



Historical Society of the Nyacks

Newsletter

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Early Traffic on the Hudson River

by Gini Stollendorf, Editor

The source of the Hudson River is *Lake Tear of the Clouds* in the Adirondack Mountains. As the river flows south and reaches the Nyack area it flows in two directions. The Lenapes who lived in the area called this body of water “Muhheakantuck” to describe its dual direction. In the 1600s, when the Dutch started to settle here, they referred to it as the “north river,” acknowledging the search for a Northwest Passage and the exploration of Henry Hudson in 1609. As Hudson sailed north out of New Amsterdam (New York City) in search of this passage, the river widened to approximately three miles across. Some thought that Hudson’s ship, the *Half Moon*, had entered a sea, so the river in this area became known as the “Zee” (Dutch for sea). By 1664, the English had settled in this region and justified their takeover by promoting Hudson’s English heritage and the fact that he was “just sailing” for the Dutch East India Company.

During the 1700s, overland travel was the way to go. By the 1800s, however, waterways became the important means of transportation, commercially and recreationally, due to advances in technology. In New York State, when the Erie Canal opened in 1825, the Great Lakes became connected to the Atlantic Ocean by way of Albany and the Hudson River, which became a connection burgeoning with traffic. As the 19th century progressed, Nyack became home to many boatyards and ferry landings.

In 1880, James Smith of Smith’s Boatyard received a contract to build a large flat-bottomed boat with square ends, known as a scow. This vessel, built for Denton Fowler at a cost of \$5,000, was 100-feet long and 35-feet wide, and would subsequently be used to transport bricks from the brickyards of Haverstraw to New York City.

In 1883, John P. Voris, whose boatyard was in Upper Nyack, was rebuilding the steamer called *Pleasant Valley*. They were also building a large three-deck excursion barge that was capable of transporting many people up and down the Hudson. In the spring of 1893, Samuel Ayers purchased the boatyard from Voris. Ayers, from Brooklyn, had owned a steam-yacht business there for over 40 years and later brought his entire yacht-building business to Upper Nyack. He built yachts for, among others, the Vanderbilts and the Morgans. In 1896, John Jacob Astor commissioned Ayers to build one of the first and largest yachts with electricity. It was 72-feet long and had three engines, all run by electricity. The cabins were built of mahogany and bronze and featured leather seats. The main salon, with fold-out tables and built-in seats upholstered in velvet and trimmed in gold, covered the entire width of the yacht. The owner’s state room was seven-



Edward Hopper, Harbor View, 1900, ink on paper, collection of Philip L. Sanborn, photo Arthur H. Gunther, courtesy of Edward Hopper Art Center

feet long and appointed similarly to the main salon.

Also in the 1890s, at the Charles L. Seabury & Co. shipyard in Nyack, a large number of yachts and launches were under construction, many of which were over 72-feet long and equipped with staterooms, folding sofa-beds, and toilet rooms. Most could accommodate over 20 people.

Along with the building of vessels for water travel came ideas for inventions to improve water travel. In 1877, Eli Hunt of Nyack came up with an idea for the propulsion of vessels up to 30 miles per hour, which would help to increase their steadiness in the water. In 1882, Theodore F. Odell, also interested in the propulsion of watercraft, patented a device to enhance the propelling of vessels more economically. Abraham G. Polhemus’s inventions helped protect steamboats against the dangers of fire.

Quarries

Not only was the Hudson River key in the transportation of bricks from Haverstraw to New York City, the river also transported stone from the quarries on the Palisades cliffs.

This semi-molten, igneous rock, dating back over 30 million years (Triassic period), was forced up through a fissure in the earth’s crust. Over eons, as the earth’s crust continued to shift and erode, a “flint-hard diabase” was exposed to form a 30-mile-long cliff face on the west side of the Hudson River. By the end of the 1800s, this cliff face, as noted by Giovanni da Verrazano and Henry Hudson, was being blasted away.

Many quarries littered the 30-mile shore. The quarrymen >

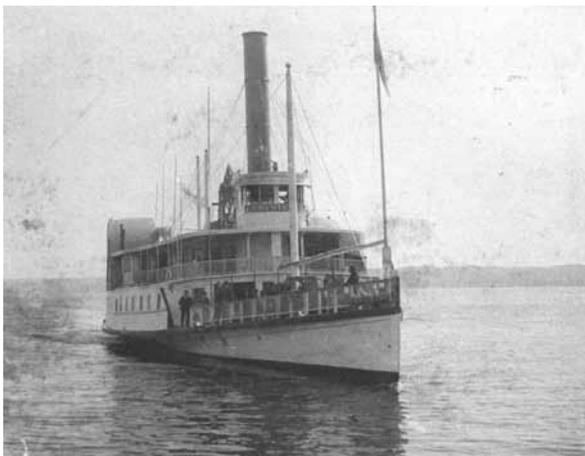
found that the Palisade stone ground up easily and mixed well with cement. Also, since the stone abutted the river, the labor involved to load it onto barges was diminished. The sound of the blasting could be heard at all hours during the day. Finally, a group of women, members of the Englewood Women's Club, focused their attention on the destruction of the Palisades.

