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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title: John A. Roebling Collection
Identifier: NMAH.AC.0981
Date: 1836-1975 (bulk 1930-1950)
Extent: 18.5 Cubic feet (62 boxes)
Creator:
- Roebling, Charles Gustavus, 1849-1918
- Roebling, Ferdinand W. (Ferdinand William), 1842-1917
- Mechanical and Civil Engineering, Division of [former name], NMAH, SI
- John A. Roebling's Sons Company
- History of Technology, Division of, NMAH, SI
- Roebling, John Augustus, 1806-1869
- Roebling, Washington Augustus, 1837-1926
- Work and Industry, Division of, NMAH, SI
Language: English
Some materials in German, French, Italian, and Spanish.
Summary: Collection documents the work of the John A. Roebling's Sons Company, builders of bridges. The materials consist primarily of photograph albums documenting some of the bridges, tramways, ski lifts and chair lifts that Roebling's Sons Company was involved with. The documentation also includes specifications, patents, and reference materials about the engineering process of building bridges and bridges in general.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information
This collection was donated by Blair Birdsall, former chief engineer at John A. Roebling's Sons Company in 1981.

Provenance
This collection was formerly known as the Blair Birdsall Collection. It was transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Work and Industry in 2007.

Related Materials
Materials in the Archives Center
George S. Morison Collection (AC0978)
John Augustus Roebling (1806-1869) was the founder and proprietor of John A. Roebling's Sons Company. Born in Mühlhausen, Germany, he was a civil engineer famous for his wire rope suspension bridge designs, in particular, the design of the Brooklyn Bridge. Roebling married Johana Herting in 1836 and they had nine children: Washington A. Roebling (1837-1926); Laura R. Methfessel (1840-1873); Ferdinand W. Roebling (1842-1917); Elvira R. Stewart (1844-1871); Josephine R. Jarvis (b. 1847); Charles Gustavus Roebling (1849-1918); Edmund Roebling (1854-1930); William Roebling (b. 1856, d. 1860); and Hannah Roebling (died in infancy). Roebling’s three sons, Washington Augustus Roebling; Ferdinand William Roebling and Charles Gustavus Roebling, worked for the company.

Roebling’s Sons Company was active in the design and manufacture of wire rope used in the erection of suspension bridges since the 1840s. Roebling devised a system of spinning the wires together where weights and swivels turned the wire coils in the opposite direction from the twisting, thereby removing kinks. Method of and Machine for Manufacturing Wire Rope (US Patent # 2,720) issued on July 16, 1842. Roebling would adapt this wire rope to his suspension bridge principle. In 1848, he established a company—John Roebling's Sons Company—in Trenton, New Jersey, to manufacture his wire rope. Roebling manufacturing plants were sold in 1952 to the Colorado Fuel and Iron (CF&I) Company of Pueblo, Colorado. In 1968, the Crane Company purchased the CF&I.
Scope and Contents

The collection documents the work of the John A. Roebling's Sons Company, builders of bridges. The materials consist primarily of photograph albums documenting a variety of bridges, mostly in the United States. The documentation also includes specifications, patents, and reference materials about the engineering process of building bridges and bridges in general.

Series 1, Historical background materials, 1895-1958, is divided into two subseries: Subseries 1, John A. Roebling's and Sons Company materials, 1895-1949 and Subseries 2, Newsletters, 1929-1931.

Subseries 1, John A. Roebling's and Sons Company materials, 1895-1949, contains a variety of items related to the company such as historical narratives, correspondence, price lists, testing data, and a ledger with cost estimates. The correspondence is partially bound (pages 1 to 104) from a letter press book (handwritten and typescript) belonging to John A. Roebling's and Sons Company. William Hildebrand and Charles G. Roebling are the chief correspondents. The correspondence documents daily activities related to the design and erection of bridges as well as finances and supplies. Charles G. Roebling's notebook, undated, contains calculations and notes about various bridge projects.

Subseries 2, Newsletters, 1929-1931, contain copies of Blue Center and Wire Engineering, which were John A. Roebling's and Sons Company publications intended for employees. The newsletters were apparently used as scrapbooks, with black-and-white photographs pasted into the pages. Found among the pages of Blue Center are photographs of the Hudson River Bridge and in Wire Engineering, there are photographs of the Maysville, Kentucky Bridge.

