And Then There Was One - Demise of the C.C. Clay Bridge

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In 1931, a new bridge was finished at Ditto’s Landing, one of 15 memorial bridges built between 1929 and 1931 by the Alabama Bridge Company. The C. C. Clay Bridge cost more than $400,000 to build, an astonishing amount of money in those Depression days. Still, it gave many needy workers jobs, albeit temporary, through the Work Projects Administration, an agency formed to help keep people employed.

The completion of the bridge, which took two years, was much anticipated by those who had to use the ferry to cross the Tennessee River to get back and forth between Madison and Morgan County. The cantilever truss bridge opened for traffic as a toll bridge on March 13 with E. E. Terry, chairman of the Madison County Board of Commissioners being among the first to cross the bridge. By the time the official dedication was held on July 23, 1931, the bridge was the third most profitable bridge in Alabama. E. D. Johnston, a local attorney, was the main speaker at the 5 p.m. event attended by thousands of people. Guests of honor were Miss Emily Clay, the great-granddaughter of Clement Clay and her mother, Mrs. J. W. Clay. John Hay conducted the Joe Bradley “Million Dollar Band” as one of the ladies christened the bridge by breaking the ceremonial bottle of champagne onto the immense structure. The marker was unveiled and the crowd cheered. Huntsville’s mayor, A. W. McAllister, gave the welcoming address.

The bridge was a modern marvel. It had been over one hundred years since a man named James/John Ditto had established his ferry business in the same location. He had come from North Carolina, where he was a most unwelcome resident. Perhaps it had something to do with his role in the American Revolution. He was a Tory and was believed to have guarded over his neighbors who had sided with the rebellious American citizens. He and his neighbors barely tolerated each other, as court records indicate, and so he set off for a little peace and quiet. Ditto came to Hunt’s Spring, perhaps even before John Hunt did, but settled along the Tennessee River at a point that would become known as Ditto’s Landing, where he established a ferry business. Among his customers was a portion of Andrew
Jackson’s army as they made their way south to fight the Indians in the Creek Indian Wars.

Mr. Ditto found trouble again when the migration into this part of the country brought others who may have known of Mr. Ditto’s former allegiance to England – as court records again indicate. He stayed on however, and the community of Whitesburg grew up around the ferry landing. James White, the “Salt King” of Abingdon, Virginia, established the port community which thrived as more and more settlers poured into the region and sent their cotton on barges down the Tennessee River. Many wagons made their way from Cotton Row in downtown Huntsville down the Whitesburg Pike (present-day Whitesburg Drive) toward Ditto’s Landing.

The community, which was incorporated in December 1824, began to dry up when the railroad came to Huntsville. It was easier and more economical to send cotton on the train and so the people of Whitesburg left. In 1905, the post office closed, sounding the official death knell.
The ferry business survived however, and people still needed to get from one side to the other. More roads were being built and so, under the administration of Governor Bibb Graves, fifteen bridges would be completed and named in memory of outstanding Alabama figures. The Whitesburg bridge was named for one of Huntsville's most outstanding citizens, Clement Comer Clay.

C. C. Clay came to north Alabama at a very exciting time in the territory's history. His law office was established one block from the courthouse. He rented out one room to the post office and the upstairs to a team of surveyors. He was very intelligent, if somewhat contentious, and was chosen to chair the committee of 15 men who put the first Alabama constitution onto paper for the 44 delegates to the 1819 convention to haggle over. He of course was one of those distinguished delegates who helped usher the 22nd state of the Union into the greatest nation in the world.

Clement Clay was the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama, a member of the Alabama Legislature, and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He accepted the nomination for governor in 1835, and beat his opponent 2-1, making him the 8th governor. Before he completed his term in office however, he resigned to become a member of the U.S. Senate, where he served until 1841. In 1846, Mr. Clay retired from public life. His life would not end in quiet comfort however. He was arrested and questioned by members of the Union occupation in 1862 and kept under house arrest for much of the remainder of the Civil War. He died in poor health and poverty in 1866. His grave at Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville reflects his personal fortune with its very simple headstone.

Clement Clay's son, Clement Claiborne Clay, is perhaps even more well known than his father. As a member of the Alabama legislature, he announced that Alabama would secede from the Union. He became a member of Jefferson Davis' Confederate cabinet. At the end of the War, he turned himself into authorities when he found out there was a warrant for his arrest. He was imprisoned, along with Jefferson Davis, at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, accused of being part of a conspiracy to assassinate President Lincoln. Clay was released after one year and returned to Huntsville, in time to see his ailing father before his death.

The Clay Bridge was a fitting memorial to a prominent Alabama statesman, and so it was the contribution he made in life, and not the hardships that should be remembered. The 1,566 foot bridge was a formidable web of steel and concrete. Although there are few of us who will miss the white-
knuckle drive across the narrow two-lane bridge, we will certainly miss the nostalgia and perhaps the memory of our first journey across it. Soon after the toll bridge was completed, 4,000 ft of gravel was laid down on the dirt road that led to Lacey’s Spring. That same road was later finished all the way to Arab, and later it was paved all the way through Birmingham. Highway 231 was called the “Airline Highway,” known as the finest highway to Birmingham and “points South.”
After 75 years, it was time to retire the faithful bridge. A new $21.5 million three-lane bridge which took over four years to build, opened to traffic in June 2006. The Clay Bridge would have to be removed in order to build yet another bridge, to begin construction in 2007 to carry northbound traffic over the river. The Department Of Transportation had hoped that a preservation group would take the Clay Bridge, but where would one put an enormous historic bridge? And how would one get it there?

And so in the summer of 2006, the explosives experts began work to demolish the grand old bridge. Thousands of people came to see the demise of the landmark in stages. It will take several weeks to bring down the bridge, one section at a time, until all that is left are white-knuckle memories and pictures.

Of the 15 original WPA bridges, only one survives – the B. B. Comer Bridge in Scottsboro. But time is running out for the Comer Bridge as well, it too is scheduled for demolition.
The Huntsville Times, June 22, 2006 “Bridge offers wider road to town,” by Keith Clines.

