



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Holton Duncan Robinson Papers

NMAH.AC.0963

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2008

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Holton Duncan Robinson papers
Date:	1889 - 1938
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0963
Creator:	Robinson, Holton Duncan, 1863-1945 (Creator)
Extent:	0.66 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
Language:	English .
Summary:	Business papers, patents, and photographs of bridges documenting the work of Holton Duncan Robinson, world-renowned engineer in suspension bridge cable design and construction.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was donated by Ann Robinson Henshaw, Holton Duncan Robinson's granddaughter, in 2007.

Related Materials

Materials in the Archives Center

Cass Gilbert Collection (AC0214)

Rip Van Winkle Bridge Photographs (AC1027)

Niagara Falls Bridge Commission Records (AC1060)

Parson, Brinckerhuff, Quade and Douglas Records (AC0969)

Nathan W. Morgan Papers (AC0965)

Processing Information

Processed by Kiley Orchard (intern), 2008; supervised by Vanessa Broussard Simmons, archivist.

Preferred Citation

Holton Duncan Robinson papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research but is stored off-site and special arrangements must be made to work with it. Contact the Archives Center for information at archivescenter@si.edu or 202-633-3270.

Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning intellectual property rights. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

Biographical / Historical

Holton Duncan Robinson, the youngest son of Ichabod Harvey and Isabelle (McLeod) Robinson, was born in Massena, New York, on February 7, 1863. Directly after graduating St. Lawrence University with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1886, he worked as a chain man for the civil engineering firm Buck and McNulty.

When the association between Buck and McNulty ended, Robinson continued his vocation with Buck and worked on computations and drawings for various bridges, including the Driving Park Avenue Bridge over the Genesee River at Rochester. Robinson was in charge of many aspects of New York bridge design and construction over the next several years, including the Williamsburg Bridge and Manhattan Bridge. He became chief engineer of the Glyndon Contracting Company in 1907 and designed the footbridge, machinery, and plant used in the construction of previously unseen 21-inch cables. Later in his career, he went on to build cables 30 inches in diameter. In 1910, he resigned as chief engineer of the company and built a bridge in Massena Center, New York, before continuing work on the Manhattan Bridge.

Robinson began work with Mackenzie and Mann in October of 1912 and worked as a bridge engineer consultant for the Canadian Northern Railway Company before resigning in 1914. During World War I, Robinson was employed by the Bureau of Yards and Docks, U.S. Navy, as a supervising engineer on plant extension work for war programs. He remained with the department until December 1919, when he joined forces with Daniel E. Moran and William H. Yates.

In 1920, David B. Steinman, a previous business acquaintance, offered Robinson a position as a partner in an engineering firm. The firm of Robinson and Steinman completed many notable bridge engagements during its 25 years, including design and construction of bridges across the country as well as in Canada, Bolivia, and Brazil. The men were also involved in the design for bridges in Australia, Germany, Spain, and Denmark.

Robinson's inventions included the hydraulically-operated cable-squeezing machine, electrically-operated cable-wrapping machine, flat-band seizings, and a simplified version of cable anchorage. He also helped to develop the Florianópolis type of suspension bridge as well as a method of preventing aerodynamic instability. Because of Robinson's additions to the field, the time it takes to build suspension bridges has been greatly reduced. He became a Life Member of the American Society of Civil Engineers in January 1929.

Robinson remained active in the bridge construction field until his death on May 7, 1945. He and his wife Frank Brown had two children, daughter Mary Olivia and son Allan McLeod.

Scope and Contents

The collection consists of the personal papers and photographs of Holton Duncan Robinson, world famous engineer in suspension bridge cable design and construction. Highlights are his business correspondence, an 1889 notebook containing calculations, and five original patents. The collection also contains numerous photographs, some of a personal nature, but mostly negatives, photographs, and cyanotypes that document bridges and the process of bridge construction, labeled with location and date. While there are many more negatives than photographs, the numbered negatives match with the numbered photographs. Also included are three prints depicting the Waldo-Hancock Bridge in Maine, the Mount Hope Bridge in Rhode Island, and the Canadian Crossing Thousand Islands Bridge. The Robinson family seemed to have used the prints as Christmas cards. Additional background information on Holton Duncan Robinson, including several in-depth biographies and career contributions is also included among the materials.

Arrangement

The collection is organized into one series.

Series 1, Personal Papers, 1889-1938

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Bridges -- New York (N.Y.)
- Engineering

Types of Materials:

- Books
- Clippings
- Correspondence -- 20th century
- Cyanotypes
- Notebooks
- Patents
- Photographs -- 1900-1950

Container Listing

Series 1: Personal Papers, 1889 - 1938

Box 1, Folder 1	Background information
Box 1, Folder 2	Book and program, 1938, 1937
Box 1, Folder 3	Business correspondence, 1927 - 1937
Box 1, Folder 4	Notebook, 1889
Box 1, Folder 5	Patents, 1911, 1909
Box 1, Folder 6	Patents, 1925 - 1929
Box 1, Folder 7	Patent descriptions, 1932, undated
Box 2	Photographs, 1898 - 1941, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Christmas cards from Dr. and Mrs. D.B. Steinman, Robinson and Steinman, and Mr. and Mrs. Holton D. Robinson (prints), 1947 - 1948, 1945, 1942, 1933 - 1939
Box 1, Folder 9	Sedgwick Bridge description, undated

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