

A QUIET SEA
RMS TITANIC



WASHINGTON ROEBLING II

TITANIC: WASHINGTON A. ROEBLING II



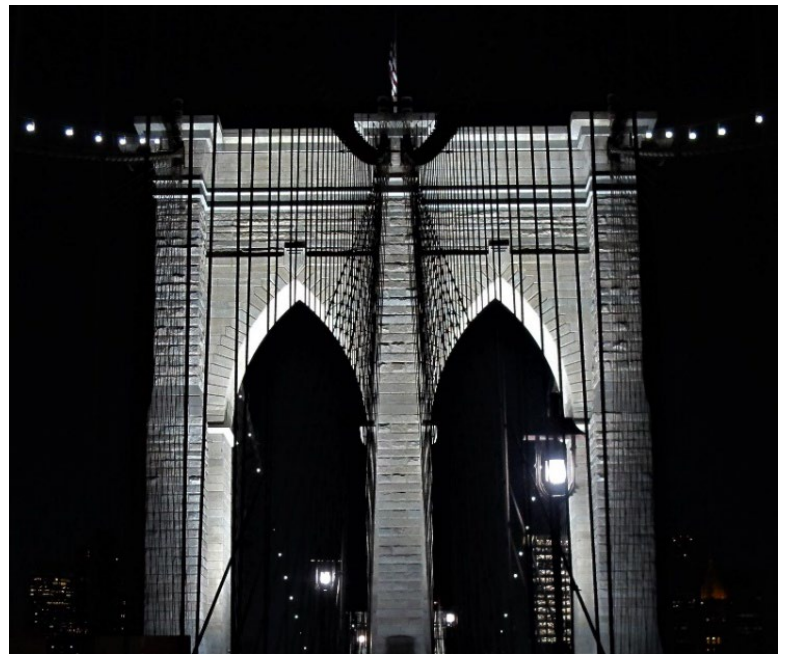
Washington A. Roebling II
Credit: Wikitree

INTRODUCTION

Washington A. Roebling II, born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1881, was the third of four children born to Charles Gustavas Roebling (1849-1918) and Sarah Mahon Ormsby (1855-1887). Sarah passed away at the age of 31, when Washington was 6; Charles never remarried. Washington's grandfather John A. Roebling, a German immigrant and civil engineer, was famous for his innovative suspension bridges. Charles, a bridge builder in his own right, was president and chief mechanical engineer of the world-renowned John A, Roebling's Sons wire rope company, which supplied cables to the world's premier suspension bridges. Charles helped his brother Washington and sister-in-law Emily build the Brooklyn Bridge. Concerned with the well-being of his employees, he also built the model town of Roebling on the Delaware.



Emily and Washington Roebling
Credit: Rutgers University.
Photographer H. Manger, Philadelphia 1865

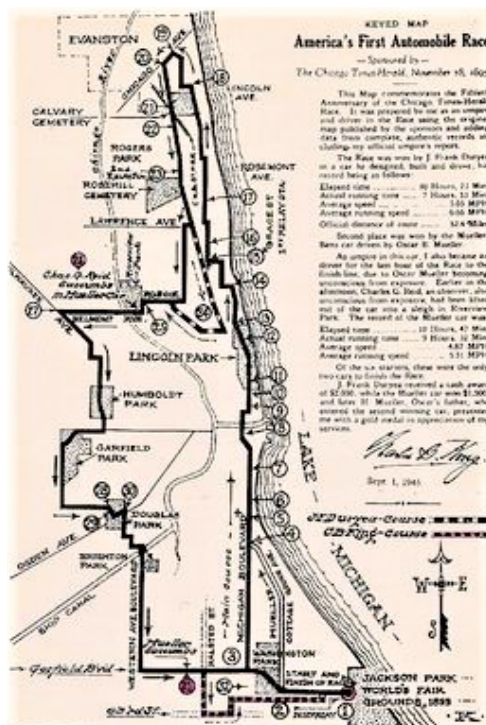


Brooklyn Bridge
Credit: Julia Deroko

Washington Roebling II attended the State Model school in Trenton, then the Hill Family Boarding School for Boys in Pottstown, PA. The innovative school provided on-campus housing, relieving students of the burden of finding lodging. The school encouraged sports, primarily tennis, and required high marks. Roebling proved to be an outstanding football player, earned a degree in engineering and developed an ardent interest in the burgeoning automobile industry. Wealthy young men were drawn to the new sport of motor racing, and Washington was no exception.

