

## The Gold Star Bridge



An 1,100-ton truss span for the second Gold Star Memorial Bridge is floated into place on June 2, 1972, after it was built nearby at Whaling City Dredge and Dock in Groton. DAY FILE PHOTO

# The longtime struggle to fix Gold Star's epic traffic jams

Second bridge, which opened 50 years ago, was only part of the story

Story By **JOHN RUDDY**  
Graphics and Design By **SCOTT RITTER**  
Day Staff

IT ALL STARTED WITH SODA BOTTLES.

The driver of a pickup on the Gold Star Memorial Bridge, then a single span with two lanes in each direction, tried to pass the car ahead of him. When he changed lanes, cases of bottles he was carrying shifted, and the truck fishtailed. Then it climbed over the low concrete median and struck an oncoming car.

Maybe it was the three serious injuries that resulted, or traffic at a standstill for hours,

or just people's patience at a breaking point. But something about this accident in November 1967 struck a nerve. After years of worsening conditions on the bridge, letters started arriving at the governor's office, demanding action.

"Being a frequent user of this Bridge I like many other citizens have come to fear to cross it," one man wrote.

But little could be done. The solution was a second span, and that was already planned but still a long way off.

Fifty years ago in June, the Gold Star's long-awaited twin was finally finished, chang-

ing the region's transportation landscape. But even that didn't end the story.

The original span's completion in 1943 ended huge tie-ups on its predecessor, a converted railroad bridge that opened whenever a boat came along. But with time and more traffic, the Gold Star became the problem it was built to solve.

Fixing things was a bigger job the second time around. The solution had to account for busier roads, changes in traffic engineering and vast disruptions on the ground. A second span wasn't enough: The old bridge would also have to be widened to keep travel between



After this crash on the Gold Star on Nov. 29, 1967, in which three people were seriously injured and traffic was tied up for hours, letter writers demanded action from state officials and urged a higher median divider on the bridge. CONNECTICUT STATE LIBRARY

New London and Groton flowing for the long haul.

The entire drama played out over 20 years of construction, demolition, upheaval and death.



The accident that took a 16-year-old's life in July 1958 was an earlier breaking point. The fact that he'd had his driver's license just two days and was going 100 mph didn't seem to matter as much as the location.

The crash occurred at the corner of Colman Street and the Bridge Approach, a four-lane **SEE A MONUMENTAL PAGE A4**

# Post by Trump prompts appeal to judge

Justice Department seeks protective order

By **ALANNA DURKIN RICHER**  
Associated Press

The Justice Department has asked a federal judge overseeing the criminal case against former President Donald Trump in Washington to step in after he released a post online that appeared to promise revenge on anyone who goes after him.

Prosecutors on Friday requested that U.S. District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan issue a protective order concerning evidence in the case, a day after Trump pleaded not guilty to charges of trying to overturn his 2020 election loss and block the peaceful transition of power. The order, different from a "gag order," would limit what information Trump and his legal team could share publicly about the case brought by special counsel Jack Smith.

Chutkan on Saturday gave Trump's legal team until 5 p.m. Monday to respond to the government's request. Trump's legal team, which has indicated he would look to slow the case down despite prosecutors' pledge of a speedy trial, then filed a request **SEE TRUMP PAGE A6**

# With few limits, ARPA money a funding fountain for municipalities

Millions spent on assorted projects with little relation to effects of pandemic

By **CLAIRE BESSETTE** and **JOHN PENNEY**  
Day Staff Writers

Why did so many local towns and cities use federal pandemic relief money for purchases that ranged from new plow trucks, remodeled skate parks and the completion of luxury apartments?

Because they could. Not long after Connecticut municipalities learned of the hundreds of millions of dollars in American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, funding heading their way in 2021, the U.S. Treasury Department eased the rules governing its use and reporting.

"That opened the door on how that money could be spent," said Amanda Kennedy, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of **SEE ARPA PAGE A7**

RELATED STORY ON **D1**

## WEATHER

Today, mostly sunny and delightful. High 80. Monday, partly sunny and humid. High 77. **E6**

## INDEX

Books/**E2** Police logs/**D2**  
Business/**B1** Public notices/**C2**  
Classified/**C2** Puzzles/**C3**  
Comics/**G2** Region/**D1**  
Daybreak/**E1** Sports/**F1**  
Editorials/**B4** Stocks/**B5**  
Nation/**A3** Television/**E3**  
Obituaries/**D3,6** World/**A3**

## 'MONSTER HUNTERS' NEEDED FOR BIG SEARCH OF LOCH NESS

Seeking: monster hunters. The Loch Ness Centre is calling one and all to join a massive search this month for Nessie, the mythical beast said to inhabit the waters of Scotland's famed Loch Ness — hoping to make it the largest hunt for the monster in more than 50 years.

