

Woman in a man's world: the career of Mary G. Roebling

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Abstract

Mary Roebling (1905-1994) was the first woman in the United States to serve as president of a major commercial bank, the Trenton Trust Company, and the first female governor of the American Stock Exchange. Apart from her impressive business career, Roebling promoted equal rights for women, served as a civilian advisor to the military, and assisted numerous charitable and non-profit organizations in her native Trenton. The Mary Roebling Papers are significant because little research has been done on women in banking or business and archival sources on women in banking are fairly limited. Her papers also constitute an important source for research on economic and business history, New Jersey history, the study of elites, and urban studies. Carmen Godwin assisted her mentor, Dr. Fernanda Perrone in drafting the following biographical sketch as part of her work as a Rutgers Undergraduate Research Fellow. This sketch is based on materials found in the Mary Roebling Papers held at Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

Mary G. Roebling (1905-1994) Biographical sketch

Mary Gindhart Herbert Roebling was born in West Collingswood, New Jersey, on July 29, 1905. She was the eldest of four siblings, (Mary, John, Floyd and Margaret), born to Isaac Dare Gindhart, Jr. and Mary W. (Simon) Gindhart. Her father was the President of Keystone & Eastern Telephone Company, while her mother was a pianist and vocalist, who introduced the public school system to the sight reading of music. Mary's first introduction to the world of business began with her father, whom she accompanied to various civic and business functions that her mother was unable to attend.[1]

In 1921, at the age of sixteen, Mary married a young soldier named Arthur

Herbert, nephew of the American conductor and composer, Victor Herbert. She and Arthur had a daughter named Elizabeth in 1922, but their marriage was cut short when Arthur died of blood poisoning in 1924.

After the death of her husband, Roebling moved in with her parents and joined a Philadelphia brokerage house as a secretary. She studied merchandising and business administration at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, at night because women were not admitted to classes during the day. Promoted to "customer's woman," she became a financial advisor to Siegfried Roebling, grandson of Colonel Washington Roebling, the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge. Siegfried ran one of the family's businesses, the Trenton Trust Company. He and Mary married in 1931 and had a son, Paul, in 1934. Another tragedy befell Mary, however, when her second husband, Siegfried, died suddenly in 1936.



Mary G. Roebling, 1964

Banking Career

As executor of her husband's estate, she was urged by her father-in-law, John A. Roebling, to become President of the Trenton Trust Company. The tragedy of the loss of her husband marks the beginning of her career as a banker, as she became the first woman to serve as President of a major commercial bank, and four years later began serving in the dual capacity of President and Chairman of the Board, also a first for a woman. During the first years of her appointment, she took evening courses at New York University in order to improve her knowledge of banking practices, and studied law with a private tutor. She quickly became a success, establishing innovative practices of public relations

and merchandising, as well as drive-in banking and a railroad station branch for Trenton commuters. Under her leadership, Trenton Trust's assets increased from 17 to 137 million in a twenty-eight year period. Roebling brought a particularly feminine touch to the operation of her bank: she was the first banker to hold "financial teas" to introduce wealthy women to the advantages of trust funds; she distributed umbrellas when it was raining, lent her board rooms for women's club meetings, and sponsored art shows and displays of customers' merchandise. Before other banks, Trenton Trust employed professional window dressers. Roebling also arranged special Christmas

concerts at the bank, and distributed 50,000 pots of shamrock on St. Patrick's Day.[2] In 1972, when the Trenton Trust Company merged with the National State Bank in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Roebling was elected Chairman of the Board for the combined institution, in which capacity she served until her retirement in 1984. As Chairman Emeritus, Roebling continued to solicit business and promote the interests of the bank. Roebling's personal and business lives were closely connected. As a friend recalled, "You must understand that when she was entertaining she was also working for the bank. Her personal life and her business life were the same." [3] Although disabled by a stroke, she remained active until her death from renal failure on October 25, 1994.