THE FIRST MOTOR RACE

On a frigid and snowy Thanksgiving, Chicago hosted the first automobile race in the United States. The course was from Chicago to Milwaukee, but the existing roads were treacherous and unsuitable for such a contest. Therefore, an alternate route was chosen—a round-trip between Chicago and one of its northern suburbs, Evanston, Ill.

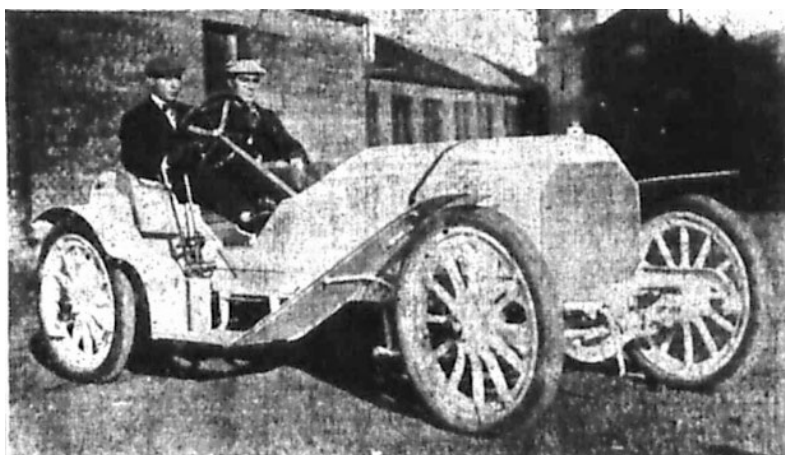


Chicago-Evanston Road Race, 1894
Credit: Wikipedia

Public fascination with automobiles led to the inevitable start of motor sports. The first race was the brainchild of H. H. Kohlsaat, publisher of the Chicago Times-Herald. Enthusiastic about these novel horseless carriages, Kohlsaat saw the race as a milestone for the new invention and a way to increase his paper's circulation. The vehicles had not yet received a worthy moniker, but the newspaper dubbed the fledgling cars, "Moto Cycle," and the winner would take home a \$5,000 prize. Stormy weather reduced the number of contestants from 80 to 11. Only six made it to the starting line, and of these, only two completed the 54-mile course. The winner, J. Frank Duryea, crossing the finish line in just under 8 hours. His average speed was 7 mph.

Roebling had joined John A. Roebling's Sons when he was 19, but driven by his passion for racing, he left to focus on the development of motorcycles and automobiles. With the Kuser brothers, he acquired the Walter Automobile company in 1906. After the company went bankrupt in 1909, Roebling and his partners reinvested their salvaged assets into the Mercer

Automobile Company and moved their new company from Mercerville, NJ to Hamilton Township, NJ. Roebling understood that well-built automobiles were paramount to public safety and, having injured himself several times racing and road-testing new models, strove to create cars that people could enjoy at their leisure. While working toward making cars safer for the public, he designed his own race car, a Mercer Raceabout roadster with a 55-horsepower engine. The car could safely reach a steady 70 mph and not break apart, something all too common with the rough-and-tumble world of early roadsters. (In 1906, the Stanley Motor Carriage Company's steam-powered Stanley Rocket broke the land speed record at the incredible speed of over 125 mph; car and driver survived.) In 1910, Roebling's company began producing the expensive Raceabout, America's first sports car especially designed for the high-end market. Roebling then partnered with Etienne Planche, the French automobile designer. Entering the 1911 Savannah, Georgia road rally, the Roebling-Planche racer, after hitting a tree, came in second. Familiar with Europe from his summer vacations, and wanting to expand his knowledge of auto design, Roebling's next step was a visit to European designers. *



Washington Roebling II at the wheel of the Mercer model Roebling-Planche racer
Credit: Wikipedia

THE EUROPEAN TOUR

With his mechanical expertise and driving skills, whetted by his racing success in Savannah, Roebling began planning a 2-month motor trip in 1911 to tour Europe with his friend Stephen Blackwell, the 41-year-old son of a US Senator. Blackwell, widowed in 1906, had never stopped mourning the loss of his young wife, Emily Lake; Roebling felt the trip would help.