Experienced Nessie researchers will use modern technology that has never before scanned the waters, said the center, which runs an exhibition and tours of the lake. They're asking volunteers and "budding monster hunters" to join in and watch the surface of the 23-mile-long lake.

The event, scheduled for Aug. 26 and 27, could be the largest surface watch since 1972, said Alan McKenna of Loch Ness Exploration, a volunteer research team that's working with the Loch Ness Centre. Its organizers hope the "Quest Weekend" will draw searchers to join

the centuries-long tradition of looking for the Loch Ness monster.

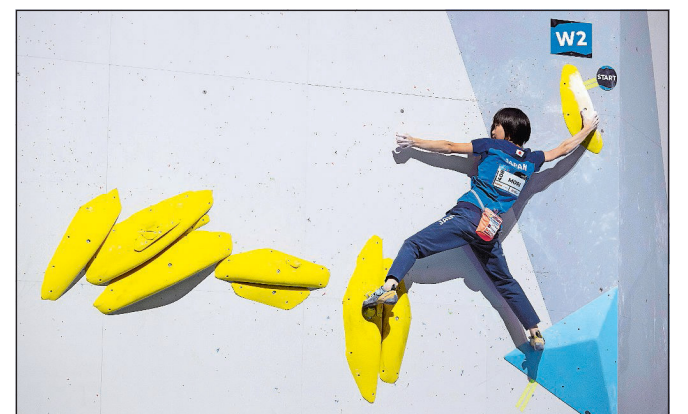
"It's our hope to inspire a new generation of Loch Ness enthusiasts," McKenna told the BBC. "You'll have a real opportunity to personally contribute towards this fascinating mystery that has captivated so many people from around the world."

Cradled by green slopes, the vast blue lake sits in the Scottish Highlands, near the city of Inverness and about a 3½-hour drive from Edinburgh. Though Nessie has never been proved to exist, the myth's attraction — like that of Bigfoot or Sasquatch — has endured over the decades, sparking research, exploration and stories.

McKenna told The Post on Saturday that he'd heard from many reporters and "friends from around the world" since the announcement of the project.

— **Washington Post**

## Fancy footwork

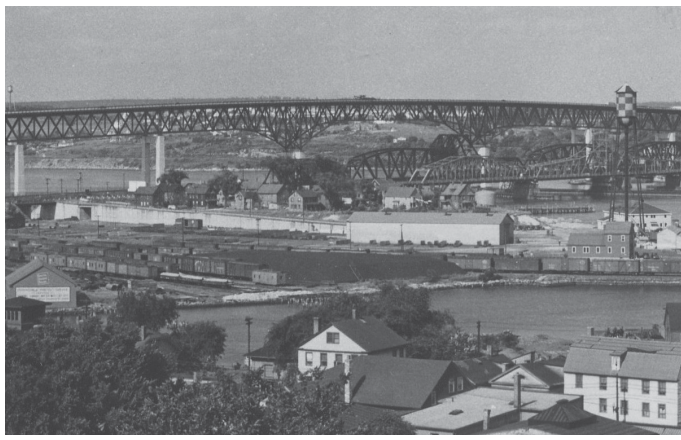


**Ai Mori of Japan competes in the women's Boulder Final at the IFSC Climbing World Championship in Bern, Switzerland, on Saturday.** ANTHONY ANEX/KEYSTONE VIA AP



# A MONUMENTAL LIFELINE TURNS 50

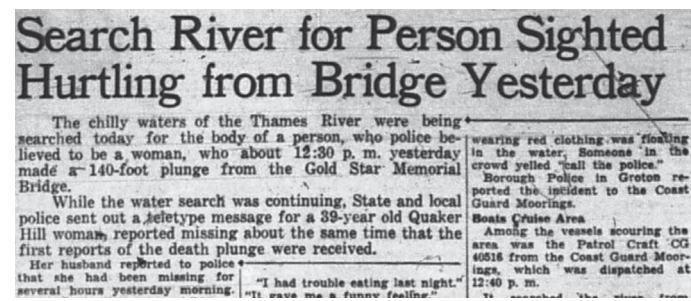
1943



PUBLIC LIBRARY OF NEW LONDON

The Groton-New London Bridge, a four-lane highway span, replaces a converted railroad bridge, which is demolished the following year.

1951



THE DAY

A woman jumps to her death from the bridge, beginning a 20-year suicide era that claims 19 lives.

1952

The bridge is rededicated as the Gold Star Memorial Bridge, honoring war veterans from New London, Groton and Waterford.

