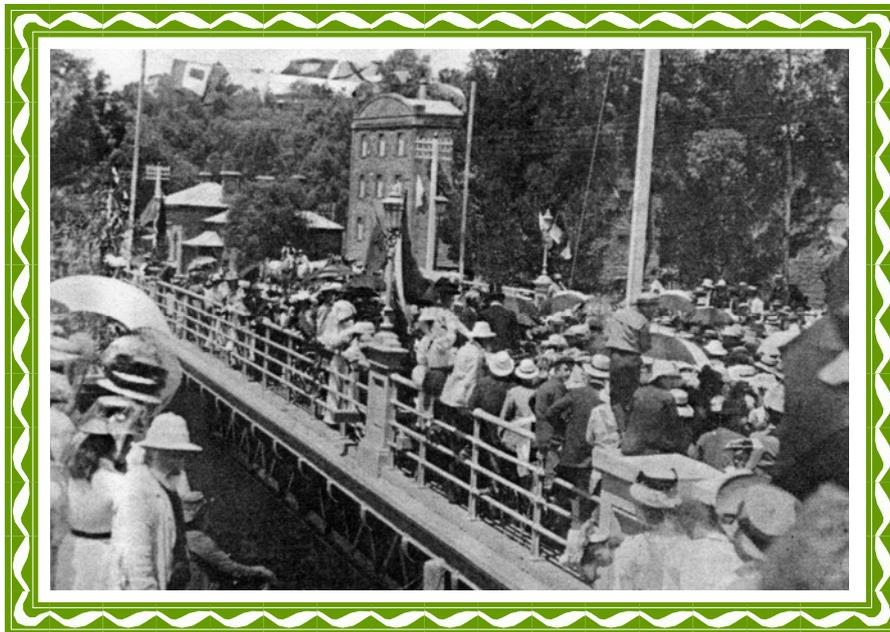




TOWN OF GAWLER

# *Gawler Mill Inn Bridge*



Official opening of Gawler Bridge, 22 January 1908  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

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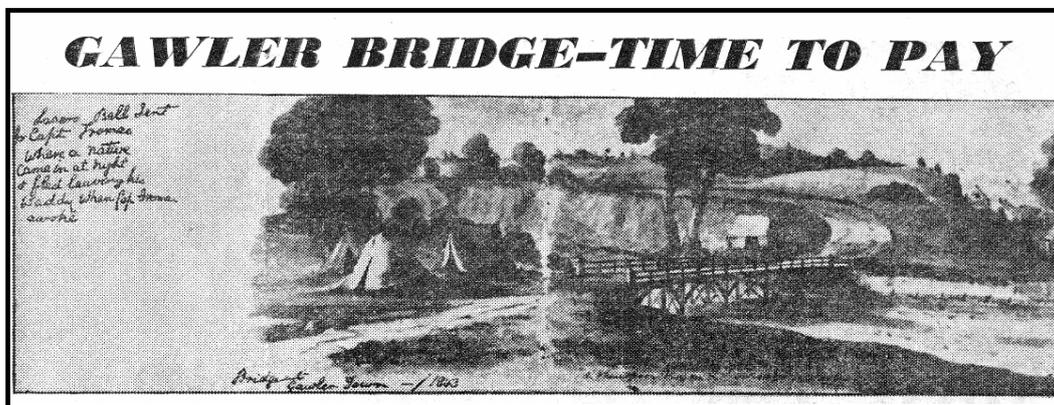


2.

The structure which spans the South Para River, near the Old Mill and linking Gawler to Gawler South, is the third bridge to be erected in that vicinity. It has been variously known as the South Para Bridge, the Mill Inn Bridge, Gawler Bridge and Adelaide Road Bridge.

The first bridge in Gawler was built in 1842 and was made of wood with sandstone abutments. It spanned the North Para River almost in line with Murray Street. In 1848, the first bridge over the South Para River was constructed. It was built of timber and served the town well until 1867 when a meeting of the influential inhabitants of the town decided that it was desirable to extend the railway from the railway station in Bassett Town to Murray Street.

