



# Women Make History:

## Stories we should have learned in school

**“I have more brains, common sense, and know-how, generally than have any two engineers, civil or uncivil.”**

**—Emily Warren Roebling  
Letter to her son, 1898**



### Bridging the Divide: Emily Warren Roebling

In the [Gilded Age](#) of America, [Emily Warren Roebling](#) was a socialite, suffragist, builder, and businesswoman who managed the construction of the [Brooklyn Bridge](#) from 1869 until its completion in 1883. An engineering marvel, it was the largest suspension bridge in the world. Roebling was also an attorney and among the earliest women in New York to earn a law degree.

[Born](#) in 1843 in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, to a prominent family, Roebling graduated with honors from a prestigious convent school in Washington, D.C. In 1864, while visiting her brother at a Union encampment during the Civil War (1861 to 1865), she met her future husband, an Army engineer. They married at the end of the war and had one son.

In 1867, Roebling and her husband traveled to Europe at her father-in-law's request. Her father-in-law, [John Augustus Roebling](#), was a renowned architect and builder of suspension bridges who had won the commission to build the Brooklyn Bridge. He [asked](#)



his son to study the latest techniques in the underwater construction of bridge foundations.

When the elder Roebling died suddenly in 1869, his son assumed control of the project. When completed, the Brooklyn Bridge would be the longest suspension bridge in the world at 1.1 miles, spanning the East River from Manhattan to Brooklyn. [According](#) to [Erica Wagner](#), author of *Chief Engineer*, "This was a structure the likes of which had never been made before...Everything about it was unprecedented. Everything about it was radical."

Tragedy struck again three years later when Roebling's husband became [ill](#) from decompression sickness, having spent too much time in pressurized conditions at the bottom of New York's East River. Roebling took charge of her husband's care. From one of their residences in Brooklyn Heights, using a telescope, he could see the work being done and issue instructions for Roebling to convey to the engineering team.

Although she had no formal training as an engineer, Roebling found herself acting as her husband's [liaison](#) with the engineering team and also as his spokesperson with officials who worried whether he would be able to complete the task. She oversaw the construction, attended board meetings, and studied to learn about building suspension bridges. She attempted to keep her involvement a secret, but became so adept in construction techniques, the use of materials, and fabricating cable that many believed she had become chief engineer.

In [The Great Bridge](#), historian David McCullough said: "She was quite literally his eyes, his legs, his good right arm."

For the 1883 opening of the bridge, Roebling had the honor of being the [first](#) to cross. Riding in a carriage, she held a rooster as a symbol of victory. An [article](#) in *The New York Times* estimated that more than 50,000 people came for the grand celebration, which included President Chester Arthur and New York Governor Grover Cleveland.



*Opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, Currier & Ives.  
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs*

In a dedication speech that followed, rival steelmaker Abram Hewitt [declared](#) that the new bridge would "ever be coupled" with the memory of Emily Warren Roebling. In a promotional stunt a year later, circus master P.T. Barnum led twenty-one elephants across the bridge to display the bridge's strength.

Following completion of the bridge, the Roeblings moved to Troy, New York, and later to Trenton, New Jersey. She became active in social and philanthropic causes, including the Federation of Women's Clubs, where she helped to produce materials for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. She also became active in the suffrage movement.

In 1896, Roebling again traveled to Europe, but this time, [alone](#), as her husband was too ill to join her. She was received by Queen Victoria in London and attended the coronation of Czar Nicholas II of Russia in St. Petersburg.

In 1899, at age fifty-six, Roebling earned a certificate





Emily Roebling after receiving her law certificate, New York Historical Society

in business law from the Women's Law Class (a special program for women) at New York University (NYU). She did so with honors. At the time, NYU did not admit women into its law school. She wrote an essay that was read aloud at graduation. In the essay, [A Wife's Disabilities](#), she advocated for women's suffrage, arguing that women should have "the possible rights given them under the Fourteenth Amendment." She also criticized unjust laws, such as those denying married women property rights.

Over the next few years, Roebling traveled across the country giving speeches in support of women's suffrage and providing services for the poor. She also encouraged women to study law.

Roebling [died](#) in 1903 from stomach cancer.

Although it's tempting to claim that Roebling was the first female engineer, biographer Erica Wagner [reflected](#): "To insist that she must have been an engineer is to force her into a paradigm of masculine achievement and categorization. That doesn't recognize the way in which, as a 19th-century woman, she had to work within the confines of her society."



Emily Roebling Plaza, Brooklyn Bridge Park

In and of itself, that is a remarkable achievement.

In 2018, New York City renamed a street in Brooklyn in her honor, and in 2021, the city opened a [park](#) at the base of the bridge named for her.

In addition to *Chief Engineer*, several books have been written about Roebling. There are also documentaries available on streaming services about building the Brooklyn Bridge that include aspects of her story.

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## Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

**Ask yourself:** Have I ever had to keep my skills a secret? How did that make me feel?

**Ask a friend:** How could you support a colleague in making her expertise known?

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## If You're Near Alstead, New Hampshire...Join

**me** in conversation with [Stephanie Gorton](#) as we discuss Stephanie's book, [The Icon and the Idealist](#), and the bitter rivalry between Mary Ware Dennett and Margaret Sanger for leadership of the reproductive rights movement.

Friday, Aug. 1, 7 p.m. - 8:30 p.m. at [Chase's Mill](#).





activist, Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). In 2020, Time magazine included her as one of the most important women in American history. I curate Dennett's family archive, and am at work on a novel about her extraordinary life. In 2024, my manuscript was named runner-up in Book Pipeline's General Fiction category.

I received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support my work. My essays about Mary Ware Dennett have been published in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), [BOLD](#), and others. I love to hike and ski in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City, where I live with my husband and my "favorite" child, a black lab named Hank.

If you need a speaker, reach out! My passion is sharing the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Be in touch: [Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com](mailto:Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com).

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Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women.  
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