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Bird's-Eye View of the Great New York and Brooklyn Bridge and Grand Display of Fire Works on Opening Night [Pyrotechnics Furnished By Detwiller & Street, New York]

Stock#: 78379mp2
Map Maker: Major
Date: 1883
Place: New York
Color: Hand Colored
Condition: VG
Size: 24.5 x 15.5 inches
Price: SOLD



Description:

Opening Day of the Brooklyn Bridge

Rare view celebrating the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge on May 24, 1883.

This spectacular 4 color chromolithograph captures the dramatic fireworks display and grand parade of ships below the bridge, with thousands of people and horse drawn carriages crossing the span.

The view is a tribute to the builders of the bridge in the truest sense, listing the Designer, Chief Engineers and Assistant Engineers at the bottom left and the Draughtsmen, Master Architect, Superintendent of Masonry and General Foreman of Laborers at the far right, but curiously not mentioning the important role played by Emily Warren Roebling, herself an engineer.

Interestingly, the view serves both as veneration of the men responsible for construction of the bridge and a tangible evidence of how easy it was to obscure the role of perhaps its most important engineer, Emily Warren Roebling, the wife of the projects primary engineer, Colonel Washington Roebling. As noted by John A. Stuart,

On May 24, 1883, a monumental vision of the future of American industry assumed a prominent site over New York's East River. The Brooklyn Bridge spanned not only geo-political boundaries between Manhattan and Brooklyn (and technological frontiers of stone and steel construction) but also nineteenth-century notions of gender and authorship. Although most



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canonical accounts attribute the bridge to its patriarchal creators, John A. Roebling (1806-1869) and his son Colonel Washington Roebling (1837-1926), its final builder was the Colonel's wife, Emily Warren Roebling (1843- 1907), a remarkable woman accomplished in the field of engineering. . .

Public perception of the bridge's authorship was blurred almost from its inception and contributed to an inconsistent picture of Emily Roebling's achievements. John A. Roebling, an entrepreneurial cable manufacturer and suspension bridge engineer, served briefly as the bridge's chief engineer from 1867 until he died from tetanus--the result of a foot injury incurred while surveying the site in 1869. Most of John Roebling's construction details remained undocumented at the time of his death and were left to be completed by his eldest son, Colonel Washington Roebling. Shortly before his father died, Washington Roebling returned home from a year in Europe, where he had studied pneumatic caisson technology. His most important tasks on the bridge involved the design and construction of the submerged wooden caissons, which permitted the excavation of the riverbed while the towers were constructed overhead. In 1872, just as work in the caissons was coming to an end, Washington Roebling was debilitated by the bends, or caisson disease, a result of the sudden changes in air pressure during his long hours directing the work on the riverbed. He was to remain bedridden, with various degrees of paralysis, for the duration of the bridge's construction. During this period Emily Roebling worked to ensure the successful completion of the project. Just as her husband had, she administered construction of the bridge, often spontaneously improvising details needed to continue work on the site.

Although the bridge progressed rapidly in the first years of Washington Roebling's service, his interest appears to have waned after 1872. In an 1898 letter to her son, John A. Roebling, Jr., Emily Roebling described her husband's and her own commitment and enthusiasm for the project:

I am still feeling well enough to stoutly maintain against all critics (including my only son) that I have more brains, common sense and know-how generally than any two engineers civil or uncivil that I have ever met and but for me the Brooklyn Bridge would never have the name Roebling in any way connected with it! ... Your father was for years dead to all interest in that work.

With his failing eyesight and intolerance for visitors, the incapacitated engineer delegated many of his duties to Emily. Roebling, one of the only people with whom he spoke during his



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period of retirement.

Because of this relationship, the New York World portrayed Emily Roebling as strong and energetic and her husband as physically weak and dependent, striking a contrast to predominant depictions of the nineteenth-century family. The paper's correspondent spoke of Emily Roebling's ability to "stand as a shield between him [her husband] and the hundreds who call ... to see him." In response to what seemed to be an inversion of gender and marital roles, an elaborate program of obfuscatory propaganda developed around the Roeblings and their bridge. This program hinged on efforts to convince the public of Washington Roebling's ability to supervise the construction of the bridge by telescope, despite the fact that he spent much of his retirement living far from Brooklyn Heights.

The extent to which myths were exploited to re-establish Colonel Roebling's traditional role in both the family structure and the professional domain becomes apparent in an 1883 account by the New York Evening Post:

For many long and weary years this man, who entered our service young and full of life and hope and daring, has been an invalid and confined to his home. He has never seen this structure, as it now stands, save from a distance. But the disease which has shattered his nervous system for the time seemed not to have enfeebled his mind. It appeared even to quicken his intellect. His physical infirmities shut him out, so to speak, from the world, and left him dependent largely on the society of his family, but it gave him for a companion day and night this darling child of his genius - every step of whose progress he has directed and watched over with paternal solicitude. . . .

On May 23, 1883, over a decade after the onset of Washington Roebling's illness and one day before the Brooklyn Bridge's official opening ceremonies, the New York World published one of the most laudatory accounts of Emily Roebling's contributions to the project. Entitled "A Tribute to a Noble Woman: How Mrs. Roebling Aided Husband in the Great Undertaking," the article began:

While so much has been written about the great Brooklyn Bridge and those who have had a share either in planning or building it, there still remains one whose services have not been publicly acknowledged

A gentleman of this city well acquainted with the family said that as soon as Mr. Roebling was stricken with that peculiar fever which has since prostrated him Mrs.



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Roebbling applied herself to the study of engineering, and she succeeded so well that in a short time she was able to assume the duties of chief engineer. . . .

Their surprise was great when Mrs. Roebbling sat down with them and by her knowledge of engineering helped them out with their patterns and cleared away difficulties that had for weeks been puzzling their brains. . .

Detailed Condition:

Cleaned and backed on tissue. Minor restoration along the bottom, including a short repaired tear, with margin extended and some minor retouching of the text.