

A SOLID HERITAGE BY VIVIAN YESS WADLIN

This article is edited, corrected, and shortened from its original publication in About Town, Summer edition 1993

Head west from Rosendale village on Route 213 and after the Turco Water Company caves, make a right at the Brooklyn Bridge.

OK, so it is not precisely the Brooklyn Bridge. It is a replica of John and Washington Roebling's iconic towers and bridge suspension cables (in miniature, of course) of the structure completed in 1883 that spanned the East River.

Our towers, measuring about 16" tall and painted black, sit atop the stone and cement gate pillars of the Century House Museum and its complex at the Snyder estate. The gates mimic the bridge cables. Unlike the real deal, these cables swing open. This "Brooklyn Bridge" welcome is the first hint of the details and history saved and cherished in this State and Federally designated historic site.

The Century House designation is rooted in its claim as foundational in American history: that hydraulic cement was initially mined nearby in High Falls and later at the Century House property—and that its natural cement supports many recognizable American structures in addition to the Brooklyn Bridge.

The Snyder Century complex is rare as a his-

toric site because it contains the home, mines, mills, and industrial resources of a vastly successful American family. Other historic sites usually display only the conspicuous consumption of the owners, providing scant insight into the engines of that wealth. Visit the Century House and that source surrounds you.

As corrected by Bill Merchant, Deputy Director for Collections, Historian & Curator of the D&H Canal Museum in High Falls, it is not true, as often reported, that this vein of wealth was discovered in 1825 on Snyder land by accident. A geologist with the canal project was on the lookout for just such a deposit. If it had not been found, the D&H planned to bring cement from Chittenango, NY to build the canal locks. However, after cement's discovery in High Falls, farmer Snyder's grist mill was grinding baked rock instead of wheat. There, part of the Rosendale cement industry was initiated, although it took several more years to be considered an "industry."

At the height of that industry, more than six-thousand men worked in the mines, kilns, and mills around Rosendale and High Fall.

Millstones were quarried from the nearby Shawangunk conglomerate. Cooperages and other supporting industries grew up around the mines. Eventually, the D&H canal barges brought coal to fire the kilns and took away cement to build the tremendous man-made world of the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds. As recently as 1929, a million-dollar cement mill was built by the Century Company. The last Rosendale Cement shipped in 1971.

Natural cement's death knell in Rosendale was the time it took to harden. It was replaced in major construction projects with the faster-hardening Portland cement. The price of that impatience may be the crumbling infrastructure we hear about today. Natural cement becomes stronger with time—a Manhattan warehouse built with Rosendale cement is certified as one of New York City's few bombproof buildings.

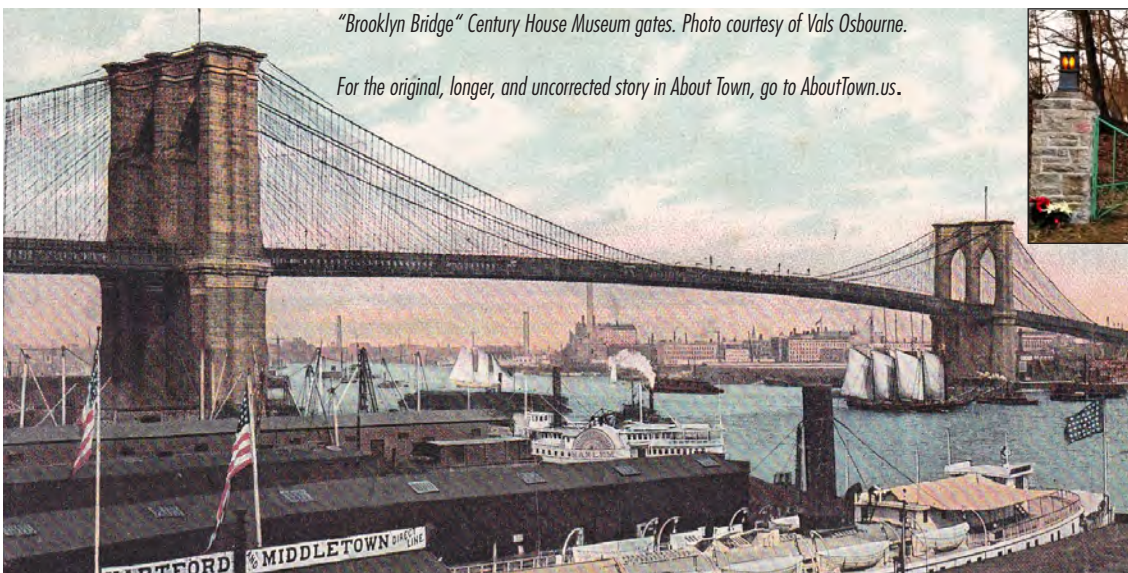
The Century House Historical Society at the Snyder Estate, 668 Route 213, Rosendale, NY 12472. info@centuryhouse.org 845-658-9900. Check website for hours and activities.

Thanks to Bill Merchant who shared his latest research on the discovery and development of the area cement industry. He is working on a book about hydraulic cement which will be highlighted in About Town when published.

Postcard image of Brooklyn Bridge from collection of author.

"Brooklyn Bridge" Century House Museum gates. Photo courtesy of Vals Osbourne.

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