1955

New London residents protest the state's plan to turn the Bridge Approach, a four-lane road, into a limited-access highway with overpasses and service roads.

1958



DAY FILE PHOTO

A series of fatal accidents on the Bridge Approach prompt the city to urge completion of the stalled service road project.

1960

With the service road project underway, the state announces plans for a second bridge alongside the Gold Star, with both to be part of the planned Interstate 95.

1963



DAY FILE PHOTO

Toll collection ceases after 20 years, and a tollbooth on the Groton side is removed.

1964

News that plans for the new bridge would destroy Hodges Square causes an uproar, and access road locations are changed in response. With the completion of Connecticut's last stretch of Interstate 95, in Groton, Stonington and North Stonington, the bridge becomes part of the highway.



An aerial view of the bridge from the New London side of the Thames River in April 2022.

DAY FILE PHOTO

## FROM A1

road built for the Gold Star in the 1940s. There were businesses on both sides and intersections with other streets. It was the second fatality at that spot, and the third on the approach, in a few months. Three years before, when the state had announced plans to convert the approach to a limited-access highway, many in New London were dead set against the idea. "We need this as much as we need a hole in the head," Spencer Moon complained about the expected loss of traffic to his Buick dealership and gas station. But as the Bridge Approach became increasingly dangerous, the city changed its tune. After the third fatality, officials pleaded for the stalled project to begin. The addition of service roads and overpasses at Briggs,

**Editor's note:** This story was drawn mostly from the archives of The Day, with additional material from the Connecticut State Library and the Connecticut College website "Mapping Urban Renewal in New London: 1941-1975."

Colman and Vauxhall streets wasn't just about safety in the immediate area. The approach would eventually be part of a Maine-to-Florida highway. Most of Connecticut's stretch of Interstate 95 had just opened as the Connecticut Turnpike, which ran from Greenwich to East Lyme before turning north. The rest of the route, from Waterford to the Rhode Island line, would be upgraded piecemeal over the next few years. The Bridge Approach was one of the pieces, as was the bridge itself. With approach construction underway in January 1960, the state announced a second bridge would be built next to the existing one. But years before that happened, the last section of highway opened in Groton, Stonington and North Stonington. As of December 1964, the narrow Gold Star was part of I-95. A traffic nightmare was ahead.

For Samuel Bellin, the state might as well have dropped a bomb. When initial plans for the new bridge were unveiled in late 1963, they included a four-lane access road from the Bridge Approach to Mohegan Avenue. It would run right through Hodges Square, wiping out the thriving business district. "There are no empty stores here, such as you see downtown ...," said Bellin, who ran a pharmacy. "How can they do this?" Bellin and his fellow merchants organized, and the city got behind them in opposing the loss of Hodges Square. Highway Commissioner Howard Ives warned the alternative might be worse but gave the city eight options to choose from. New London reluctantly backed "Alternate G," which spared Hodges Square but still took 250 properties, including businesses on the new service roads. The interchange to enter the bridge caused endless design complications, but the bridge itself would be a straightforward truss span like the Gold Star, only wider. Engineers had briefly considered a double-deck bridge and even a tunnel, but those ideas went nowhere. Revisions to the interchange in 1967 that would take still more properties dismayed most city officials except the Redevelopment Agency, which was conducting widespread demolition of its own. "Usually when highways are built, they take some valuable land and open other properties which in turn become valuable. This plan takes everything but returns nothing," Assessor Robert Flanagan complained. The city's grand list was in for a \$3 million hit. Among the properties to be sacrificed were the Meadows Restaurant, New London Motel, Fremont Funeral Home and London House apartments, which were almost new. Winthrop School next to the Old Town Mill was also targeted. Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church left town, though its building survived.

By the fall of 1969, as property owners collected damages, other aspects of the project were in place. With bids made and contracts signed, construction was set to begin. Bumper to bumper and not moving, cars stretched west to the Waterford weigh station and north to Quaker Hill. The cause of the afternoon traffic jam, just before Christmas 1966, was a tractor-trailer that had jumped the bridge's median. That morning another truck had run out of fuel. Then it snowed overnight, and the next day cars were again stacked up for miles. The only thing remarkable about this trio of tie-ups is that it wasn't remarkable at all. Crashes and congestion on the bridge had gradually increased, but once I-95 opened, they spiked. Stories about closed lanes and late-arriving commuters were so common in The Day they were often relegated to inside pages. In one case, an ambulance carrying a patient was rerouted many miles to the Mohegan-Pequot Bridge. In another, a woman in labor got a police escort past an accident scene. Meanwhile, a separate drama was unfolding: People were jumping off the bridge. Since 1951, there had been about one suicide a year, with more attempts thwarted. Dr. Charles Dyer, New London's health director, spent years begging the state for higher fences. Officials finally agreed in 1967. Two people leaped to their deaths while the fences were going up, but the march of troubled souls to the bridge slowed, then stopped. Amid the traffic woes, public hearings were held and frustrations vented, but answers were elusive. "Who the hell is responsible?" asked Groton City Mayor Clarence Sharp, who later had a highway named after him. Ideas included stoplights, TV monitors, motorcycle patrols and highway workers summoning wreckers with walkie-talkies. New London City Councilor Ruby Turner Morris proposed squeezing through traffic into one lane to keep the other free for entering vehicles. There was no solution except to proceed with construction.

