

The John A. Roebling Bridge Linking Cincinnati, Ohio and Covington, Kentucky

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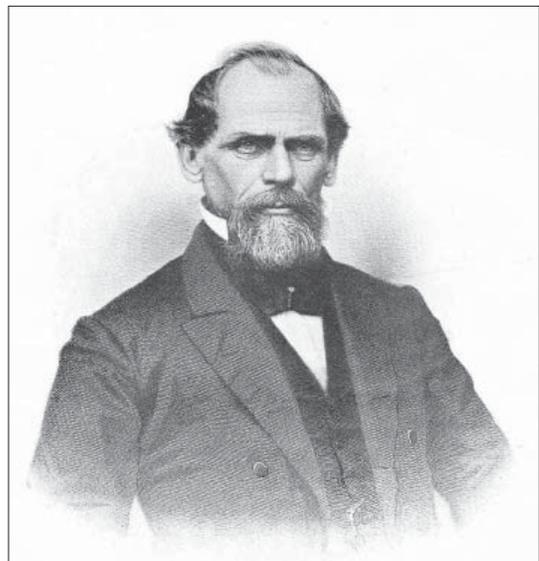


Die Hängebrücke über den Ohio.

The John A. Roebling Bridge
From Max Burgheim's Cincinnati in Wort und Bild (1888)

The John A. Roebling Bridge was officially dedicated on New Year's Day 1867, and was the longest bridge span in the world from tower to tower at that time. It was designed and built by John A. Roebling (1806-69), a German-born civil engineer who designed at least thirteen suspension bridges and aqueducts, including the Brooklyn Bridge. The Roebling Bridge is on the National Register of Historic Places (1975), and has been recognized as a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark (1983).

In the 19th century, the idea of a bridge on the Ohio River was often discussed. A group of Kentuckians petitioned the Kentucky State Legislature for a charter



John A. Roebling
Author's collection

for the Covington and Cincinnati Bridge Company, which was granted in 1846, and the Ohio State Legislature followed suit in 1849. Roebling was invited to survey the area and submit a report. He proposed a bridge with a central tower in the middle of the river, but this was viewed as an obstacle and impractical, so his plan was not approved. Moreover, the Company lacked the necessary funds to build a bridge.

By 1856, the Bridge Company was ready to proceed, and Roebling was invited back to the area. His plan now called for a bridge with two Romanesque- style towers. Work began, but came to a halt due to the great Financial Panic of 1857. By this time, only two towers had been partially completed. In 1862, the threat by Confederate forces during the Siege of Cincinnati sparked interest in completing the bridge.

Amos Shinkle (1818-92), an enterprising businessman in Covington, became the driving force in the Bridge Company to get the bridge completed. He joined its board in 1856, and served as president from 1865 until his death. Roebling returned in January 1863, and work on the bridge resumed in May. In March 1865, his son Washington, who had just mustered out of the Union Army, joined his father as Assistant Engineer.



Washington Roebling
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By early September 1865, the towers were completed, and work began on the main suspension cables. Each measured 12.5 inches in diameter, and contained 5,180 individual wires. Cable work was completed in June 1866, and vertical suspenders were hung from the cables, and diagonal stays added to stabilize the bridge. The roadway was made of oak and pine.

On December 1, 1866, the bridge was opened for pedestrian traffic, and 166,000 people crossed it. A grand march was composed to celebrate its official dedication on New Year's Day in 1867. Tollhouses were at each end of the bridge, with tolls ranging, for example,

from 3 cents for a pedestrian to 10 cents for a horse and cart. In the ensuing years the bridge contributed greatly to the growth and development of the region.

However, by the 1890s, electric streetcars were introduced into the area, and to accommodate the heavier weight and traffic the Bridge Company sought proposals to address these concerns. It approved a proposal for the reconstruction of the bridge that was submitted by Wilhelm Hildenbrand (1843-1908), and hired him as Chief Engineer.

Hildenbrand was a German-born civil engineer who had worked as an Assistant Engineer on the Brooklyn Bridge. Reconstruction began in 1895, and was completed in 1899. Improvements included a second set of cables (10.5 inches in diameter), new trusses, four anchorages, and a widened and strengthened roadway. The bridge could now handle the streetcars, as well as automobiles.

During the 1937 flood, the bridge was the only highway bridge open on the entire 800-mile stretch of the Ohio River from Ohio to Illinois. In 1953, the bridge was acquired by the state of Kentucky, and the wooden floor replaced with metal grating that gives it a humming sound when driving across the bridge, causing it to be referred to as “the singing bridge.” Tolls were removed in 1963 under provisions of the Interstate Highway Act when the Brent Spence Bridge opened on I-71 / I-75.

In 1992, spheres and crosses were returned to the top of the towers; modeled after the originals that had been removed during the reconstruction of the bridge in the 1890s. The originals had been removed to allow for saddles for the second set of cables passing over the towers. This was part of a repair and restoration project by the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet costing in excess of \$10 million.



Wilhelm Hildenbrand
Author's collection

The expenditures for the construction of the bridge totaled \$1,768,821.77, and \$590,000 for its reconstruction. Only two persons are recorded as having lost their lives during the construction of the bridge, and one person during its reconstruction. It originally was painted Spanish brown (a dark reddish brown), and in the late 1890s was repainted (blue for the trusses, white for the stays and suspenders, and black for the railings and bottom). At some time in the 20th century, it was painted green, and since 1976 has been painted blue.

In 2017, the 150th anniversary of the Suspension Bridge was celebrated at RoebingFest in Covington, and sponsored by the Covington-Cincinnati Suspension Bridge Committee (CCSBC). It was formed in 1975 as a citizen group dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the bridge.

The CCSBC promotes public awareness of the bridge's engineering and historic significance, and is responsible for its beautification by the placement of flags and necklace lighting on the bridge. It also sponsors tours and an annual photo contest. For further information about the Committee: www.roebingbridge.org.

Note: The author serves as Historian for the Covington-Cincinnati Suspension Bridge Committee.

Sources

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