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Budapest's Chain Bridge and Tunnel

As envisaged
before
actually built

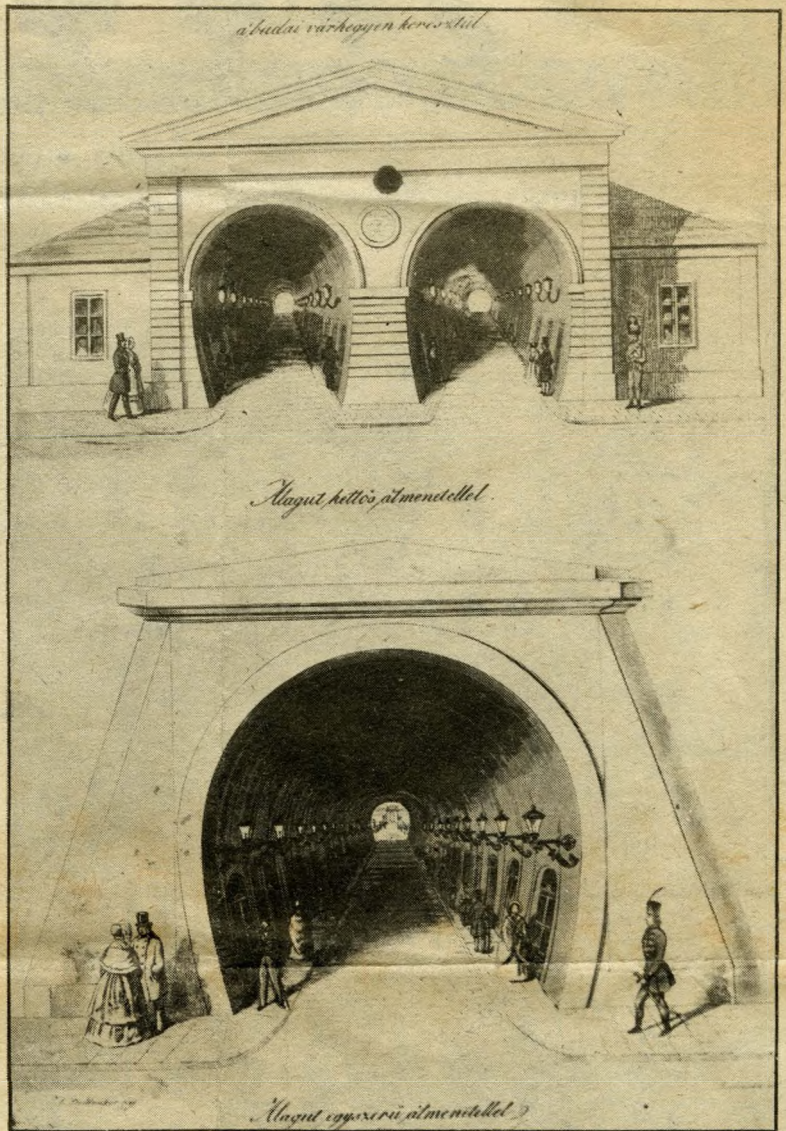
Budapest's Lánchíd, or Chain Bridge, and the Alagút, or Tunnel, which carries traffic from the bridge under Várhegy, or Castle Hill, to central Buda, and back, are among the best known landmarks of scenically beautiful Budapest, apart from Buda Castle itself, the impressive pile overtopping Castle Hill.

Before the Chain Bridge was built—as the first permanent bridge over the Danube anywhere in Central or Eastern Europe,—passage between the two banks was assured by a pontoon bridge. There were successive plans over the centuries to set up a permanent structure across the river. These remained in the planning stage, though, through troubled historical times.

The carrying out of a project awaited the coming of Count István Széchenyi, called by Louis Kossuth “the greatest Hungarian”. Széchenyi, spiritual leader as well as prime mover of the early 19th-century Age of Reforms in Hungary, set up in 1832 a “Bridge Association” to take charge of matters connected with the funding, planning and construction. He commissioned surveyors to draw up plans, and hydrographers to study the riverbed.

When a competition launched to design a suitable bridge had failed, in view of the poor plans received by the Association from a string of construction engineers, Széchenyi cast farther afield and, having studied some modern bridges in England, he decided that the Thames bridge at Marlow was an ideal, if smaller, version for the bridge he had in mind. He contacted its designer-creator, William Tierney Clark, and commissioned him to design a chain bridge across the Danube.

The Bridge Association was replaced in 1833 by the Permanent National Commission. A joint-stock company was launched to put up the money, and it was decided in advance that toll would be payable by everyone crossing over the bridge, including noblemen.



“The Planned Tunnel through the Buda Castle Hill,” drawing by L. Steinraker engraved by N. Perloska, from the late 1840’s

In charge of the actual construction work was Adam Clark, a compatriot but mere namesake of William Tierney Clark. Adam Clark arrived in Pest in 1834. Ultimately, he became the master-builder of the Tunnel as well.

Preparation of the construction work began in 1839. The bridge’s foundation stone was laid on 24 August 1842, a grand scene that can be seen in Miklós Barabás’ famous watercolour. At the proposal of Louis Kossuth, the Chain

Bridge was named after Széchenyi. It was finally commissioned on 20 Nov. 1849. The Tunnel’s construction began in 1853, and it was opened in 1856.

Our pictures show how in 1839 the Chain Bridge—then envisaged with twin-turreted piers—was visualized by a contemporary artist, and the plans for the Tunnel, envisaged with single, or double passageways.

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“Picture of the Bridge to Stand between Buda and Pest,” an impression by lithographer József Szakmáry, engraved by N. Mahlkecht, printed by Gusztáv Heckenast in Pest in 1839