*The Bunyip* report (May 18, 1867) was scathing, stating that even though attendees at the meeting were unanimous in the opinion that it was desirable to have a railway extension, each one had a different plan and ideas about how the project should be carried out. It seemed that the majority of the speakers believed themselves to be 'heaven-born engineers, capable of determining the most desirable route for a railway without going through the ordinary preliminary of a survey, &c'.



(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

By October 1867 Government funds of £2,500 were made available to re-build the bridge to accommodate the extension of the railway on the same site. A contract was let to Mr Nutt of Strathalbyn for a cost of £1186. A report from *The Bunyip* (May 7, 1870) gave details of materials to be used in the new bridge: five main girders, each 75 feet

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long and weighing 6.5 tons; ten girders each 30 feet long and weighing more than two tons each, five on each side of the bridge; five cross box girders on the abutments and piers, each 31.75 feet in length and weighing over two tons. Very little of the original structure was retained.

Coombe (p. 347) recounts the story of one workman having a narrow escape as he was working on the bridge:

*... while removing the old laminated arch it collapsed and he only saved himself by seizing a gas pipe, from which he hung suspended over the bed of the river until assistance could be given him.*

Sometime near the end of June 1870 the second bridge, known as the South Para Bridge, was declared open to traffic, having been inspected and found structurally sound. *The Bunyip* (June 25, 1870) reported that, on the very day the bridge was inspected, a flood came down the river which, had it come earlier, would have 'caused a considerable amount of inconvenience'.



South Para Bridge, ca. 1878  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

4.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the existing bridge was once again considered inadequate for the traffic passing over it. There were calls for a new bridge and when the Premier of South Australia, Thomas Price, visited Gawler early in October 1905, he was appraised of the state of the bridge which vibrated under the weight of the traffic it was carrying. The Mayor of Gawler, James Fergusson and the Chairmen of Gawler South and Munno Para West Councils (Mr Parker and Mr Roberts, respectively) reminded Mr Price that the South Para Bridge was vital to the town as it provided the only means for people to travel to the railway station. Mr Price undertook to have the matter of funding for a new bridge re-considered in Parliament.

Progress was slow and it was not until early 1907 that tenders were called for the construction of a new bridge using parts of the old bridge. Mr A. Schneemilch was awarded the contract and work began quickly. By June 1907 a portion of the roadway was fenced off, leaving barely enough space for two vehicles to pass. Fearing an accident in the dark, this prompted the Councils of Gawler and Gawler South to leave the lights at both the eastern and western ends of the bridge turned on all night. The Inspector for Council recommended that repairs be done to the Gawler West ford to make it available for traffic accessing the railway station.



South Para Bridge, pre-1908  
(State Library of South Australia, B20196)

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Tram bridge over South Para River, Gawler, pre-1907.  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

Because the firm of James Martin & Co. was in liquidation at the time, the delivery of the ironwork was delayed from July to November 1907. However, *The Bunyip* reported in early December that work had progressed sufficiently and that tram traffic would be stopped for about ten days and vehicular traffic for five to six weeks while construction was completed. Heavy traffic was to be diverted across Dead Man's Pass ford and lighter traffic was to use Gawler West ford. Some businesses in the town were disadvantaged by the temporary closure of the bridge - Albion Chaff Mills at the northern end of Murray Street shut down and took the opportunity to renew and overhaul machinery while others, among them Mr T. Ey, were forced to stockpile supplies such as wheat.

By mid-December, after the contractor had employed two shifts of men, the bridge was tested with a load of empty railway trucks passing over it prior to allowing the trams to resume. The town had suffered much inconvenience, but the benefit was one of the best bridges in the state of South Australia at that time. The cost was around £7,000.

