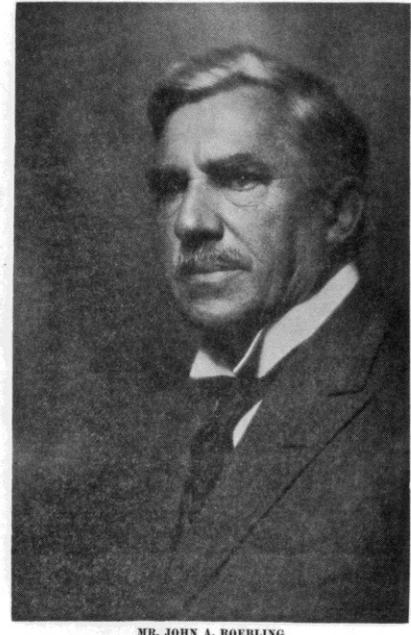
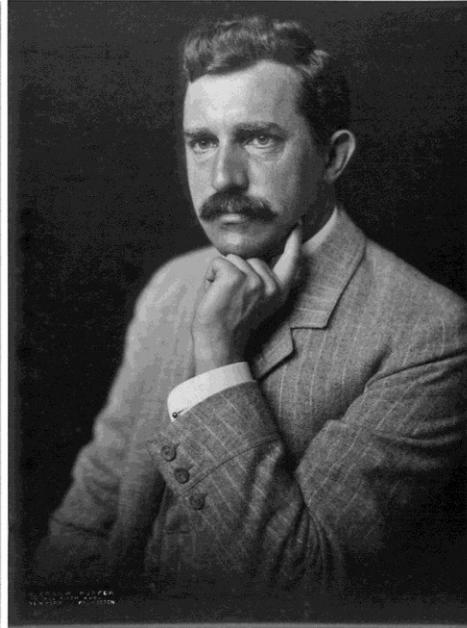


**John A. Roebling, II (1867-1952),  
Builder of the Red Hill Estate (1929-1941), Lake Placid, Florida**

**A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY and The RED HILL ESTATE**

Compiled by

Fred E. Lohrer, 20061002, revised 20140825, 20170717, Archbold Biological Station, Venus, FL 33960  
< <http://www.archbold-station.org/documents/publicationsPDF/JARoebling2-biography.pdf> >



*John A. Roebling, II; Photos courtesy of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*

**John A. Roebling, II (JAR2)**, builder of the Red Hill Estate (1929-1941) at Lake Placid, Florida (and since 1941 the site of the Archbold Biological Station), was the son of Washington A. Roebling, the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge, and the grandson of John A. Roebling, inventor of wire rope (steel cable) and himself a builder of suspension bridges; nine including those across the Allegheny (1844), Monongahela (1846), Delaware\* (1848), Niagara (1854), and Ohio\* (1867) rivers (\* still in use). JAR2 spent his childhood in the developing shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge as his father was building the bridge, and even his birthplace was influenced by his grandfather's bridge-building business. Perhaps then, JAR2 considered the Red Hill Estate as his contribution to the family legacy of building enduring structures.

*Born:* November 21, 1867, Mulhausen, Germany. *Died:* February 2, 1952, Bernardsville, New Jersey.

*Education:* Collegiate School, Manhattan, N.Y., and Brooklyn Boy's Preparatory School  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Inst.: Bachelor's degree, Civil Engineering (1888); Master's, Chemistry

*Married:* June 12, 1889 to Margaret Shippen McIlvaine (B: Aug. 31, 1867, Trenton, N.J. D: Oct. 23, 1930, Trenton, N.J.)  
Dec. 30, 1931 to Helen Price (B: Lee Hall, Shropshire, England. Emigrated to USA in 1909. D: Apr. 28, 1969, Bernardsville, N.J.)

*Children:* Siegfried (B: Dec. 29, 1890, Morris Plains, N.J. D: Jan. 1, 1936, Los Angeles, Cal.)  
Paul (B: May 1, 1893, N.J. D: Dec. 16, 1918; a victim of the flu epidemic.)  
Donald (B: Nov. 15, 1908, N.Y., N.Y. D: Aug. 29, 1959, Boston, Mass.; after a "long illness.")

## John A. Roebling, II (1867-1952), A Brief Biography

*Born in Germany.* John A. Roebling, II's (JAR2) father, Washington A. Roebling (1837-1926), attended (1854-1857) Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York, and earned a degree in Civil Engineering. After several years of working with his father, John A. Roebling, who was building a bridge in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Washington enlisted in the Union Army in April, 1861, as a private and eventually resigned in January, 1865, as a colonel. During his Civil War years he built several military suspension bridges. On January 18, 1865, Washington married Emily Warren, the sister of his former commander, Major General Warren. In spring, 1865, Washington, with Emily, moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, to again work with his father, now on the Cincinnati-Covington Bridge across the Ohio River. He remained in Cincinnati until the summer of 1867 when his father, who had signed the contract to build the Brooklyn Bridge, sent him to Europe to study the principles of caisson foundations. Washington remained in Europe for a year, and during this period his son, John A. Roebling, II, was born on November 21, 1867, in Mulhausen, Thuringia, German, the birthplace of his grandfather, for whom he was named.