Business Activities

Roebling participated in numerous community, civic and national organizations. Most of her activities reflected her belief in the free enterprise system, her anticommunism, and support of a strong military. She promoted the business community at the local, state, national, and international levels. Most significantly, in 1958, she was appointed as the first woman governor of the American Stock Exchange. She was one of the three public members not connected with Wall Street, whose function was to report public reaction and thought to the Board of Governors. According to Exchange President Edward T. McCormick, Roebling was selected "first, because of her stature and executive ability in the business field and secondly because she is a woman.[4] " In 1956, Roebling was the only woman delegate from the United States to attend the International Chamber of Commerce meeting in Tokyo. The following year, she was invited to entertain officially for the Japanese delegation to the United Nations. In 1959, Roebling served as chair of women's activities for the International Chamber of Commerce's Seventeenth Congress in Washington, D.C.. She continued to serve as a trustee of the United States Council of the International Chamber of Commerce, and to its successor body, the United States Council for International Business into the 1990s. Among her many "firsts," Roebling was the first woman to serve as a director of the New Jersey Standard Fire Insurance Company and of Walker-Gordon Laboratories, a milk-producing company in Plainsboro, New Jersey.

Government Service

Throughout her life, Mary Roebling served the government at the national, state, and local levels. Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her to the committee working on the China Relief Bill, she served on the board of the International Rescue Committee, and attended the White House Conference on the Refugee Problem. Her outspoken views on the place of women in society won her an appointment to the Citizens Advisory Council to the Commission on the Status of Women in 1963. President Reagan, appointed her to the Task Force on International Private Enterprise, which

recommended ways to strengthen private enterprise in the developing world. She also served on the National Business Council on Consumer Affairs and the Regional Advisory Committee for Banking Policies and Practices.

On the state level, Roebling was the first woman member of the New Jersey State Unemployment Compensation Commission, the first woman to serve as Economic Ambassador of the State of New Jersey and as a member of the Interstate Commission on the Delaware River Basin. In addition, in 1950, Governor Alfred E. Driscoll appointed her to the New Jersey State Investment Council, where she served under five governors. Roebling also served on the New Jersey Small Business Advisory Council from 1966 to 1968, and on the Citizens Advisory Committee for the New Jersey State Museum from 1963 to 1968. Locally, Roebling served as Chairman and Comptroller of the Trenton Parking Authority and as a Member of the Mercer County Improvement Authority.

Mary Roebling was an active and committed member of the Republican Party. She corresponded with many past presidents and their families, including Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Her service as a delegate for Nixon in the 1960 presidential election and her lifelong correspondence with him and his family, prove her unwavering support for this controversial president. Nevertheless, Roebling occasionally gave money to the Democratic Party, if she supported a particular candidate. She was on cordial terms with Democratic politicians, and cooperated with them on activities such as the annual dinner honoring the memory of former New York governor Alfred E. Smith.

Military Service

Mary Roebling's greatest area of government service was in her work for the military. Throughout her life, Roebling was an advocate of a strong military, supporting universal military training: "The military is a service that all citizens -- men or women -- should render to their country." [5] Her lifetime of service to the military began when President Harry S. Truman made her the only woman member of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Armed Forces Training Installations in 1950. In this capacity, Roebling traveled throughout the country visiting military bases, interviewing soldiers and reporting on conditions. In 1951, she was appointed to the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), where she served on the Recruiting and Public Information Subcommittee. Between 1951 and 1953, Roebling visited bases, arranged events, and promoted the introduction of a postage stamp honoring women's contribution to national defense. Remaining on DACOWITS as an Emeritus Member, Roebling continued to be concerned with the position of women in the military and with publicizing the military services to make them attractive to women. Among other ventures, she funded a scholarship for top women Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) graduates.

