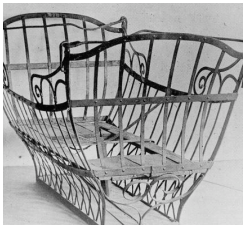


On Nov. 9, 1847, Charles Ellet, Jr. of Philadelphia was selected to construct the first bridge over the turbulent Lower Niagara River to connect the U.S. and Canada. It would be built at the

narrowest point, where today's Whirlpool Rapids bridge is located. Ellet would build a suspension bridge, beginning with stretching a line or cable across the water. However, since a boat couldn't navigate the swift rapids, how would he get the line across?

At first, the idea of shooting off fireworks with an attached rope could do the job. But it was decided it wouldn't work. Then, a local ironworker suggested offering a cash prize to the first boy who could fly his kite over the river to connect the Canadian and U.S. sides. The idea set off a stampede of young men who took up the challenge.



Six weeks after Homan Walsh successfully flew his kite over the Niagara River to connect the two countries, bridge contractor and engineer Charles Ellet, made the first crossing of the river in an iron basket he made. The iron basket would be winched from one side to the other by a man turning a windlass. Soon, riding in the iron basket became quite the novelty. Over 100 people a day paid \$1.25 to experience the death-defying ride over the Class 5 rapids. The iron basket is now part of the collection at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society.



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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 from 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 quickly 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!



Dozens of Teenagers From U.S. and Canada Participate in Kite Flying Contest in 1848

If you are going to build a suspension bridge over the treacherous whirlpool rapids, you need to start by connecting both sides. It was decided a kite string would work. Once the contest was announced, dozens of young men began making their kites and headed to the top of the Canadian gorge wall to try their luck. On his second attempt, Homan Walsh from Niagara Falls, New York, was successful in spanning the river with his kite. The 16 year old was awarded \$10 and bragging rights. Homan spent most of his adulthood in Nebraska, but when he died in 1899, at age 67, his body was brought back to his hometown. He is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Niagara Falls.

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