



## 37: Colin Campbell Cooper *Main Street Bridge, Rochester* (1908)

Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsleck

Mrs. Cooper says that the *Main Street Bridge* picture, whenever it has been shown at exhibitions, has attracted much attention, because people are surprised that such a foreign looking place can be found in America....People always compare it with the Ponte Vecchio at Florence, which rather proves my assertion that "any old thing" is good enough when the sun falls on it right.

—Colin Campbell Cooper<sup>1</sup>

Colin Campbell Cooper and his wife Emma Lampert were inveterate travelers in search of subjects to paint. Until Emma's death in 1920, they were based in Philadelphia and New York City, and their ties to upstate New York through Emma's friends and family often brought them to Rochester, where Cooper discovered many subjects to his liking.<sup>2</sup> Although he studied under Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and also in Paris at the Académie Julian, it was likely the painter Childe Hassam's impressionist technique that influenced Cooper in his depiction of picturesque and colorful scenes. In the early years of the twentieth century, he was particularly interested in the buildings that were rapidly changing the Manhattan skyline, and his paintings of New York architecture were highly regarded.<sup>3</sup>

Cooper's Rochester visits resulted in an undetermined number of oil sketches and at least one major painting, *Main Street Bridge* (1908). Considering his interest in significant structures, it is not surprising that he chose to paint it and other Rochester landmarks, like the aqueduct and the Upper Falls.<sup>4</sup>

The bridge that Cooper painted remains the principal crossing of the lower Genesee River in Rochester, New York, and was the fourth construction on that site—more distinctive than its predecessors and tested by the ravages of time and the Genesee River itself. Before 1812, when Colonel Nathaniel Rochester and his partners, William Fitzhugh and Charles Carroll, first laid out the One Hundred Acre Tract on the west side of the Genesee River, the only bridge crossing was twenty miles to the south at Hartford, now Avon.<sup>5</sup>

A new crossing was needed to bring the recently opened Genesee Country into communication and commerce with the Niagara Region. Colonel Rochester must have noted when he purchased the One Hundred Acre Tract that the most advantageous crossing of the river was at the group of three small falls near the present Main Street Bridge. These falls together descended only fourteen feet, and while offering the necessary power to drive the waterwheels, the drop was not significant enough to hinder construction. In fact the low water made this an ideal location for a bridge.

Bridge construction began in 1810 and was completed in 1812 at a cost of twelve thousand dollars. It was constructed of wood and rested on wooden piers sunken into the stone riverbed. Since the east bank was much higher than the west bank, a ramp was required to reach the west side of the bridge floor. Farmers often stopped to water their horses where the water lapped up around the ramp. In the late fall of 1817 rushing flood water tore away at the piers and about five feet of the river's west bank were swept away. Increased travel and the threat of flood damage demanded a new, more accommodating bridge. The newly formed village of Rochesterville successfully petitioned the new County of Monroe for funding, and after a year of political bantering a contract for six thousand dollars was awarded to Elisha Johnson. The bridge was finally completed in December 1824, one year after the Erie Canal aqueduct two short blocks to the south.

Colin Campbell Cooper,  
1856–1937  
*Main Street Bridge, Rochester*,  
1908  
Oil on canvas, 26 1/4 x 36 in.  
Gift of Mr. Hiram W. Sibley,  
26.20

Soon enough, the new bridge began to fulfill the promise of its desirable commercial location. Within three years, two businesses crept out on the piers on the north side. Business lots were becoming scarce near the bridge, and because the rapids made this section of the river non-navigable, owners took advantage of the fact that they owned to the middle of the river and began to build out over the bridge abutments. The village itself built the first public market over the river at the northwest end. Farmers had sold their goods there for years, taking advantage of the traffic. In fact, the Main Street Bridge would be distinguished from all bridges in America and invite comparison to Ponte Vecchio in Florence.<sup>6</sup>

By 1830 the entire north side of the bridge was built over with wooden structures, the preferred stone buildings being too heavy. A substantial exception was the four-story stone Globe Building built to rest on the east end of the bridge. It housed small factories and, after the commercial Reynolds Arcade, was the pride of the village. But building on the bridge was risky. A fire in 1834 and floods in 1835 and 1836 devastated the bridge, the market, and many of the surrounding buildings. Still the Main Street Bridge remained a preferred location for business. Rather than relocate, the city planners looked to control the river and rebuild the bridge stronger.<sup>7</sup>



Main Street Bridge Over  
the Genesee River  
ca. 1890s  
Courtesy Rochester  
Public Library

A third bridge was built in 1837 with stone piers and an elevated east abutment to meet the rise in the road there, although plans for a cost-prohibitive all-stone bridge were abandoned. Within a short time the north side of the new bridge was lined with one- and two-story wooden buildings housing dry goods and inexpensive clothing shops, a few drug stores, and shops that advertised unusual wares. Even so, it was not an adequate crossing for the needs of the rapidly growing city.

