

Brooklyn Bridge

The year is 1870, and you are a 16-year-old Irish American teenager living in New York City. Your parents fled Ireland because of a famine, and they struggled in New York for many years. Your father eventually found a job as a construction worker, and after your 15th birthday, you started working with your father at the construction sites.

In the 1870s, there are no public high schools in New York, and no laws requiring children to remain in school until a certain age. Most children attend elementary school, but teenagers are expected to work and help their family earn money. Only rich people send their teenage children to private high schools and colleges.

Your family is trying to save money to move to a better neighborhood. You currently live in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where the apartments are unsafe, overcrowded, and crumbling. Your parents want to move across the river to Brooklyn, where the neighborhoods are nicer, but the cost is higher too.

An opportunity arises when you and your father are recruited to work on an important new construction project: a giant suspension bridge connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn. Once completed, the bridge will be one of the largest architectural structures in the world.

When you arrive at the construction site, the foreman gathers everybody together and explains the job. The first step is to build the giant towers that will hold the suspension cables. The crew will work in two teams, with the first team digging down into the riverbed to build the foundation of the towers. The second team will build upwards with limestone blocks. As more weight is added from above, the foundation will sink deeper into the river and provide more stability. In the end, each tower will rise 272 feet above the river.

During the first week, you prepare the construction materials that will be used for the foundation. Your team is in charge of building a three-sided wooden box that will be lowered into the water, and then workers will go into the box to dig up the riverbed.

At the end of the week, your boss calls another meeting. He is recruiting people to excavate the riverbed, and he'll pay double the normal rate. It's a tempting offer, but underwater construction is incredibly dangerous. You would spend hours in a muddy, dark, wooden box under a river, hoping the box doesn't collapse.

Walking home with your father, you discuss the possibilities. On one hand, the double pay would let you save more money to move to Brooklyn. On the other hand, the job seems quite dangerous. But when you stop to think about it, all of the jobs are dangerous on this project. Climbing up the towers has many risks as well, and it doesn't pay double. What will you choose?

Brooklyn Bridge Response

Will you dig up the river bed for double the pay? Or will you continue to work on other parts of the bridge, which are also dangerous, for the normal pay rate?

Write your response to the dilemma in the space below.
What will you do? Why will you do it?
