

**FORENSIC ENGINEERING
RECONSTRUCTION OF ACCIDENTS**

Second Edition

**FORENSIC ENGINEERING
RECONSTRUCTION OF
ACCIDENTS**

By

JOHN FISKE BROWN, P.E.

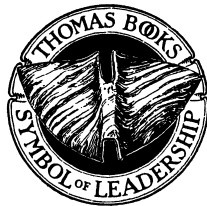
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PREFACE

The objective is to produce a book that can serve as an introduction to the subject as well as a “refresher course” for the active professional. Thus, we have avoided the temptation to greatly expand or totally rewrite the book. Rather, for this second edition Chapters 3 to 5 have been rewritten and the rest of the text has been edited to bring parts more up to date.

The book covers the important areas of vehicular accidents, automobile, truck, motorcycle and pedestrian. Slip-and-fall accidents and failure analysis are introduced. Techniques such as photography, mapping and measuring as well as the fundamentals of mechanics and dynamics are covered. The material is selected to show the approach to accident reconstruction, the thought processes involved, the range of subjects covered, and the breadth of technical material covered by this field. The material is presented at a level that is appropriate for engineers, lawyers, and others interested in the techniques and details of the accident reconstruction process.

As this second edition of *Forensic Engineering Reconstruction of Accidents* goes to press, John Brown is suffering the latter stages of Parkinson’s disease. He was unable to participate in much of the rewriting of the book. Hence, this second edition, as a gentle modification of the first edition, still retains the flavor of John’s skillful writing as well as his knowledge and expertise.

Kenneth S. Obenski
Thomas R. Osborn

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

From an engineering standpoint this is not an advanced text. Much of the material, however, does deal with various aspects of traffic accident reconstruction. It is assumed that the reader has either gained some practical experience in this subject, or has read basic books on the subject such as *Traffic Collision Analysis*, by Collins and Morris, and *The Traffic Accident Reconstruction Handbook* by J. Stannard Baker.

The engineering principles involved are introduced at the elementary level, and in many cases equations used in freshman physics are derived. The authors believe that the derivations are presented in the simplest manner possible so that this material will be retained by the reader.

This book is the result of an effort over a period of four years to compile useful forensic engineering data, information, and analytical techniques over and above those taught to non-engineers. Many of the mathematical treatments are original. In general, the book reflects the authors' combined 17 years of forensic investigations involving over 1500 cases.

This book offers something for everyone interested in forensic engineering. The experienced investigator will find a wealth of new ideas and relationships to fill in gaps in his knowledge and reinforce his analytical approaches. Those starting new in this work will have a "leg up" on their competition after studying this material. For the non-technical reader, most of the book is eminently readable. To an investigator; attorney, or insurance adjuster with only a nodding acquaintance with freshman physics, the book should be totally comprehensible.

John Fiske Brown
Kenneth S. Obenski

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Chapter</i>	
1. WHAT IS FORENSIC ENGINEERING?	3
2. WHY ARE FORENSIC ENGINEERING INVESTIGATIONS MADE?	8
3. FRICTION	12
Types of Friction	16
Area of Contact	19
Mechanism of Dry Friction	20
Temperature of Sliding Surfaces	20
Dry Friction of Non-Metals	21
Other Aspects of Dry Friction	22
Brakes and Clutches	28
Solid Lubricants and Greases	30
Rolling Contact Bearings	31
Galling	31
Clinging Friction	32
Journal Bearings with Marginal Lubrication	32
Hydrodynamic Lubrication	33
Hydrostatic Bearings	35
Protection Against Wear	35
4. FORENSIC MECHANICS	38
Basics	38
Units	39
Vectors and Scalars	41