In 1959, Roebling went to London as one of one hundred American delegates to the Congress of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the purpose of which was to enlarge the activities and increase understanding of the organization. Her prestigious career of service to the military continued in 1971, when she was appointed Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army for New Jersey, which was extended to the First Army Area in 1983; Roebling served until 1987, when she was made Civilian Aide Emeritus. In her role as Civilian Aide, Roebling sponsored events, made speeches, and advised the Secretary of the Army on publicity, using the skills in public relations which she had honed at the Trenton Trust Company. Concurrently, Roebling served on the Advisory Board of the Association of the United States Army, where, as a member of the Expanding Education Fund Committee (established in 1980), she worked to educate the public about the military. She was also Founding President of the Army War College Foundation, a trustee of the Naval War College Foundation, a Life Member of the National Defense Transportation Association and a member of the American Legion Auxiliary. Through her work with the military, Roebling developed friendships with military figures such as General Howard Louderback of the U.S. Army Reserve, and General Rocco Negris, Commandant of Fort Dix in Wrightstown, New Jersey, where a room was named after Roebling.

Views on Women

Throughout her life, Mary Roebling was a strong supporter of equal rights for women. Her goal was "equal pay for equal work with equal opportunity for advancement." [6] The promotion of women in business was extremely important to Roebling. She felt that companies were not using women to their fullest advantage, and that women were concentrated in lower-echelon jobs and paid accordingly. Beginning in 1938, in her speeches on women in business, Roebling frequently pointed to the numbers of wealthy women, women stockholders, and women business owners in the country. She also emphasized women's power as consumers through their control of the family income, or as insurance beneficiaries. Cultivating women entrepreneurs and consumers would be, according to Roebling, beneficial to business as well as to women. Roebling supported women's entry into all professions, believing that young women should prepare themselves for careers: "A career gives you a sense of accomplishment...it keeps you from being frustrated...or an alcoholic...or bored." [7] In her speeches and articles, Roebling frequently called for the nomination of a woman vice-president; she herself was suggested as a possible candidate in the 1950s.

Mary Roebling was active in numerous women's organizations. In 1978, she helped to found the Women's Bank, N.A. in Denver, the nation's first chartered bank established by women, where she served as Chairman of the Board. The Women's Bank was co-founded by fifty women, many of whom had been refused credit

elsewhere. In the bank, in which everyone called each other by their first names, Roebling and her associates tried to create a comfortable atmosphere and cater to the special needs of women customers. The Women's Bank was economically successful, with assets eventually reaching twenty million dollars.

Mary Roebling was a member of the National Woman's Party and a lifelong supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Yet, she distrusted radical feminists, whom she believed had made the mistake of confusing manners and morals with equality, thus leading to the failure to ratify the ERA. Instead, she devoted herself to the issues of equal pay and equal opportunities for professional women. Roebling was a founder and director of the American Women's Council, and was active in many professional women's organizations, including the American Association of Bank Women, American Women's Association, the League of Women Voters, and the Business and Professional Women's Club. She was also a member of women's clubs such as Zonta International and the Contemporary in Trenton, and became the first woman member of a venerable male bastion, the Union League in Philadelphia, in 1986.

Philanthropy

Mary Roebling believed in corporate responsibility to society: "Certainly in our free enterprise system, the business world is necessarily a major part of the entire society, and business has many important roles to fulfill in civic, social, and church affairs and most assuredly in government." [8] Roebling also felt that because most women were mothers, they had a greater sense of moral responsibility to the next generation. [9] These twin beliefs made Roebling an active philanthropist. She served on the boards of numerous charitable and non-profit organizations, including the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, the Medical College of Pennsylvania, the Boy Scouts of America and the Woods Schools and Residential Treatment Center in Langhorne, Pennsylvania, with which she was associated for over forty years. Roebling was particularly disturbed by the poverty, unemployment, and civic unrest in the city of Trenton during the 1960s. She supported many Trenton institutions, particularly the Greater Trenton Symphony, the New Jersey State Museum, and several hospitals. She also supported nearby institutions such as Westminster Choir College in Princeton, the Columbus Boys Choir, and the Philadelphia Art Museum. Roebling possessed a deep religious faith, which she expressed in many of her speeches and interviews. She was a life member of All Saints Guild, Trinity Cathedral in Trenton, served on the lay committee of the National Council of Churches, and was an active supporter of the New Jersey Conference of Christians and Jews.