*Youth.* JAR2 was 3 years old (1870) when his father began building the towers for the Brooklyn Bridge. JAR2 was 9 years old (1876) when the towers were completed and the first wire was strung from one tower to the other. JAR2 was 16 years old (1883) when the Brooklyn Bridge was completed and opened to traffic. One must wonder what effect the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge had on the young JAR2.

*Education.* During 1870-1883, the Roebling family lived in Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, New York, and JAR2 first attended the Collegiate School in Manhattan, and later the Brooklyn Boy's Preparatory School in Brooklyn. In 1883, when the Brooklyn Bridge was completed, the Roebling family moved to Troy, N.Y., where JAR2 entered Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1884. He graduated in 1888 as the president of his class and with a degree in civil engineering. He was later awarded a Master's degree in chemistry. For the 1900 census, when JAR2 was living at Asheville, North Carolina, he listed his occupation as "Civil Engineer." Construction and engineering were his heritage and training, but they never dominated his life, perhaps, until 1930, when he was 62, and he began a construction project in rural Florida, the Red Hill Estate at Lake Placid, Florida.

*Life.* After college, JAR2 worked at John A. Roebling's Sons, Trenton, New Jersey, for a short period where he conducted studies in chemistry. However, he soon left the company and continued his chemistry studies at his home in nearby New Jersey. The New York Times obituary notice states, "A heart ailment in his youth prevented Mr. Roebling from participating fully in the engineering activities that made the name John A. Roebling's Sons widely known in ... manufacturing and engineering." Upon his father's death in 1926, JAR2 inherited 18.4% of the company's total shares, becoming the largest individual shareholder. Yet, he did not serve as a Director of the company.

JAR2 married Margaret Shippen McIlvaine, of Trenton, on June 12, 1889. They moved to Oracle, AZ, for her health ("a lung ailment"), where they resided during 1898-1897. They moved to Asheville, North Carolina, for the same reason. JAR2 lived at Asheville for about 10 years (ca. 1897-1907) where he had a 25-acre estate, adjacent to the Vanderbilt Estate, called "Beaux Chiens." In December 1907, JAR2 donated his estate to the Episcopal Church in Asheville, and left because the city of Asheville had voted for the prohibition of public sale of alcoholic beverages. He then moved his family to Bernardsville, New Jersey, in the Somerset Hills, where he had purchased a 13-acre estate, Boulderwood (constructed 1901) in 1904. Boulderwood was his permanent home and where he died on February 2, 1952, at age 84.

## John A. Roebling, II, and The Red Hill Estate (1929-1941), Lake Placid, Florida

*John A. Roebling, II, in Florida.* The two obituary notices of JAR2 (see sources, below) do not mention JAR2's time in Florida or his Red Hill Estate. Perhaps this is because the primary source for these two documents was almost certainly JAR2's second wife, Helen. Nonetheless, the Red Hill Estate was a major accomplishment of JAR2's life. JAR2 visited central Florida in winter, perhaps several times during 1927-1930, because of the activities of Melville Dewey (B: Dec. 10, 1851. D: Dec. 26, 1931.), the librarian who developed the Dewey Decimal System of library classification and who was a co-founder of the American Library Association < <http://www.oclc.org/dewey/resources/biography/> > & < [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvil\\_Dewey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melvil_Dewey) >.

*The Lake Placid Club & Loj.* In 1895, Melville Dewey founded the Adirondack Lake Placid Club (LPC), Lake Placid, New York, as a social and recreational club < <http://www.lakeplacidclubresort.com/history.html> >. In 1927, the LPC, with Dewey still at the helm (? it is not clear what the legal relationship between LPC and Dewey was during 1927), purchased a recently-constructed hotel in Lake Stearns, Florida. The LPC; enlarged the hotel, convinced the Florida Legislature to change the town's name to Lake Placid, Florida, and changed the hotel's name to the Lake Placid Club Loj (LPCL) < [http://my.htn.net/lplacid/history/lp\\_club/lp\\_club.htm](http://my.htn.net/lplacid/history/lp_club/lp_club.htm) > & < [http://my.htn.net/lplacid/history/lp\\_club/pamphlet/pamphlet.htm](http://my.htn.net/lplacid/history/lp_club/pamphlet/pamphlet.htm) >. Soon thereafter, the LPCL constructed several resort buildings on a nearby tract of land on the north shore of Lake Placid (formerly Lake Childs). The stock market crash of 1929, and the ensuing Great Depression, had a severe negative effect on the LPCL, as well as many other tourist developments in Florida. The LPCL closed on May 1, 1931. The original LPCL was abandoned, and eventually was destroyed in a fire during the 1950s. The buildings of the lakeshore campus still exist and functioned as a religious conference center throughout most of the intervening years, and even now (2012).