Rotational Motion	43
Analyzing Tire Motion	47
Tire Markings	49
Motion with Constant Acceleration	55
The Derivative	57
Jerk	61
Integration	61
Equations of Motion	62
Acceleration	63
Energy	67
Momentum	68
More About Acceleration	72
Falling Objects	74
Newton's Laws for Rotational Motion	75
Coriolis Effect	76
5. TRAFFIC ACCIDENT DYNAMICS	83
Friction and Acceleration	83
The Basic Skid-Speed Equation	84
Brake Performance and Skid Marks	88
Wet Pavement	92
Safe Speed	95
Acceleration	96
Cornering	97
Crash Speed Analysis	99
Crash Worthiness	105
Momentum	107
Evasive Action	116
6. VEHICLE FIRES	118
Characteristics	118
Tank Design	119
Fuels	120
Hydraulic Oil	121
Fire-Resistant Hydraulic Fluids	123
Investigation	127
7. UNDERSTANDING MOTORCYCLES	130
Why Motorcycles Are Fundamentally Different from Cars	130

Unique Hazards	132
Controls	135
Reaction Time	136
Laying It Down	137
Maneuverability	138
Braking	139
Skids	141
Crash Damage Analysis	142
Momentum	147
Rider Contact	148
Conspicuousness	149
Rider Factors	151
Motorbikes	153
Bicycles	153
8. TRUCK ACCIDENT RECONSTRUCTION	154
Types of Trucks	154
Performance	156
Hammerscan Mirror	158
Air Brakes	163
Suspension Systems	169
Steering	170
Inspection of Trucks	171
9. PEDESTRIAN ACCIDENTS	175
Basics	175
Visibility and Lighting	175
Location	179
Vision	179
Speed Analysis	180
10. MOTION PERCEPTION LIMITS IN TRAFFIC ACCIDENT RECONSTRUCTION	182
Introduction	182
Overtaking	184
Orthogonal Motion	186
Theoretical Considerations	188
11. ROLLOVERS	190
Reconstruction	190

Inspection	193
Causation	194
12. SINGLE VEHICLE LOSS OF CONTROL	
ACCIDENTS (LOC)	200
Background	200
Steering	201
Acceleration	203
Human Nature	204
Power Loss	205
13. TIRES AND RIMS	207
Failure	207
Performance	209
Rims	210
Multi-Piece Rims	211
14. MAPPING AND MEASURING	217
Tools	217
Measuring Vehicles	218
Mapping	219
15. PHOTOGRAPHY	226
The Camera	226
Lighting	231
Automation	232
Reliability	233
Macro-Photography	233
Reference	235
Tape Recorder	237
Copying	237
Tripods	238
Right-Angle Finder	238
Wide-Angle Lens	238
Telephoto Lens	239
Motor Drive	239
Zoom Lens	239
Instant-Print Cameras	239
What to Photograph	240

16. FAILURE ANALYSIS	241
The Engineering Method	241
Define the Problem	244
Assumptions	246
Hypothesis	246
Metallurgists	247
Lubrication	248
Manufacturing Versus Design Defect	249
Safety Hierarchy	249
Summation	250
17. SLIP AND FALL	251
Misstep	252
Stairways	253
Trips	254
Slips	255
The Role of the Friction Coefficient in Slip and Fall Accidents	257
Background	257
The Contradiction	259
Dynamic Film Lubrication	260
Locomotion	260
Determining Minimum COF	262
Recommendation for Future Research	263
Conclusion About the COF	263
Lighting	264
<i>References</i>	265
<i>Index</i>	267

**FORENSIC ENGINEERING
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Chapter 1

WHAT IS FORENSIC ENGINEERING?

Forensic engineering” is a relatively new term and is still not used exclusively by the people who are engaged in this work. The more familiar term is “expert witness.” Even the general public has some kind of vague notion about who an expert witness is and what he does. Surely, the layman is not aware of all of the details. Usually, however, prospective clients of the forensic engineer will more readily recognize one’s professional capabilities as an “expert witness,” or simply “expert,” than as a “forensic engineer.” The term forensic engineer is preferable to “expert witness,” and there is a tendency among existing companies engaged in this work to prefer this term. In most investigations, the forensic engineer works first as a consultant. A consultant, just as the term implies, advises his client. Until the “consultant” is disclosed as an “expert,” his work is usually protected under the attorney work product privilege. Once an expert is identified, he may then be examined by the adverse parties.