Stephen Blackwell
Credit: Find a Grave

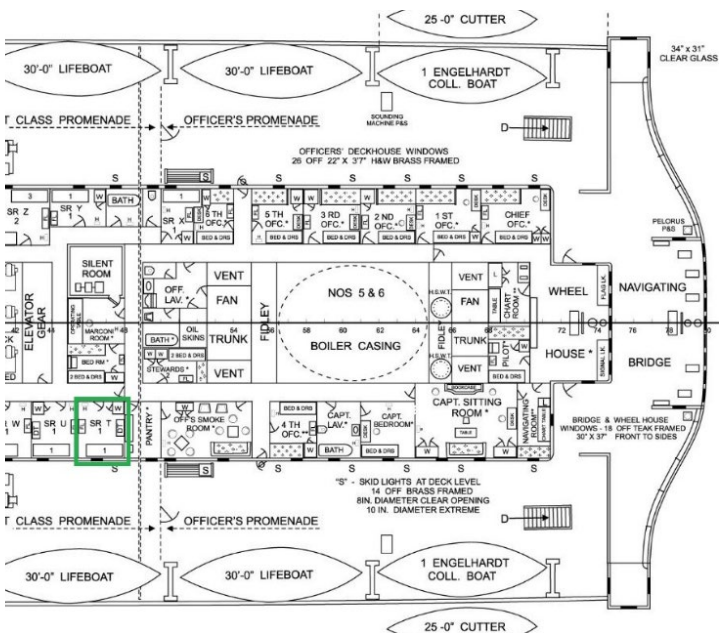
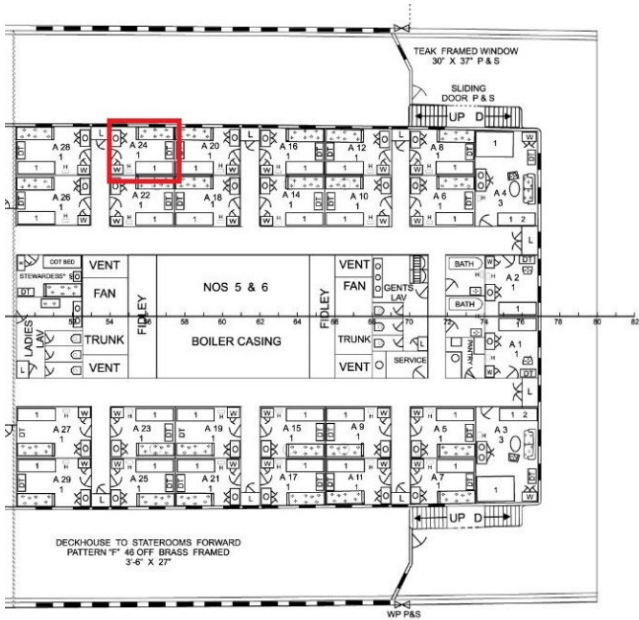
With them was their chauffeur, Frank Stanley. In addition to touring, they wanted to learn all they could about European auto design. Roebling met with the pre-eminent engineers to discuss the finer points of design and drive the latest Fiat roadsters. Impressed, he purchased one to ship back to the United States.



Fiat Poster (1899)
Credit: Wikipedia

TITANIC

The three men planned to return with the Fiat automobile after a successful European tour that ended in Southampton, England in early April 1912. Roebling and Blackwell boarded the new Titanic, but Stanley became ill and planned to return with the car when he recovered. Once aboard, the two friends settled into their First-Class cabins, Roebling in Cabin A-24 on A deck and Blackwell in Cabin SR-T on the Boat Deck.