Gawler Bridge was wholly constructed in Gawler and was built to the design of Mr W. M. Stevens, Engineer for Roads and Bridges. The contractor was Mr A. Schneemilch and the sub-contractor for the iron and steel work was James Martin & Co. (which was in liquidation at that time). Described as a steel lattice girder deck bridge, the main span of 79 feet and two end spans of 27 feet each are constructed from concrete. The bridge initially carried a roadway which was 21 feet wide, a footway which was six feet wide and a five feet three inch gauge railway. Portions of the piers of the old bridge were utilized and were reinforced with masonry and cement concrete. The abutments were built of cement concrete with brick parapets.

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On Wednesday 22 January, 1908, the new bridge was opened by the Governor of South Australia, Sir George Le Hunte and named and christened the 'Gawler Bridge' by Mrs E. H. (Sarah) Coombe, wife of E. H. Coombe MP. Mrs Coombe was given the honour in recognition of the persistence of her husband in lobbying for the bridge to be built. She 'manipulated a blue ribbon to which a bottle containing water from the river was attached'. In breaking it over the bridge railing, she declared "In the name of the Great Architect of the Universe I christen this bridge the Gawler Bridge". After the official ceremony, the Governor presented the neck of the broken bottle, around which was wrapped the ribbon, to Mrs Coombe as a memento of the occasion. She returned the compliment by giving the Governor another piece of ribbon which had been used during the ceremony.



The opening was a gala occasion for Gawler. Riggs' Brass Band played 'appropriate' music (including *The Song of Australia* and *The Old Rustic Bridge by the Mill*) and the State School Cadet Corps formed a guard of honour. The bridge was decorated with bunting, a dais was erected for the 'principal personages' and many people from Gawler and the surrounding area attended. As *The Bunyip* reported (January 24, 1908), the bridge was 'thronged from end to end'. Administration of the bridge was handed over to the Councils of Gawler and Gawler South and in his acceptance speech the Mayor of Gawler, William Dawkins, acknowledged the debt owed to the Government for allowing the bridge to be built despite opposition from some people in the State Government. The first 'trap' to traverse the bridge carried the Governor, Mrs Coombe, the Mayor and other dignitaries. After the ceremony at the bridge, the official party was entertained at the Town Hall.

#### **Mrs E. H. (Sarah) Coombe**

Daughter of Mary and Samuel Heywood, Sarah Susannah Fraser Heywood was born at Footscray, Victoria, in 1861. On 1 March 1880, she married Ephraim Henry Coombe at the Wesleyan Church, Pirie Street, Adelaide, after which they made their home at Willaston. In 1906 the Coombe family purchased a 'gentleman's residence' in Burrows Street, Willaston, which was built in the 1890s by Job Freak (blacksmith). Sarah Coombe died on 25 November 1923, aged 63 years, at Renmark. She is buried with her husband at Willaston Cemetery.

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Gawler Bridge, ca. 1908  
(State Library of South Australia, B37749)

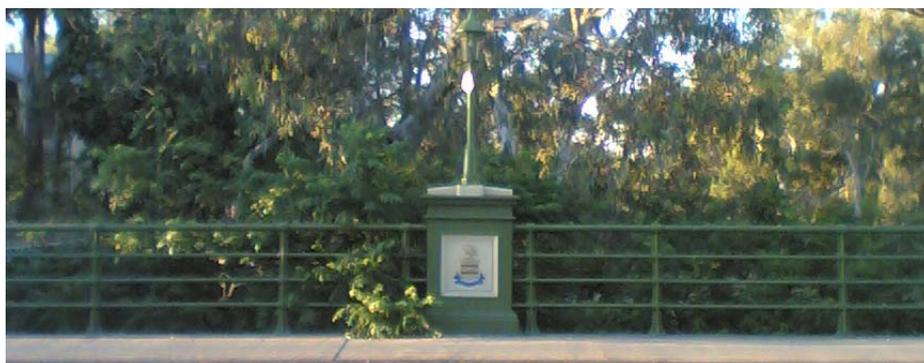


Gawler Bridge, ca. 1908  
(State Library of South Australia, B19378)

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Gawler Bridge, December 2007  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)



Gawler Bridge, December 2007  
(Town of Gawler, Gawler Heritage Collection)

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