Roebilng Headed Germans Who Founded Saxonburg

John Augustus Roebling, a name famous in the world of engineering, is a name that has a special meaning to the Borough of Saxonburg.

It was the renowned builder of the Brooklyn Bridge, along with a band of immigrants from Muhlausen, German who, in 1832, purchased 7,000 acres (at $1.37 an acre) in Jefferson Township, and carved out the village of Saxonburg from what was then largely virgin forest.

With mathematical precision that was characteristic of Roebling, he laid out the village. Main Street runs east to west, with a “white church” at the eastern end, with each lot 100 to 200 feet wide, running approximately half a mile to Water Street, leaving ample space for the small farms, traditional to German families.

Having found what he believed to be his new home, Roebling sent invitations to friends and family remaining in Muhlausen, many of whom joined their fellow countryman in the new land.

Canal, Railroad Builder

But Roebling quickly found that farming was not to his liking and soon was building dams and locks on the Sandy and Beaver Canal. His next job was on a feeder to the Pennsylvania canal above Freeport on the Allegheny River, then he became a state employe, charged with a survey of a railroad route over the Allegheny Mountains.

It was this job that led him to discover a need for a strong and light cable to haul boats over a portage railroad, and thus the invention of the wire cable which has made his name famous throughout the world.

His concern was reported to have been aroused by a tragic accident in which the traditional hemp cable then in use snapped, and two men were crushed to death by the boat that slid down the portage tracks.

The first wire cable was spun on rope walks in a wooded area to the east of the Borough, and the wire cable soon replaced the cumbersome hemp ropes that had been used to haul boats across mountain paths. The cable was spliced and wound on large reels in a workshop, now a memorial to Roebling in a park in the Borough that bears his name.

Using his ingenuity Roebling quickly found new uses for his invention, and turned his attention toward suspension bridges.

In the 16 years Roebling remained in Western Pennsylvania, he built two suspension bridges in Pittsburgh and four aqueducts on the Delaware and Hudson Canal, none of which remain today.

However, problems developed in the Borough, where transportation of the new invention became a problem, since the only outlet, the Allegheney River, was iced over much of the winter, and the costs of reinforcing bridges and boats were excessive.

Move to Trenton

In 1848, Roebling and many of his fellow emigrants left Saxonburg for Trenton, N.J., where his descendants still maintain substantial holdings.

The rest is history.

Roebling did not live to complete his most famous project, the Brooklyn Bridge, but the world-famous bridge over the East River established his genius, and his mark is indelibly stamped on bridge engineering throughout the nation and the world.