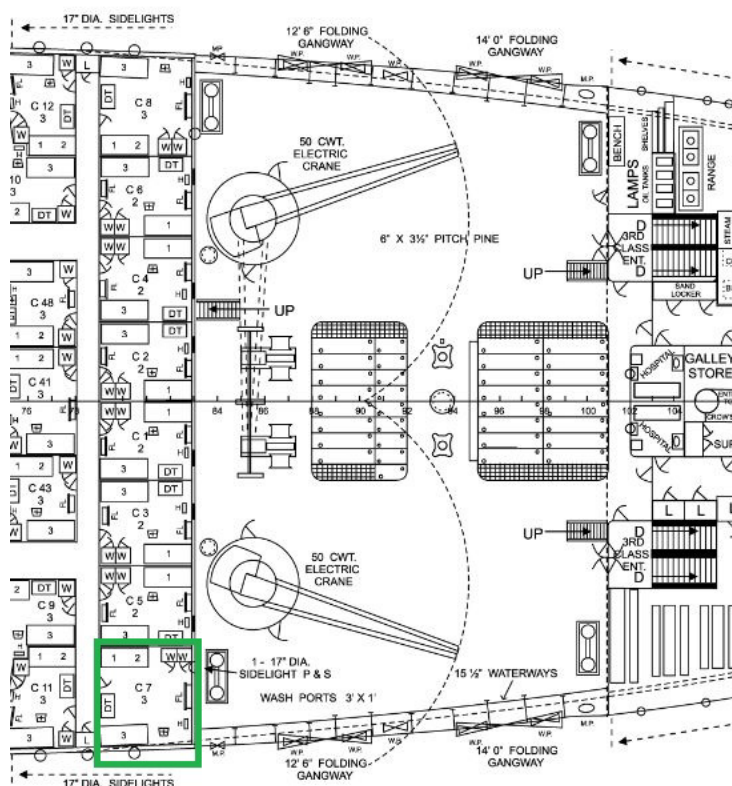


Washington Roebling Cabin A-24 (red) Stephen Blackwell Cabin Boat Deck 'T' (green)
Credits: Titanic Deck Plans

On the trip from America to Europe, the men had met a family from Youngstown, Ohio: Caroline Bonnell, her aunt Lily Bonnell and cousin Mary Natalie Wick, and Natalie's father and stepmother, George and Mary Wick. Caroline and Natalie were daughters of iron and steel magnates. Caroline, devoted to the church, taught immigrants to read and write English to improve their chances to secure work and assimilate into America. Natalie spent her time on the Continent and was ensconced in English society. Her mother had died when she was 13; her father later married Mary Pebbles Hitchcock.

George Wick, in failing health, had planned the European trip in February 1912 in the hope that he would recover enough to continue in the steel business. Touring Venice, Naples and Paris, the group had bumped into Roebeling and Blackwell. It seemed like the maiden passage of the largest ship in the world was a perfect venue for the new friends to enjoy each other's company, so they met in Southampton and boarded Titanic. Joining the group were Edith Graham, her 19-year-old daughter, Margaret, and governess Elizabeth Shutes. (The Graham family patriarch, William Thompson Graham, wasn't making the trip.)

Caroline and Natalie shared cabin C-7 on the starboard side, adjacent to the forward well deck. They talked of little other than the thrill of seeing an iceberg. Four days out, on the night of April 14, a rumbling sound awakened both women just before midnight. They hurriedly dressed, and as they went on deck, Caroline excitedly exclaimed, "Well, thank goodness, Natalie, we are going to see our iceberg at last!"



Bonnell/Wick Cabin C-7 (green)
Credit: Titanic Deck Plans

Their excitement waned when both women arrived on deck and saw only a quiet, star-filled, bitterly cold night embracing an uncannily calm sea. Disappointed not to see their iceberg, the scene offered, as it did many, a false assurance that all was well.



Caroline Bonnell
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica



Mary Natalie Wick
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica

Not knowing what had happened, the rumor of an iceberg animated the conversations among the passengers. But as Titanic coasted to a stop and the familiar sounds of a ship steaming along faded away, their light banter was replaced by growing apprehension. The sudden, thunderous sound of pent-up steam venting out the boilers and up the funnel pipes added to the passengers' unease. Rumors began: Titanic had lost a propeller blade; the ship had stopped so as not to run over an iceberg. In the machinery spaces, where the effect of the collision was most pronounced, the immediate concern was that the ship had run aground.

