First Bridge Across Niagara River Started with a Kite String
16-year-old from Niagara Falls Spans River, Wins Contest, and Makes History

How Homan Walsh Won the Contest

Homan Walsh was born in Ireland and was 8 years old when his family moved to Niagara Falls, NY, in 1840.

He was one excited kid when he first heard of the kite flying contest and he began immediately to build himself a six-sided kite he called “Union.” The kite was known as a “barn-door” kite and it was covered in muslin or calico to withstand strong winds and dampness.

In January 1848, the contest began. Carrying his new kite and “balls of twine,” he took a ferry ride to the base of the falls to the Canadian side. (All the kites would be flown from the Canadian side to take advantage of the prevailing winds from the west.)

It was in the dead of winter and very cold, but Homan hiked 2 miles along the top of the gorge wall to the site of the planned bridge. Along with other contestants, Homan flew his kite all day and into the night. But the winds died down and the kite plummeted into the rocks and ice below, breaking the string.

He was stranded on the Canadian side for 8 days because a build up ice prevented the ferry from operating, so he stayed with some friends. Losing valuable time while the other contestants continued to fly their kites, Homan finally made it back to the U.S. to retrieve his kite at the bottom of the American gorge and make repairs.

Soon, the “Union” was as good as new and Homan made the trip back to the Canadian side to try again. On January 31, 1848, Homan successfully flew his kite across the 800-foot wide chasm to the American side where it got caught in a tree. He had won the contest!

The day after Homan's victorious effort, a stronger line was attached to the kite string. Afterwards, a thicker rope was attached and then a metal cable. Homan's string eventually turned into an entire bridge!