Awards

Roebbling's dedication to the military is revealed in the many prestigious awards she received, including the President's Medal from the Association of the United States Army, the Distinguished Service Award from the Marine Corps League, and the Outstanding Civilian Service Medal from the Department of Defense (1984). Roebbling also received many international awards, including the Commendatore of the Order of the Star of Solidarity from the President of Italy and the Israel Freedom Medal. In New Jersey, she was awarded a Brotherhood Award from the New Jersey Conference of Christians and Jews in 1956, in recognition of her year-long activities in brotherhood and human rights, and was awarded the Cecilia Gaines Holland Award from the New Jersey State Federation of Women's Clubs in 1965. Locally, she was Trenton's Woman of the Year in 1952, and the Delaware Valley Council's Citizen of the Year in 1965. The city of Trenton celebrated "Mary Roebbling Day" in 1959, and in 1988 the Mary G. Roebbling Building was dedicated by the State of New Jersey in her honor. Roebbling, who was particularly fond of orchids, had three flowers -- an orchid, a rose, and a dahlia--named after her. Several educational institutions awarded Roebbling honorary degrees, including St. John's University, Ithaca College, Wilberforce University, Marymount College, and Rutgers University.

Other Activities

Mary Roebbling had a wide variety of hobbies and interests. Able to trace her family's roots back to the seventeenth century, she was deeply interested in genealogy, history and historic preservation. She was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), the Colonial Daughters of the Seventeenth Century, the Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Swedish Colonial Society, the Holland Society of America, and the Huguenot Societies of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, among others organizations. Roebbling was also an avid collector of furniture, sculpture, paintings, glass, and porcelain. She was a member of the Art Collectors Club of America, the Button Collectors Club, the Mechanical Bank Collectors of America, and the Jim Beam Bottle Collectors Club. Committed to music and art, she helped to support various artists, museums and performing arts centers, even founding a music scholarship in her mother's memory.

Mary Roebbling enjoyed meeting political and military leaders, and Hollywood celebrities such as Joan Crawford, Agnes Moorehead, Van Johnson, and astrologer Carroll Righter. Maintaining homes in New York and Palm Beach, she moved easily in elite social circles. In Trenton, she had a \$500,000 town house built on State Street near her bank in 1959. The house featured a dining room that seated thirty-six and an indoor swimming pool surrounded by sculptures, where she entertained her friends lavishly. Roebbling believed in self-marketing in the same way that she believed in marketing her bank. Always well-dressed, she bought clothes from thte top designers,

and in 1958 was named best-dressed banking woman in the country. Roebling employed a full-time public relations representative to handle her personal publicity, and in 1960 was voted "the most publicized woman in the state" by the New Jersey Association of Newspaper women.[10]

Conclusions

Mary G. Roebling was an unusual example of a woman who had a successful career in a male-dominated profession, banking, during the mid-twentieth century. Unlike most American women, of course, Roebling was aided by her family background, and most importantly, her marriage into a wealthy family. Her father, himself an executive, supported her interest in business. Her marriage, however, gave her entry into the most elite circles of economic power in the state, and upon her husband's premature death, gave her the opportunity to run the Trenton Trust Company. Her successful operation of the bank, however, was the result of her shrewd marketing ability. Roebling's social and economic success enabled her to attain influence in yet another male-dominated sphere, the U.S. military.

Roebling was also unique in the way she used gender to further her career, from her feminine and personal management style, to the way she constructed her identity as a woman of fashion, a mother, homemaker and philanthropist. Furthermore, in promoting equality for women in business, Roebling shrewdly used arguments related to women's importance as consumers, which she knew would resonate with business leaders. Because of her social and business connections, she found a ready audience for her arguments.

Footnote

Since this article was written, the authors discovered an unpublished dissertation: Patricia R. Faulk, "Gender and Power in the Twentieth Century: Mary G. Roebling, Pioneer Woman Banker," (University of Pennsylvania, 1992), which explores many of the same themes.

Acknowledgment

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- [7] *Palm Beach Daily News* February 2, 1981).
- [8] *Stuart County Day School* (April 1980), p. 3.
- [9] *Mainliner* (October 1979), p. 62.
- [10] *Saturday Evening Post* (May 21, 1963), p. 23.

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