SEE GOLD STAR BRIDGE PAGE A6

## Bridge's current long-term drama is about maintenance

The 20-year odyssey of road improvements and bridge building from 1955 to 1975 ended the Gold Star's chronic traffic nightmare.

Since then, problems have been limited to things like weekend beach tie-ups and the occasional spectacular crash.

On Feb. 13, 2022, a tractor-trailer jackknifed and tore through the bridge's fence, snarling northbound traffic for five hours, just like in the old days. On April 21 of this year, a crash involving a heating oil truck killed the driver and set the southbound span on fire, closing Interstate 95 in both directions.

The bridge's latest multiyear saga isn't about traffic. This time, it's maintenance.

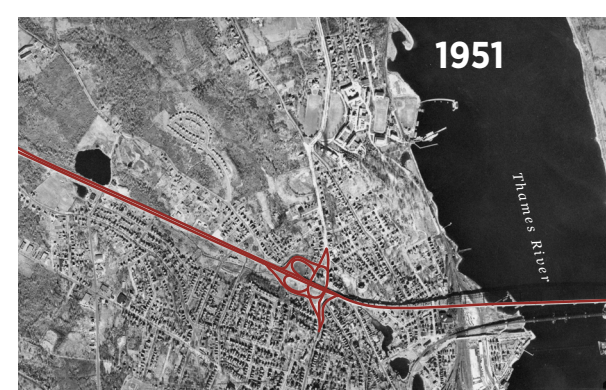
In 2017 the state Department of Transportation announced both bridges were due for extensive rehabilitation to keep them in good shape for the next 25 years. The southbound span was tackled first: substructure and steel repairs, expansion-joint replacement and deck repaving. Work wrapped up in late 2018 and cost \$43.8 million, according to the DOT.

The structural integrity of the southbound bridge held firm through the massive fire in April, though officials said that was less about the rehab than other factors.

Last year, work began on the northbound span, whose condition was rated as "poor" after a Federal Highway Administration inspection in 2019. That indicated a need to start repairs rather than an immediate emergency, and DOT said bridges rated poor can be used safely for "many, many years."

In December the FHA announced a \$158 million federal grant for the job, which is estimated to total \$407 million. It involves strengthening the truss and girder spans and replacing the deck. Adding a pedestrian and bicycle path is also under consideration.

The work is expected to be complete by 2029. — John Ruddy



Construction of the first Gold Star bridge in the early 1940s and its twin 30 years later changed nearby roads, which became increasingly complex. They are highlighted in these aerial photos. From left, the road to the old Thames River Bridge, a converted railroad span, is seen in 1934; the four-lane Bridge Approach, built for the first Gold Star, included a cloverleaf of entrance ramps, seen in 1951; for Interstate 95, the Bridge Approach became a limited-access highway with service roads and overpasses at Briggs, Colman and Vauxhall streets, seen in 1965; the second bridge brought vast changes, including highways connecting downtown and the area to the north, upgraded service roads, and more overpasses and entrance ramps, seen recently.

SOURCES: BY WATER HISTORICAL IMAGES; GOOGLE; BILL KEEGAN

1964



THE DAY

Engineers again revise access road plans in response to complaints, and the taking of 250 properties begins. As increasing traffic jams become intolerable, local officials beg the state to speed the construction schedule. Suicide fences are erected, which reduce fatal jumps.

1967

Construction begins with abutments on each side of the river as demolition of property proceeds.

1969

Construction of the piers is completed a year ahead of schedule.

1970



DAY FILE PHOTO

Work on the deck begins as girders are erected atop the piers.

1971

The deck is completed, and a three-year project to construct access roads begins, changing much of the 1960 work on the approach.

1972



The new bridge opens and temporarily accommodates three lanes of traffic in each direction as the original bridge closes.

1973



DAY FILE PHOTO

Five sections of the original bridge are removed and replaced by wider ones.

1974

The original bridge opens to five lanes of northbound traffic, and the new bridge is converted to five lanes of southbound traffic. The configuration has remained the same since.

1975