water pump was finally dismantled in 1813. Its sister pump, on Pont Notre Dame, survived until 1858. By this time, the Pont Neuf was understandably in need of repair. Six of its seven arches across the northern arm of the Seine were now reconstructed. This in turn was followed by the renovation of several arches over the Seine's southern arm, after one of these arches collapsed. The original roadway was now lowered and flattened, and the bridge's foundations braced and strengthened.

During this long process, the more than 300 famed masks, or "mascarons," decorating the arches were removed and replaced with copies. You can see four of these highly imaginative grotesques in the Musée Carnavalet, along with fragments of the original sculpture of Henri IV and his horse, which the Revolutionaries destroyed in 1792. The current version of Henri, by the way, is an 1818 copy of the original, installed once the monarchy was safely restored. (For the record, the Pont Neuf's huge candelabras were installed in 1854.)

By 1990, barely a century after the Pont Neuf's last renovation, another was needed. The ancient bridge was now withstanding velocities and weights that its original architects could never have imagined. The goal was to complete this massive project by 2007, the 400th anniversary of the Pont Neuf's original inauguration.

And so the huge project began. Of all its many requirements, the most delicate certainly was the replacement, once again, of the many mascarons. Because who could possibly picture the Pont Neuf without its mascarons? With this in mind, workers laboriously made casts of each of these fabulous grotesques, allowing sculptors to create faithful reproductions.

Stone for the entire renovation—a creamy white limestone closely resembling that used in the bridge's original construction—was specially selected from the quarry of Saint-Pierre-Aigle, situated northeast of Paris. Once extracted, each stone was rough-hewn and shaped for its particular spot, and then put into place via three-level scaffolding reaching from water level to bridge-top. Like me, you probably have watched this scaffolding inch its way along from the Left Bank to the Right for the past few—or should I say many—years.

Reconstruction began on the shorter portion, or Petit Bras, followed by work on the Grand Bras. By the time I was peering through the protective fencing along the Quai du Louvre, the workers had reached the last three arches connecting the bridge to the Right Bank. There they were, practically beneath my feet, chipping and pounding away.

And now the job is finished—a major accomplishment. Yet after all is said and done, do we now have a Pont Neuf that is new or one that is old? Perhaps a little bit of both. In design, of course, the bridge is old—as close to original as humanly possible. In actual structural materials, it is mostly new, although perhaps astonishingly, its original wooden piles (well reinforced) still remain. But most importantly, the Pont Neuf's spirit clearly lingers on. We should recognize its vitality, thrill to its beauty and laud the farsighted men of imagination who made it possible. With a little luck and regular upkeep, this beautiful bridge could well be around for at least another 400 years.

•The paintings, mascarons and fragments of the original equestrian statue of Henri IV mentioned in this article can be found on the ground and first floors of the Musée Carnavalet: 23 Rue de Sévigné, 3rd. Tel: 1-44-59-58-58. Open: Tues-Sun, 10am-6pm. Some rooms open for limited hours or on alternate days. No admission charge. Site: www.carnavalet.paris.fr.

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