The term “expert witness,” of course, is all-inclusive. Some people associate it wrongly with “purchased testimony.” A medical doctor, an accountant, or for that matter, a mechanic, or carpenter, could serve as an expert witness. The term “forensic engineer” limits the scope to the engineering profession. The word forensic means applying to or dealing with the process of litigation, or literally debate. A forensic engineer can, of course, be a forensic mechanical, civil, or electrical engineer, etc. Most people are familiar with the term forensic medicine or forensic chemistry. The TV program “Quincy,” starring Jack Klugman, did much to put this kind of work in the public eye. It is only a short step from here to apply the same concept to a forensic engineer.

As already implied, a forensic engineer applies the principles of science and engineering to investigations which are part of, or potentially a part of, some litigation process. A forensic engineer's clients, then, will come from two major sources—lawyers and insurance companies. Perhaps one-half of those clients will be insurance companies, and one-half will be attorneys. On very rare occasions, a forensic engineer may work for an individual, or a corporation. Even though one may start working for an insurance company, he may, however, eventually work with that company's attorney. Therefore, most of the time, the work will be closely associated with attorneys and the legal profession.

The history of forensic engineering is as old as written history. Hammurabi's Code had a section that dealt with punishment for the designer of a house if the roof collapsed or if the foundation failed. More recently, an accident in 1916 involving a Buick ultimately resulted in litigation that traced the fault to defective manufacture. Probably the Industrial Revolution, especially as it moved into the 20th century, was responsible for the present concept of forensic engineering. As more and more complex devices moved into the public realm, accidents were unavoidable, and the ability of laymen to comprehend them decreased. First came steamboats and railroad trains in the 1830s and steel bridges in the late 1800s. Railroads experienced many disastrous accidents, and later bridge collapses were not uncommon (the early metal bridges were iron, not steel, so that failures could have easily been predicted in the light of present-day metallurgy). As the 20th century progressed, the automobile appeared on the American scene, and in large numbers after World War I. Along with the automobile, came home appliances. Meanwhile, the commercial aviation business began to thrive. It is significant that aircraft accident investigation has always been an integral part of the aircraft industry. Whenever an airplane crashes, both government and industry investigators are on the scene immediately. This has always been the case, and this is well known to the general public because of the publicity that these crashes create. What is not well known is that accidents involving automobiles, home appliances, etc. are also the subject of engineering investigations.

Simply because of the large number of vehicles in use (about 220 million registered cars, trucks, and buses in the United States in 2000), and the inherent risks of high-speed transportation, unless one has some unrelated specialty, he should expect that the bulk of the work

may be derived from automobile accidents. This work will come in two forms, automobile accident investigation and automotive defect investigation. Accident investigation involves applying principles of dynamics, perception, and general physics to the movements of vehicles before, during, and after the collision to determine speeds, positions, and driver responses or possible responses during the sequence of events that took place. Defect investigation involves the mechanical failure of critical components such as brakes, steering, and suspension that lead to an accident. As more occupant protection systems (air bags, automatic seat belts) are added to vehicles, these also become the subject of litigation. One can even have investigations that involve several aspects.

While as much as 80 percent of the work will come from automotive sources, the remainder will come from a wide range of home appliances and equipment. Many engineers find themselves specializing in one group of products. Just to give an idea of what a forensic engineer might become involved in, a list of some of the items that the authors have investigated follows.

1. Glass coffeepots
2. Chairs
3. Ladders
4. Dishwashers
5. Falling pictures
6. Plumber's snakes
7. Toilets
8. Floor designs and materials
9. Water heaters
10. Roofing materials
11. Power tools
12. Air compressors
13. Machinery fires
14. Plumbing systems
15. Cranes
16. Machine tools
17. Presses
18. Construction machinery
19. Agricultural machinery
20. Industrial machinery