

Washington Augustus Roebling Biography

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Contents

[Washington Augustus Roebling Biography.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Biography.....3](#)

Biography

Washington Augustus Roebling (1837-1926), American engineer and manufacturer, was a noted bridge designer and builder.

Washington Roebling was born on May 26, 1837, in Saxonburg, Pa., where his father, a civil engineer, had settled in 1831 with a group of German colonists. The boy was raised in a strict home; both German and English were spoken daily. At the age of 13 he moved with his family to Trenton, N.J., where his father set up a factory to manufacture wire rope. Roebling was educated by private tutor, at an academy, and finally at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., then the leading civil engineering school in the United States. After graduating in 1857, he went to work at his father's factory. During this period he also helped his father build the Allegheny River Bridge at Pittsburgh.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Roebling enlisted and saw considerable service, mostly as an army engineer. He built several suspension bridges for use by the Union forces and at one time rode in a captive balloon to observe Confederate movements. After the war he returned to civil engineering, working with his father on the construction of a bridge across the Ohio River at Cincinnati. When it was opened in 1867, this was the longest suspension bridge ever built. Roebling spent a year abroad learning about European bridge-building techniques but returned in time to assist his father's work on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Roebling's father, John Roebling, had pioneered the manufacture of wire rope in the United States and had originated the application of such cables to the building of suspension bridges. The Brooklyn Bridge, connecting Brooklyn to Manhattan, was to be John Roebling's greatest feat. Then, just as the actual construction was beginning, he died. His son carried on the work for three years, but in 1872, after an attack of the bends in one of the caissons, his health was broken. Within a few months he retired to a house on the Brooklyn side of the East River, and from there he observed the work through a telescope and directed construction.

After completion of the bridge in 1883, Roebling largely withdrew from active engineering work and from the family manufacturing business, of which he had become president in 1876. He spent his last years in Trenton, occupied with philanthropic and scientific pursuits. He died on July 21, 1926.