



1863: Wash Roebling's Gettysburg Letter

by **Cecily Nelson Zander**

Posted on August 2, 2023

There is one location on the Gettysburg battlefield where heroism remains hotly contested. Atop two small hills at the field's southern terminus, a host of monuments attest to the bravery of Union soldiers and celebrate the service of three of their leaders. On Gettysburg's Round Tops visitors will find tributes to Lieutenant Colonel Strong Vincent, who commanded the 3rd Brigade of the Army of the Potomac's V Corps; Brigadier General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, who served as the army's Chief Engineer during the battle; and Colonel Joshua

Lawrence Chamberlain, the regimental commander of the 20th Maine Infantry Regiment. Warren's monument is a life-sized plean to the man himself, Vincent's two stone sentinels mark the site of his mortal wounding and the location of his regiment (Pennsylvania's 83rd Infantry), the latter topped by a bronze likeness of the lawyer-turned-soldier, while Chamberlain's name alone appears on the memorial to his regiment—with no image of the sometime college professor enshrined in either granite or bronze on the battlefield.



Washington Augustus Roebling

To this triumvirate of heroes historians might add Washington Augustus Roebling. Roebling served in the 83rd New York Artillery, with which he fought at Second Manassas, Antietam, and Chancellorsville. At Gettysburg, Roebling worked as aide-de-camp to Gouverneur Warren, who he eventually accompanied through the Wilderness and on to the siege of Petersburg. Roebling resigned from the army on January 21, 1865. His decision came not

long after he had written a disconsolate letter to his fiancé Emily Warren (sister to Gouverneur) predicting that the “business of getting killed is a mere question of time.”**[1]**

Though his service was laudable, it was Roebling’s postbellum career that cemented his place in history. Indeed, he achieved perhaps the most remarkable engineering feat of the nineteenth century, when he became the principal engineer for the building of the Brooklyn Bridge. The great bridge had been designed by Roebling’s father, the noted bridge-builder and engineer John A. Roebling. John Roebling died in 1869, just as construction on the bridge was about to begin. At the time he took control of the bridge project Washington Roebling was 32 years old.

Roebling never wrote extensively of his wartime experiences. The Brooklyn Bridge project occupied nearly a decade and half of his postbellum career, which also included running the cable factory his family founded in Trenton, New Jersey, leaving little time for Roebling to record his memories of the war. Had he done so, history might remember that in the early afternoon of July 2, the 26-year-old Roebling was one of the first officers to climb Little Round Top and was the man who noticed John Bell Hood’s recently arrived Confederate’s cresting Warfield Ridge and moving toward the Union left flank. Roebling hurriedly conveyed the news to Warren and the two men worked quickly to find troops to defend the critical position. In that moment of crisis, “Roebling,” Warren would later recall, “performed more able and brave service than anyone I knew.”**[2]**

The following excerpt is from a letter Roebling wrote about his involvement in the Gettysburg battle in 1913, published in a small illustrated in pamphlet in 1961.

Being a stranger to you I may state that my name is Roebling, the same Colonel Roebling who built the Brooklyn Bridge, and am now seventy-six years old. I was at Gettysburg, an aide-de-camp to General Warren (my brother- in-law).

I arrived in Gettysburg on the forenoon of the second day about an hour in advance of the 5th Corps with whom I had marched part of the way. At Meade's headquarters I found General Warren. After making myself familiar with the situation and looking around, Meade suddenly spoke up, and said, "Warren! I hear a little peppering going on in the direction of that little hill off yonder. I wish you would ride over and if anything serious is going on, attend to it." (This is verbatim.)

So we rode over. Before reaching it we met the head of the 5th Corps, marching to reinforce the 3d Corps, who were sorely pressed in their advanced position.

Arriving at the foot of the rugged little Knob [Little Round Top] I ran up to the top while Warren stopped to speak to General [Stephen Hinsdale] Weed. One glance sufficed to note the head of [General John Bell] Hood's Texans coming up the rocky ravine which separates Little and Big Round Top. I ran down, told General Warren, he came up with me and saw the necessity of immediate action.

Fortunately he was an old friend of General Weed's, and Colonel [Patrick H.] O'Rourke had been his favorite pupil at West Point. Without waiting for General [George] Sykes' approval, who was some distance ahead, Warren ordered these troops to face about and get into line, covering Little Round Top and the adjacent ground. Firing began at once. It was deemed very important to get a section of artillery up there.

[Charles E.] Hazlett's battery was nearby; it started up the hill, but the horses could not pull it up, so all hands took hold of the wheels and tugged away. I strained at one hind wheel, and you, my dear Sir, at the other hind wheel, until we reached the summit, and some shots were fired. They had a great moral effect, as the enemy supposed the hill to be unoccupied.

In the meantime the head of the enemy's column had passed through between the round tops, had reached and crossed the Baltimore Pike, and virtually cut the 5th Corps in two.

Then came the magnificent work of [Colonel Joshua] Chamberlain's men from Maine who drove the enemy back at the point of the bayonet, but I do not wish to elaborate on the hundreds of incidents that happened. Many prominent officers were killed. Warren had the skin of his Adam's apple grazed, a close call. After the position was safe, I was sent back to General Meade and gave him a detailed account of what had happened. Men who were on Little Round Top are getting scarce!

[1] Washington Roebling to Emily Warren, August 27, 1864, in Earl Schenck Miers, ed., *Wash Roebling's War* (Newark, DE: The Curtis Paper Company, 1961), 29.

[2] Gouverneur K. Warren to Doctor Farley, December 16, 1877, in Oliver Wilcox Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top, Gettysburg, July 2, 1863* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1913), 325.

Posted in **Primary Sources**

Tagged as **1863**, **1863-the-great-task-before-us**, **Gettysburg**, **primary source**, **Washington Roebling**

3 Responses to *1863: Wash Roebling's Gettysburg Letter*



Kevin C. Donovan says:

August 2, 2023 at 1:30 PM

Interesting. To whom is G.W. Roebling writing in his 1913 letter? It appears that the recipient personally worked with him to push cannon up to Round Top.

Loading...