It was shortly after the collision that Roebling checked on Edith Graham, her daughter and the governess. The three women occupied starboard aft cabin C-91 and were awakened by Titanic grinding along the iceberg. As Mrs. Graham recalled, "Shortly after there was a rap at the door. It was a passenger we had met shortly after the ship left Liverpool—Washington A. Roebling, II. He told us that it would be best to be prepared for an emergency. I looked out of my window and saw a big iceberg." ** Once on deck, they met Roebling's friend, Mr. Howard Brown Case, and..." he advised us to get into a boat. And what are you going to do?" we asked him. "Oh," he replied, "I'll take a chance and stay here." Just at that time they were filling up the third lifeboat on the port side. I thought at the time that it was the third boat, which had been lowered, but I found out later that they had lowered other boats on the other side where the people were more excited because they were sinking on that side. Just then Mr. Roebling came up too. He told us to hurry and get into the boat. Mr. Roebling and Mr. Case bustled (sic) our party of three into that boat in less time than it takes to tell it. They were both working hard to help the women and children. The boat was fairly crowded when we three were pushed into it. A few more men jumped in at the last moment, but Mr. Roebling and Mr. Case stood at the rail and made no attempt to get into the boat. They shouted good-bye to us, and—what do you think Mr. Case did then? He just calmly lighted a cigarette and waved us good-bye with his hand. Mr. Roebling stood there, too—I can see him now. I am sure that he knew that the ship would go to the bottom. But both just stood there..." As the boat descended, the last words Mrs. Graham heard Roebling say as he smiled and waved were, "You will be back with us on the ship soon again." The Grahams departed in starboard side boat #3 at about 12:43am.

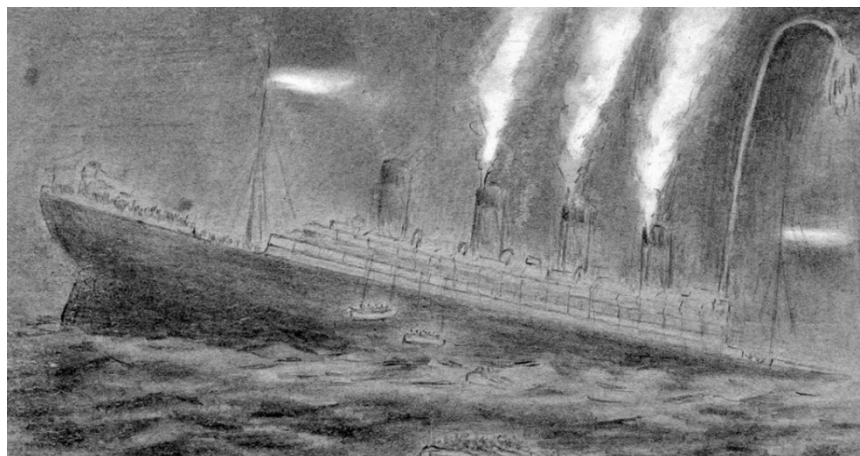
While the Graham family was preparing to evacuate, Caroline and Natalie sought out Natalie's father George. Her stepmother thought there had been a boiler explosion, but Natalie and Caroline told them about the iceberg. Mr. Wick brushed them off with, "Why, that's nonsense, girls, this boat is all right. She's going along finely. She just got a glancing blow, I guess." But the women pressed the issue, and all donned their lifebelts and proceeded to the boat deck.



George Wick
Credit: Wikipedia

Caroline went to fetch her aunt Lily while the others waited. The group entered boat #8 at about 1:05am. Mr. Wick remained on board, looking down at the boat and waving at his wife as she waved back.

Once boat #8 was away from Titanic, the women, ill-prepared for the cold night air, rowed to try and keep warm. Being in the middle of the ocean in a small, open boat while the largest vessel in the world was sinking before their eyes was a surreal experience. But soon, the gravity of the event snapped them back to reality. As Caroline Bonnell witnessed: "The Titanic was fading in the distance, but her lights were quite visible. About 20 minutes after we were put in the boat we noticed that the giant ship was sinking low in the water. Then we realised (sic) for the first time that it was in danger, and our lark turned into a frightened party of women. Lower and lower sank the Titanic. The faint strains of a band came to us. Then all of a sudden the lower lights seemed to go out. Only the lights on the upper deck were visible. And then we saw the ship sink—this great unsinkable liner. It didn't plunge, as far as we could see, but seemed to settle lower and lower into the water and went down gently, grandly, to its grave. Then the full horror of the thing came over us. We were frightened. But the men in the boat tried to reassure us. They told us that those left behind on the boat would surely leave it—that they would be picked up in a short time."