*Roebling's Red Hill Estate.* JAR2 visited the Adirondacks LPC (perhaps frequently?) and was attracted to the new Florida LPCL because his wife Margaret had tuberculosis and she had to leave New Jersey during winter. Mr. & Mrs. Roebling must have liked central Florida, because JAR2 purchased 1,050 acres of forested land 8 miles south of Lake Placid (in 2 transactions; May 15, 1929 & Mar. 30, 1930), where he intended to construct a winter home on the highest point of his new land, Red Hill, 213 feet about sea level. But first he wanted to construct a storehouse, and other support buildings, on a railroad siding along the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad that ran along the western boundary of the property. Thus the Red Hill Estate of JAR2 was conceived. JAR2 hired a resident construction engineer, Alexander Blair (1877-1975) < <http://www.archbold-station.org/documents/publicationsPDF/ABlair-biography.pdf> >, and construction of the warehouse began in August 1930 < <http://www.archbold-station.org/html/linkpgs/buildings.html> >. Unfortunately, on October 24, 1930, Mrs. Roebling died in Trenton, N.J. JAR2 remarried soon thereafter (Dec. 30, 1931), and lost interest in constructing the mansion on Red Hill. Nevertheless, construction of the storehouse and other support buildings continued through 1933, and with minor alterations through 1935 < <http://www.archbold-station.org/html/vinfo/albums/RedHillbrochure-1939/index.htm> >. JAR2 considered the Red Hill Estate construction project as his own private WPA (Works Progress Administration) Project. He employed about 100 men and insisted that all work be done by hand, eschewing any mechanized labor-saving machinery wherever possible, so that he could employ as many men as possible.

*The Red Hill Storehouse.* The Roebling Storehouse was designed to store furniture and building material for the construction of the mansion (and did function as a furniture storage facility for some of the time). Two major hurricanes (Miami-1926, Lake Okeechobee-1928) swept over southern Florida during the late 1920s causing much destruction of property and human lives. Therefore building a hurricane-proof

building was important to JAR2. The warehouse, and other support buildings, were also built to test construction methods that might be used for building the mansion on Red Hill. In 1935, JAR2's son, Donald, of Clearwater, Florida, used the Red Hill Storehouse, and adjacent Lake Annie, for the first aquatic test-runs of his amphibious vehicle, The Alligator, which became the prototype of the WW2 landing-vehicles used by the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Army

< <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1987/RRW.htm> >.

During the Roebling Era (1930-1941) much of the storehouse was empty. Unit 1 (units numbered from the north) was the machine shop. The north side of the storehouse had a ramp and folding door, so that vehicles could be moved into the machine shop for engine repair. Unit 3 possibly was a carpenter shop. Unit 7 was a tool-storage area. This left four storage units for the temporary storage of furniture from N.J., which was stored at Red Hill for a time. No evidence exists about other uses of these four storage units except for Donald Roebling's temporary storage of the Alligator (see above).

*Archbold Biological Station founded.* On July 28, 1941, JAR2 gave his Red Hill Estate to Richard Archbold (1907-1976) < [http://www.archbold-station.org/html/aboutus/r\\_archbold/archbold.html](http://www.archbold-station.org/html/aboutus/r_archbold/archbold.html) > , who founded the Archbold Biological Station on the site, using the well-constructed Roebling buildings as the core campus. Archbold and Donald Roebling (JAR2's youngest son) were schoolboy friends with similar interests and who maintained radio contact when Archbold was exploring New Guinea during the 1930s. It was Donald who facilitated the gift of the Red Hill Estate to Richard Archbold.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to the following people for their help with this document. Charlotte Wilson donated the photographs of JAR2. Mike Mazzeo scanned the photographs and processed the digital images. Beverly Mazzeo conducted biographical research.

### **Sources for this Document**

- anonymous. 1952. John A. Roebling, engineer, 84, dies. New York Times, February 3, 1952.
- Archbold Biological Station archives.
- Harris, D. 2000. The amazing Margaret Shippen Roebling. Highlands Today, March 22, 2000, Page 5.
- Roebling, H.P. 1952. A biographical sketch (John A. Roebling, II). Bernardsville News, February 7, 1952.
- Morse, R.A. 2000. Richard Archbold and the Archbold Biological Station. University Press of Florida.
- Rutgers University Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives. 2003. MC 654. Roebling Family Collection, 1824-1971. New Brunswick, NJ.
- Schuyler, H. 1931. The Roeblings: A century of engineers, bridge-builders, and industrialists. Princeton University Press.
- Zink, C.W., and D.W. Hartman. 1992. Spanning the industrial era: The John A. Roebling's Sons Company, Trenton, New Jersey, 1848-1974. Trenton Roebling Community Development Corporation.
- Zink, C.W. 2011. The Roebling legacy. Princeton Landmark Publications.