

Famous New Yorker Emily Warren Roebling

Emily Roebling's husband and father-in-law designed the Brooklyn Bridge, and an army of workers built it, but she did more than anyone to hold the massive project together.

Emily Warren was born in Cold Spring, Putnam County, on September 23, 1843. She attended the prestigious Georgetown Visitation Convent school near Washington D.C., while her brother Gouverneur K. Warren rose through the ranks of the U.S. Army. While visiting Gen. Warren during the Civil War, Emily fell in love with one of his staff engineers, Washington Roebling. They were married on January 18, 1865.

Roebling's father was the bridge builder John A. Roebling. The young couple's honeymoon in Europe was arranged in part so Washington could study advanced bridge-construction techniques. The Roeblings would use those techniques on a bridge across the East River, linking lower Manhattan and the city of Brooklyn. In an early show of resilience on the trip, Emily gave birth to a son despite falling down a flight of stairs during her pregnancy.

When John A. Roebling died suddenly in 1869, Washington Roebling became the chief engineer for the Brooklyn Bridge project. He supervised the construction of caissons, huge watertight structures inside which workers, breathing pressurized air, would lay the foundations for the bridge's towers. Working long hours inside the caisson, Washington gradually overexposed himself to pressurized air and contracted caisson disease, better known as "the bends." By 1872, the disease had left him a virtual invalid, unable to travel to the construction site.

Washington Roebling now depended on Emily to act as his eyes and ears on the bridge project. Her job was to convey his instructions to the workers, and to report back to him on the progress of the work. To do both accurately, Emily had to master the fundamentals of engineering and construction herself. Tutored by her husband while studying intensely on her own, she learned to analyze every aspect of the project scientifically. The work required absolute precision, as well as focused leadership. Acting as her husband's surrogate, Emily effectively led the project for the next decade.

In 1881, Emily was the first person to walk across a 5' plank connecting the two halves of the nearly-complete bridge. After defending her husband from politicians pressuring him to resign, Emily rode across the completed Brooklyn Bridge on May 24, 1883. At the dedication ceremony, her crucial role in the project was publicly acknowledged for the first time. Congressman Abram S. Hewitt declared that the bridge was "an everlasting monument to the self-sacrificing devotion of a woman."

After her triumph, Emily Roebling pursued a wide range of new projects. She designed her family's new home in Trenton, New Jersey, and organized relief efforts for soldiers during the Spanish-American War. She studied law at NYU, earning a certificate and an essay prize. She became a historian, transcribing and publishing the journal of an 18th century minister.

Emily Roebling died on February 28, 1903. Ironically, her invalid husband lived another 23 years. Today, Emily and Washington Roebling are remembered as the team behind one of the greatest engineering feats of American history.



Portrait by Carolus-Duran
circa 1896,
Brooklyn Museum



The village of **Cold Spring** is located on the eastern shore of the Hudson River at its deepest point, directly across from West Point.

To learn more about the history of the Brooklyn Bridge go to <http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/brooklynbridge/timeline/>. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA News Media Literacy/NIE Program. All rights reserved 2018.

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