Series 2, Photographs, 1926-1975, comprises the largest series in the collection. The photographs are primarily black-and-white and document aerial tramways, tramways for logging or mining, chair lifts, ski lifts, floods, and bridge construction projects. The latter makes up the majority. Most photographs were assembled into albums with corresponding captions and dates, and almost all of the photographs document bridges in the United States. There is one exception, the Yauricocha Tramway in Peru. In some instances, the captions are recorded on the back of the photographs, and others were recorded on album pages. The series is arranged alphabetically by name of bridge and/or project.

Series 3, Specifications, 1855-1962, consists of printed textual documents (both bound and loose) that contain information for bidders, proposals, contracts, and bonds, and the detailed specifications. This series is arranged alphabetically by bridge name.

Series 4, Reports, 1928-1938, contains bound reports (both progress and final) detailing problems, requirements, research, manufacture, plant installation, cable equipment, strand adjustments, and Roebling Company developments. This series is arranged alphabetically by bridge and/or project.

Series 5, Patent materials, 1849-1952, consists of issued patents (to a variety of individuals) for cable and cable appliances, cables, and cable apparatus, cableways and tramways, and grips. The patents are arranged by subject area, then by patent number.

Series 6, Reference materials, 1836-1964, contains a wide range of materials—articles, biographical files, drawings, photographs, newspaper clippings, advertising, correspondence, notes—documenting all aspects of bridges. This series is arranged alphabetically by topic.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into six series.
Series 1, Historical background materials, 1895-1958, undated
Subseries 1, Biographical, 1900-1958, undated
Subseries 2, John A. Roebling's and Sons Company materials, 1895-1949
Subseries 3, Newsletters, 1929-1931
Series 2, Photographs, 1926-1975
Series 3, Specifications, 1855-1962
Series 4, Reports, 1928-1938
Series 5, Patent materials, 1849-1952
Series 6, Reference materials, 1836-1964

Names and Subject Terms
This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
Bridge construction industry -- United States
Bridges -- Design and construction
Bridges -- New York (N.Y.)
Iron industry and trade -- Colorado
Iron industry and trade -- United States
Ski lifts
Suspension bridges -- Design and construction
Wire industry -- New Jersey
Wire-rope industry -- New Jersey

Types of Materials:
Blueprints
Correspondence
Genealogies
Ledgers (account books)
Letterpress books
Newsletters -- 1920-1940
Notebooks
Patents
Photograph albums
Photographs -- 20th century
Price lists
Reports
Specifications

Names:
History of Technology, Division of, NMAH, SI
Mechanical and Civil Engineering, Division of [former name], NMAH, SI.
Work and Industry, Division of, NMAH, SI
Container Listing

Series 1: Historical Background, 1895-1958

Subseries 1.1: John A. Roebling's and Sons Company materials, 1895-1949

Box 17, Folder 1  Roebling family genealogical chart, 1949
Box 17, Folder 2  *The Roebling Story*, 1941
Box 21, Folder 3  *Trenton Sunday Times Advertiser* (overview of Roebling's and Sons Company), 1945 May
Box 21, Folder 1  Roebling Scrapbook, 1975 October
Box 21, Folder 2  John A. Roebling's Sons Company (correspondence), 1900-1903
Box 17, Folder 3  John A. Roebling's Son Company Book, *Suspension Bridges: A Century of Progress*, undated
Box 17, Folder 4  Charles G. Roebling notebook, undated
Box 17, Folder 5  Roebling's Sons Co., Price list, 1904
Box 17, Folder 6  *John A. Roebling's Sons Company Wire in Electrical Construction Book*, 1897
Box 17, Folder 7  Price List for John A. Roebling's Son's Company, 1919
Box 17, Folder 8  John A. Roebling's Sons Price List, 1922 June
Box 18, Folder 1  *John A. Roebling's Sons Company Catalog of Wire Rope and Wire Rope Fastenings*, 1912
Box 18, Folder 2  Cableways, Tramways, 1905
Box 18, Folder 3  Construction of Parallel Wire Cables for Suspension Bridges, 1925
Box 18, Folder 4  Ledger of list of estimates, 1895 January-1905 February
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Subseries 1.2: Newsletters, 1929-1931

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Box 50  Chesapeake Bay Bridge, 1951-1952
Box 20, Folder 1  Deer Isle Bridge, 1943-1944
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Box 52  Golden Gate Bridge, 1935, undated
Box 41  Golden Gate Bridge #1, 1935-1936
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