Titanic sinking
Credit: Steward Leo J. Hyland

Only fragmentary evidence remains of what Roebling, Case and Blackwell did after their companions departed Titanic. Caroline stated that she saw Blackwell talking with Captain Smith in the First-Class smoking room before the order was given to abandon ship. Some said that Roebling spent his last hours calming people and helping women and children into the boats. He was lauded for showing courage and became an esteemed part of Roebling family legend. Others stated that Case and Roebling were last seen standing together on the boat deck. An exchange with Algernon Barkworth leaves a final glimpse of Case, echoing Edith Graham's image of Case lighting a cigarette. As Titanic approached her final moments, Barkworth, preparing his own escape, met Case on the boat deck. Barkworth wore a large fur coat over his lifebelt and held a briefcase, presumably for extra buoyancy. Barkworth was eager to leave and suggested the same to Case, but Case would have none of it, replying, "My dear fellow, I wouldn't think of quitting the ship. Why, she'll swim for a week." He then lit a cigarette, and Barkworth saw him no more. Barkworth managed to swim to overturned collapsible B and survived by clambering aboard.



Howard Brown Case
Credit: Encyclopedia Titanica

Boat 8, heading toward what was assumed to be an unknown ship's distant light, meandered for 5 hours until found by rescue ship Carpathia at around 6am. Boat 3 drifted for 6.5 hours, until picked up at about 7:30am by Carpathia. Chilled to the bone but safe on Carpathia, both families hoped to find Mr. Wick, but to no avail.

Early editions of newspapers reported, without any official word or tally, that although Titanic was badly damaged and being abandoned, all were saved. Chauffer Frank Stanley was erroneously reported as being on board with Roebling, Blackwell and their automobiles. Although no direct message was received from Roebling and Blackwell, their families assumed they had survived.

Blackwell's father departed for New York to meet Carpathia but withheld information from his ill wife. Still, she learned of the disaster and hoped to see her son later that week. Stephen Blackwell's brothers met two of Roebling's cousins in New York and spoke to Caroline Bonnell, who told them that it was unlikely the pair had survived.

Not until 3 days later, Thursday, April 18, when Carpathia arrived with survivors, was it confirmed that Titanic had been lost and hundreds with her. The Roebling family was initially told that their son's body had been recovered, so family members went to Halifax to meet the mortuary ships. With Roebling's dental records in hand, his cousins undertook the grisly work of examining the bodies, but that of their young relative wasn't found. Another body was misidentified as being that of Stephen Blackwell, but the error was corrected; his body was never recovered.

EPILOGUE

Trenton was in shock over young Roebling's death. The family was known around the world because of their wire rope products and engineering prowess, and the Roebling were pillars in Trenton's Trinity Episcopal Church. Charles Roebling rebuilt a portion of the church as a tribute to his son. Because Washington's body was never recovered, Charles, who passed away in 1918, kept an empty vacant plot for his son next to his grave.



Charles G. Roebling
Credit: Find a Grave

Frank Stanley learned of the disaster while preparing to return to America. He saw his name on a list of those lost and promptly sent a telegram to the Roebling family, saying he had not been aboard Titanic and intended to return with the Fiat. What became of the only artifact of the road tour remains a mystery, as the car vanished soon afterward.

John A. Roebling's Sons closed in the 1980s.

Author's Notes:

* Various sources offer different versions of Roebling's European tour with his friend and chauffer. Some state that they took his Mercer-Fiat with him and bought another, intending to bring both cars back to Trenton. Others make no mention of the three taking a car to Europe, but state that he purchased one in Europe to bring back to Trenton. Yet another version states that the three men were returning with two vehicles, but in fact the chauffer stayed behind. The version presented in this essay is an attempt to distill the available information and to be as accurate as the records permit. The only automobile listed on Titanic's cargo manifest is a 1912 Renault Type CB Coupe de Ville.

** Edith Graham's curious statement about seeing the iceberg after Roebling knocked on her cabin door is interesting. With Titanic's speed of 22.5 knots (nearly 26 mph) at the time of collision, Roebling would have had to go down two decks and about 500 feet aft to get to the Graham cabin at the same time the iceberg passed her window. Titanic was traveling nearly 38 feet per second, and Roebling would have had about 12-13 seconds to reach her cabin. It is far more likely that her statement is the result of conflating his arrival with the excitement of the moment.

Sources: British Board of Trade & American Senate Inquiries, The Trentonian, Trenton Tribune, Riverview Cemetery, Historic Racing, Retro Kimmer's Blog, Trenton Spaces, Wikipedia, Titanic Wiki, Wiki Tree, Youngstown Vindicator, NJ.com, Lancaster Intelligencer, Newark Evening News, Roebling Museum, Hidden New Jersey, New York Times, New York Herald, Encyclopedia Titanica, Savannah Morning News, Savannah Now