II. TOLL BRIDGES AND TUNNELS

1. BRIEF HISTORY

Bridges, causeways, and tunnels are being combined under a single category because their functions are basically the same.

Toll bridges came into being for the same reason as toll roads. They became feasible and practical because of the demand for crossing a body of water at a particular point. Ferries powered by horses or oxen had a limited capacity and were adaptable for use only on relatively short crossings. As the demand for better crossings grew, enterprising individuals, and sometimes companies organized for this purpose, began constructing toll bridges under special charters to connect the primitive road system in the early years of our Nation. Thus, the first toll bridges, like toll roads, came into existence as a venture of private enterprise.

In a young, growing country having very limited tax resources, the advantages of private financing, ownership and operation of toll bridges were obvious. Public funds were not available, a crossing was definitely required and the private enterprise approach was the fastest and least painful way of providing a bridge, while at the same time avoiding direct responsibility for its operation and maintenance.

Unlike early toll roads, construction and operation of toll bridges flourished, and the trend toward publicly owned and operated toll bridges did not become general until about 1930.

Original statutory and policy opposition of the Federal Government to the imposition of tolls on all highway facilities was softened as to bridges in 1927. The "Oldfield Act" of that year provided that Federal-aid highway funds could be extended to the construction of any toll bridge and approaches thereto under certain conditions. These were: (1) that the bridge be owned and operated by States or their political subdivisions, and (2) that "all tolls received from the operation thereof, less the actual cost of operation and maintenance, are applied to the repayment to the State or States, or political subdivision or subdivisions thereof, of its or their part of the cost of construction of such bridge and, upon the further condition that when the amount (so contributed) shall have been repaid from the tolls, the collection of tolls for the use of such bridge shall thereafter cease, and the same shall be maintained and operated as a free bridge."

The statute was further amended in 1956 to include tunnels as well as bridges and has remained part of Federal law. Federal-aid funds were used in the construction of a number of bridges and/or approaches under the Oldfield Act, but several of these have since become toll free and only eight were in operation as toll facilities by the end of 1964.

The trends toward governmental ownership and the creation of special authorities and commissions to finance and operate toll bridges were revolutionary. Many of the original structures built by bridge companies had, by the late 1920's, become old or obsolete so that an entirely new and larger facility was required. In some instances, the original bridge owners could finance a new structure or rebuild the existing structure to new specifications. Others were not in a position to do so. The result was that a privately owned bridge was sometimes purchased by a municipality, a county or a State, which in turn operated it or created an authority or commission to provide, operate,