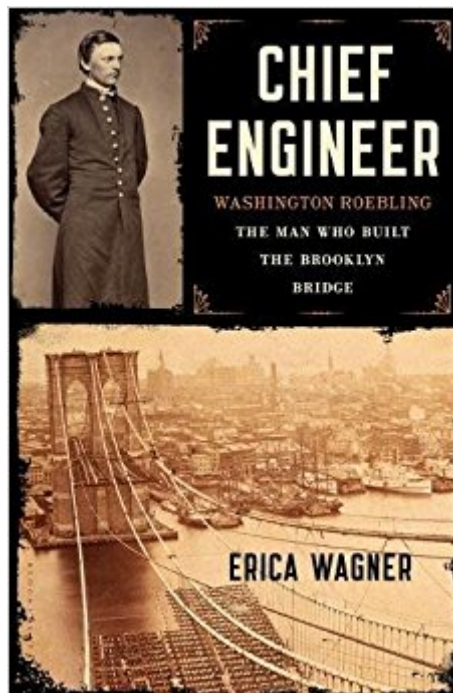




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# Chief Engineer: Washington Roebling, The Man Who Built The Brooklyn Bridge



## Synopsis

The first full biography of a crucial figure in the American story--Washington Roebling, builder of the Brooklyn Bridge."I know that nothing can be done perfectly at the first trial; I also know that each day brings its little quota of experiences, which with honest intentions, will lead to perfection after a while." --Washington RoeblingHis father conceived of the Brooklyn Bridge, but after John Roebling's sudden death, Washington Roebling built what has become one of American's most iconic structures--as much a part of New York as the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. Yet, as recognizable as the bridge is, its builder is too often forgotten--and his life is of interest far beyond his chosen field. It is the story of immigrants, of the frontier, of the greatest crisis in American history, and of the making of the modern world. Forty years after the publication of *The Great Bridge*, David McCullough's classic chronicle of how the East River was spanned, Erica Wagner has written a fascinating biography of one of America's most distinguished engineers, a man whose long life was a model of courage in the face of extraordinary adversity. *Chief Engineer* is enriched by Roebling's own eloquent voice, unveiled in his recently-discovered memoir that was previously thought lost to history. The memoir reveals that his father, John--a renowned engineer who made his life in America after humble beginnings in Germany--was a tyrannical presence in Washington's life, so his own adoption of that career was hard won. A young man when the Civil War broke out, Washington joined the Union Army, building bridges that carried soldiers across rivers and seeing action in many pivotal battles, from Antietam to Gettysburg--aspects of his life never before fully brought to light. Safely returned, he married the remarkable Emily Warren Roebling, who would play a crucial role in the construction of the unprecedented Brooklyn Bridge. It would be Washington Roebling's grandest achievement--but by no means the only one. Elegantly written with a compelling narrative sweep, *Chief Engineer* will introduce Washington Roebling and his era to a new generation of readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Ms. Wagner's writing is graceful, even evocative, conveying a mellow admiration of Washington Roebling that suits the man . . . A welcome tribute to the persistence, precision and humanity of Washington Roebling and a love-song for the mighty New York bridge he built." - Wall Street Journal "[A] solidly constructed biography of Washington Roebling, the man who joined Brooklyn to Manhattan by the grace of a steel and concrete arc held aloft by a filigree of wire. It is a book about connection, but also about disconnection--the lifelong divide between Roebling and his father, John Roebling, also a celebrated engineer, and the son's struggle to detach himself from the elder man's influence." - The Economist "Compelling and elegant . . . [an] exploration of the life of Washington Roebling, the engineer whose energy and ideas got the Brooklyn Bridge built . . . the story not just of two engineers, father and son, but also of a son who survived treatment that, as he wrote in a private memoir at the end of the 19th century, could have led to his death . . . [a] powerful book." - The Guardian "The impressive career of [Washington Roebling] is well told in Erica Wagner's captivating new book." - New York Post "As we learn from Chief Engineer, Erica Wagner's highly original biography of Washington Roebling, the little-remembered and rather strange man who built it, the feat of raising such a bridge took over a dozen years of his life--and nearly killed him . . . Chief Engineer also sheds light on matters beyond engineering . . . Where she unquestionably succeeds is in bringing to life, and very probably bringing to the public's attention for the first time in generations, the name--and rather peculiar life--of a man who deserves his place on the top tier of the pantheon of engineers." \*\*\*\* - The Sunday Telegraph "[An] engaging new biography . . . [a] detailed portrait of a sensitive and tormented man." - New York Times Book Review "In this engrossing biography. . . Wagner writes detailed, lucid descriptions of the technological advances that made the bridge possible. . . . Wagner grounds her fine study of the human side of industrial progress in patient devotion to science and craft." - Publishers Weekly "With contemporary notes, clippings, and letters, too, [Chief Engineer] makes a fascinating tale . . . A sturdy, illuminating biography." - Kirkus Reviews "A well-judged and well-written portrait." - Booklist "Chief Engineer was made possible by the discovery of an unpublished memoir at Rutgers University and Wagner has

mined it well. She tells the story with the thoroughness of Roebling's calculations: the book is as robust in structure and fine in detail as the bridge itself and, like its subject, unlikely to be bettered. It is immaculately researched, meticulously written but exciting and evocative too." - Spectator

"In her bravura book about its creation . . . The magnificent book by Wagner, an NS contributing writer, focuses on the two men responsible for building the edifice: John A Roebling and his patriotically named son Washington." - New Statesman

