

Octave Chanute

Engineer, Bridge Builder
1832-1910

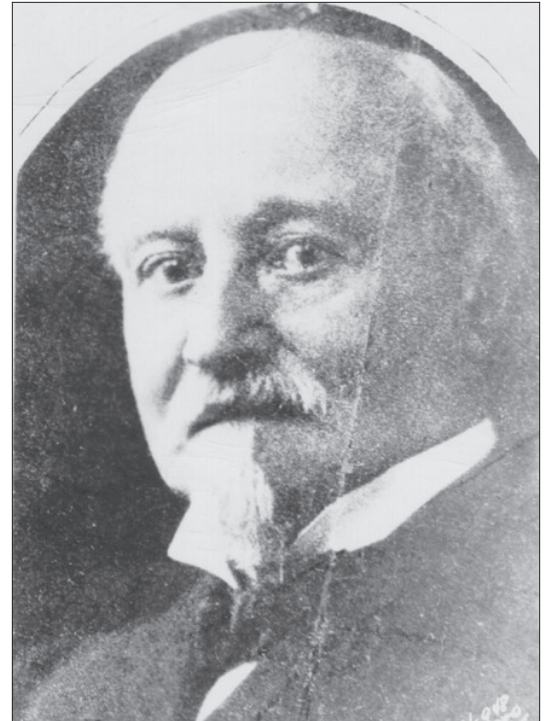
by Susan Jezak Ford

When Octave Chanute came to Kansas City in 1867 to engineer the building of the first bridge across the Missouri River, he held the city's future in his hands. The Hannibal Bridge, designed by Chanute and completed in 1869, made Kansas City the link between the railroads of the east and the trade of westward expansion. This engineering marvel contributed to an eight-fold population growth here between 1865 and 1870.

Chanute was born in Paris in 1832 and moved to the United States with his family at the age of six, when his father became vice-president of a Louisiana college. Chanute's interest in engineering led to work on the railroads; he was appointed Chief Engineer of the Chicago and Alton Railroad in 1863. During his years as a railroad engineer, he designed the stock yards in Chicago and Kansas City, was placed in charge of building several railroad lines into Kansas and, in 1867, was awarded the contract to design and oversee the building of the first bridge across the Missouri River.

The seven limestone and concrete piers of the mile-long span were sunk into the sand and rock riverbed of the swiftly flowing Missouri River. The center section of the railroad bridge pivoted, allowing tall boats to pass. Once it opened, an average of 18 trains a day crossed, leading to a boom in area population, industry and property values. A pedestrian walkway spanned much of the length of the bridge, and horse-drawn vehicles paid a toll to cross when trains were not operating. The ornate iron Hannibal Bridge was replaced by the current carbon steel version in 1916.

After he left Kansas City, Chanute helped to design the early elevated train system of New York City and became very involved in early attempts at flight, often pursuing engineering experiments with the Wright Brothers. He died in Chicago in 1910, leaving a legacy of innovative transportation engineering across the United States.



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