Agitation for the fourth generation of the Main Street Bridge, which appears in Colin Campbell Cooper's painting and upon which we walk and ride today, was precipitated by the need for a stronger and wider bridge that would replace the deteriorated wooden floor and sidewalks with substantial stone. For two decades the thousands of horses' hooves and heavily laden wagons had taken their toll on the bridge and rendered it dangerous. *The Daily Union* remarked that if people knew the condition of the bridge under the planks only the stout-hearted would cross.<sup>8</sup>

Work on the bridge began in September of 1855 after long, heated discussions over the number and shape of the arches, and the number and placement of the supports. Much had been learned over the years about the toll the river's flooding could take on the piers as well as the need to allow for clear passage of the river under the arches. Millers and commercial lot owners complained that any further construction of supports in the river impeded the river's flow and endangered their businesses. It was decided to rest the bridge on five rounded stone arches with piers adequate to support buildings on both the north and south sides. The cost soared as contractors found that Elisha Johnson had compromised the new bridge's soundness by using dirt instead of stone when he reinforced the east abutment in 1824. The controversies and changes of personnel delayed the start of construction so that the annual fall flooding swept away the work that had been done the month before. After eight thousand dollars invested, the city had nothing but a stack of stone waiting to be placed.<sup>9</sup> Construction delays, flood damage, changes in design, and cost overruns further plagued the project. Though the keystone set July 29, 1857, was celebrated that weekend, the Medina stone pavement was not finished until the following summer and the temporary wooden sidewalk served much longer.<sup>10</sup> Like the third bridge, the fourth bridge, painted by Cooper, was soon filled with buildings that housed businesses ranging from the Rochester Printing Company that printed the *Democrat and Chronicle*, to clothing and shoe stores and one store listed in the 1907–1908 City Directory as selling "kodaks."

Colin Campbell Cooper's depiction of the Main Street Bridge is the image most popularly held. This fourth bridge over the Genesee River holds the same attraction as the first—it is the heart of commerce, the connection between east and west, and the place everyone wants to be. When Cooper set out to paint the bridge around 1908, he selected an interesting vantage point—the back of the bridge buildings, from the south. This might seem odd at first, but it was a fortunate choice, because it also gave him the opportunity to paint the light on the river, the bridge's *raison d'être*. To paint from this angle, he must have had access to a room in the Post Express Building, on South Water Street. Current visitors to the site would be standing on the terrace at the Rochester Convention Center.



Cooper captures the power of the river, its shallow, quiet current as it moves under the bridge around the heavy stone piers that support the buildings. Across the river a tailrace spills water back into the river after having generated power to the mills. Cooper's dramatic use of the bridge as a strong diagonal is consistent with the composition of some of his other urban scenes (*Wall Street, New York Cityscape*). While it was probably inadvertent, he leads the eye to the very spot that Nathaniel Rochester had determined would be a good location for water-powered mills, expanding the painting's already substantial role as an icon of local history. The mid-day sun casts shadows under the awnings that shade and cool the riverside apartments and back rooms of the businesses. After more than half a century, the ravages of time sag the balcony floors and rails. This rear view contrasts with the bustle of people, carriages, and bicycles that frequent the presentable, public front of the businesses.

Main Street Bridge Railings  
by Albert Paley, 1989  
Photograph by Bruce Miller  
Courtesy Paley Studios Ltd.

Cooper implies the humanity that drew people to the businesses on the Main Street Bridge. Darkness between the buildings across the river draws the viewer to look closer for other glimpses into life in 1908—a freeze-frame from one sunny afternoon. The movement in the sky is imperfectly reflected in the river below. The smoke moving slowly over the rooftops, carried by a gentle northward breeze, tells of life as usual on this day. Nothing out of the ordinary. The painting is a complex joining of long-gone buildings, each with its own story.

The bridge as Cooper shows it to us in 1908 has changed significantly over the years, although its stone arches and piers remain. Flood control studies blamed the constriction of the river's flow partly on the Main Street Bridge, but not until 1913 was a flood wall built on the west side and the arch obstructions removed on the east end. From 1915 to 1919 a river-deepening project further enabled the river to safely pass through the downtown. Since then, the Main Street Bridge surface has been repaved and improved a number of times. The buildings that once lined its sides obstructing the view of the Genesee River were removed in the urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s. Today iron rails wrought by noted sculptor Albert Paley grace the sides of the bridge. The Main Street Bridge, still the mainstay of the city's commerce and traffic, has changed since Colin Cooper's memorable view of it in 1908, but remains in some ways the same: always functional, always beautiful.

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