"Powerful." - The Observer

"Erica Wagner honours Washington with a fine, sympathetic biography." - Literary Review

"The Brooklyn Bridge is one of the greatest engineering marvels of all time, as well as a great work of public art. Its chief engineer is equally compelling and Erica Wagner brings him and his complicated world to life." - Ken Burns, filmmaker, "Brooklyn Bridge" and "The Civil War"

"In this keenly observed and deeply felt biography, Erica Wagner brings Washington Roebling to life, examining both the rigorous mathematics and the complex psychology involved in envisioning one of mankind's greatest built monuments. The narrative is intensely absorbing, the prose tremendously clear, and the characters genuinely unforgettable. This is history of the first order." - Andrew Solomon, author of THE NOONDAY DEMON and FAR FROM THE TREE

"Erica Wagner's account of Washington Roebling, the man who built America's most famous bridge, is a classic, as lovingly and meticulously constructed as the bridge itself. It is a triumph of a book." - Simon Winchester, author of PACIFIC and WHEN THE EARTH SHAKES

"Erica Wagner has given us a captivating and highly readable portrait of Washington Roebling, chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge. Her book should put to rest once and for all in the general reader's mind any confusion between the relative contributions of Washington and those of his father, John, to that monumental engineering project." - Henry Petroski, Aleksandar S. Vesic Professor of Civil Engineering and Professor of History, Duke University; author of ENGINEERS OF DREAMS

American writer and critic Erica Wagner was the literary editor of the London Times for seventeen years and is now a contributing writer for the New Statesman and consulting literary editor for Harper's Bazaar. Her work has appeared in the Guardian, the Economist, the Financial Times, and the New York Times, among others. She is the author of Ariel's Gift, Seizure, and the short story collection Gravity; she is the editor of First Light: A Celebration of Alan Garner. She was the recipient of the Eccles British Library Writer's Award in 2014, and she is a lecturer in creative writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. She lives in London with her husband and son.

great book

This is a very well-written book that I thoroughly enjoyed. A very detailed look at the life of Washington Roebling, builder of the Brooklyn Bridge. I knew a little about him from David McCullough's book but Ms. Wagner paints a very vivid portrait of Roebling the man. From his harsh upbringing through his Civil War travails, Roebling overcame it all to become one of the great names in engineering. An excellent read from a very talented writer.

Dr. A.E. Santaniello's comments on "Chief Engineer: Washington Roebling, the Man who Built the Brooklyn Bridge." I have spent my entire life with books and book writers and can agree totally with his evaluation of Wagner's book. Don't be put off by the title; while the book does give you an insight into the engineering wonder that is the Brooklyn Bridge as executed, day by day, under Washington Roebling's exacting eye and enormous capacity for detail, "Chief Engineer" is also the poignant, heart-rendering and always captivating story of "one man's tenacity in the face of hardship beyond most people's imagining." Fortunately, Erica Wagner has beautifully done the imaging for use: Washington Roebling and his life stand forth as much itself an enduring monument to the human spirit's capacity to journey through adversity to the stars as the great work that still stands as Wagner writes, "an extraordinary symbol of nineteenth-century ideals of progress." This is biography, science and cultural history in one cover. The book answers beautifully Hart Crane's question in his great poem "The Bridge," "How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!"

A well-written and engaging biography of a man who, on his own and through his family's wire company, was a significant part of the making of post-Civil War America. This book pivots around the building of the heroic Brooklyn Bridge, but there is much more to the life story of Washington Roebling. Erica Wagner is an excellent tour guide to this vibrant and complex man, one who is now largely forgotten by history. In this day when superficial celebrity, sports, and political biographies seem to be produced by the boatload, it is pleasant to read one about a true builder of this country. I think not only civil engineers, but the common reader will enjoy Ms. Wagner's book.

Chief Engineer is to me not only an outstanding and well researched biography of an extraordinary

person helping to build a nation and an artistically well-written book where language and structure captivate, elevate and hold the reader. It is much more. There are carefully written subtexts as I read this book that like a mirror reflect on the maturing and evolving American society of the day: the economic, social, cultural and class relationships that evolved during this churning, ambiguous and 'catch as catch can' time in the development and growth of the country. Here are a few of the themes. Personal development. From the horror and grotesque experience of the Civil War and the loyalty of an American soldier who endured what had to be dealt with on behalf of his country, while his brother hired a substitute, we live through this man's difficult maturation. American professionalism. The painful evolution of career excellence and the education processes and structures that evolved and aided individuals and technology to establish American industrial might that delivered the 20th Century's prominence for this nation. Trust in science by doing it. How did we ever learn to repair and replace human hearts or get to the moon and back or bank knowledge in a "cloud"? The lessons of experience so aptly described in framing and supporting this long lasting artful bridge symbolize the journey of this nation and its builders to design and sustain great accomplishments for society. Personal wealth creation by earning it. Washington Roebling became rich by taking risk and delivering on his promises. Countless others have followed. Giving back. Despite his health issues, this man shared his knowledge and experiences rather than selfishly holding it all in close. These themes and others provide for endless hours of further thought and discussion about the importance of this bridge to the American journey and this book. Erica has gifted us with much more than a biography of a man, important as he was in his own domain.

Purchased as gift.

Excellent book. Arrived in the condition specified.

Bought this book in a used book store. Not a page turner by any means. Boring and laborious. If not for the author's literary connections, I doubt it would have been picked up by any publisher let alone be positively reviewed by critics. May be of interest to academics but the average person will find it slow going and quickly give up on it, as I did.

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