

**American Society of Civil Engineers, San Diego Section**  
**Historic Civil Engineering Landmark**  
**SPRUCE STREET SUSPENSION BRIDGE**



*Story and Photos by Phil Kern*



San Diego has been home to many iconic personalities, including both famous and infamous politicians. Around the turn of the century one of these, San Diego's mayor and a highly capable civil engineer to boot, was Edwin Capps. Born in Tennessee as the son of a mathematics professor and civil engineer, Capps learned the ropes performing civil engineering for mining operations in Colorado and worked for local water

companies after moving to San Diego in 1886. By 1893 Capps was the City Engineer of San Diego and was known for being decisive, outspoken, opinionated and not afraid to back down from a political scrap. Capps was involved in the early "smokestacks vs. geraniums" and in 1899 ran for and was elected to the Mayor's office. After his first two year stint as Mayor Capps took positions in the LA and Seattle areas, but returned to the City Engineer position in 1909. The vocal Capps battled with City Council on several occasions, including use of the only City automobile and one argument on the merits of new vitrified clay vs. traditional concrete sewer pipe (which he lost). His battle royale was over the "Capps Plan" for harbor improvements, which were then under the control of the City. Capps pushed tirelessly for dredging and the construction of seawalls, wharves and a rail line to serve them, and was rewarded with the voters passing by a landslide a \$1 million bond for the improvements-a huge amount of money in 1911.

Capps had many other projects going on during this time. Directed to design a new city jail, this was a first for Capps but he dove in and





prepared plans featuring an ornate classical Greek façade and a functional and efficient three bay interior. The building was recognized by the State Corrections Board and later became the headquarters for the U.S. Navy Shore Patrol.

During this period Capps also designed the Spruce Street Suspension Bridge. Intended to connect residents of Banker's Hill on the west to shops and the Fourth

Avenue street car line east of the canyon, it remains the only pedestrian suspension bridge in San Diego. The structure consists of steel cables strung over a pair of lattice towers on each side of the canyon and founded below grade by large concrete anchorages on each side of the canyon. The wood deck is suspended seventy feet above the bottom of the canyon, and spans a total of 375 feet. Contractors Knight and Hyde began work on July 29, 1911 and the bridge was completed and opened to foot traffic in 1912. Estimated capacity of the bridge is 164 tons, and people have tested this many times over the last 100 years by rocking and bouncing on the structure.

After another fracas with the City Council over harbor improvement plans and being fired as Harbor Engineer (a position created for him), Capps ran for Mayor again-and won again. He did not have a vote on the Council but he did freely wield his executive powers. He served as Mayor until 1917 and eventually retired from public service in 1923, he again moved to the Los Angeles area where he lived until his death in 1938.