They started writing letters to every newspaper in New York State, accepted invitations to speak before interested groups, and started to lobby legislators. Due to their movement to SAVE THE PALISADES, New Jersey and New York governors, Foster M. Voorhees and Theodore Roosevelt, agreed that preserving the Palisades would benefit both states. In 1901, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission was founded. The quarry at Hook Mountain in Upper Nyack was one of the last quarries finally put out of business by the Commission. In 1917, after many years of litigation, the PIP succeeded in having the face of the quarry, from the river's edge to the top, condemned for park purposes at the highest price ever paid by the Commission. One of the quarry's owners was Wilson P. Foss of Upper Nyack.

Ferries and Steamboats

As early as the 1700s, there were ferry services on the Hudson River. Around 1729, William Dobbs, a farmer living in Van Cortlandt Manor, decided to supplement his income by taking travelers across the river. He hollowed out a flat-bottomed log that he propelled with oars. Dobbs called his vessel a periauger and he would go back and forth to Sneden's Landing. Molly Sneden started operating a ferry herself and during the Revolutionary War took both British and Colonial troops across the river. William Dobbs's son, Jeremiah, took over the family business and continued to run it until 1759 when the family sold it. The ferry site, Dobbs Ferry, and the community that developed around it, continues today. By the mid-19th century, Tarrytown developed a ferry service across the Hudson to Nyack. These two communities, across the river from each other, are located where the river broadens and flows a bit slower to New York Harbor and the Atlantic. All of these communities were growing and the ferries became the link for their merchants and farmers.

A noted steamboat, the *Chrystenah* was built in William



Chrystenah, photo courtesy of the Nyack Library

Message from the President

by Win Perry, AIA, Society President

Our new exhibit, open Saturdays in February and March from 1:00 to 4:00 pm, is titled **Nineteenth-Century Treasures: a Quilt, a Diary, a Coverlet, a Notebook . . .** (the . . . signifies other things, too).

The quilt, of course, is our Nyack Star Quilt, which was signed by a group of local girls, mothers, and a grandmother, and likely auctioned or raffled to raise money in support of their young men who were leaving to fight in the Civil War to preserve the union and end slavery. We are showing it again by popular demand.

The coverlet was made in 1834 for Peter T. and Leah Stephens. It's the sort woven by itinerant weavers, often with a loom mounted on a wagon bed, usually using wool yarn spun by the owner. This one is unusual, being blue on blue, rather than the more common blue and white. Peter T. Stephens was a wealthy farmer in West Nyack with a grand sandstone house. He was also a judge and served a term as Supervisor of the Town of Clarkstown. A news article states that he and his son produced 40,000 gallons of cider one year, and he frequently exhibited his produce and animals at the county agricultural fair.

The diary is loaned by Betty Perry and was handwritten by Bertha Frost in 1881-95. She was also a farmer in West Nyack, but at the other end of the economic spectrum. She took over the family farm as a teenager on the abdication of her father (a "gentleman at leisure") and managed it throughout her life. She and her mother sold eggs, butter, and farm animals and took in roomers to eke out a basic existence. They were Friends (Quakers), referred to Sunday as first day, and were also vegetarians. She identifies herself as from Nyack-on-Hudson and tells about coming to town, sometimes on foot, to go to the library or catch the Chrystenah to Manhattan. She also traveled by horse and buggy and the Nyack—Tarrytown ferry to visit relatives in Pleasantville.

The notebook is one the Society was given that is apparently by Robert Hart and records details about life and history in South Nyack between 1799 and 1855. Among the items that Hart considered worth recording are the history of how the Cornelison farm, comprising most of South Nyack, was subdivided, how many shad his sons caught each year, the death dates of prominent citizens, events in the history of the Nyack Presbyterian Church, and the details of running his farm.

Please come visit us and see the exhibit at our mini museum in the basement of the Depew House, 50 Piermont Avenue.

Dickey's Nyack boatyard in 1865-66. The name came from the owners who wanted to honor their mother, Chrystenah Smith. Her portrait graced the main salon of the steamboat during its 60 years of service, which ended in the 1920s. And though ferries began to accommodate automobiles, transportation was changing and the boats started to disappear. The opening of the George Washington Bridge in 1931 had a profound impact on river traffic.

The Hudson River Valley still commands interest. It has often been compared to the Rhine River Valley in Europe. In 1998, the Hudson was designated an American Heritage River by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Recently, National Geographic Traveler magazine named the Hudson River Valley one of its top 20 destinations in the world!

A Boy in the '30s

by Gene Brown

Earliest memories of the Nyack Library are centered, naturally, on the children's section, which included a large round table and a few low shelves under the north window of the main hall. Behind the heavy fortress of a long, polished desk sat Miss Powell and her associates, Miss Doig and Miss Halstead. If, by chance, someone broke the rule of complete silence, the culprit would be warned by a dreadful glare or a humiliating waggling of a forefinger. I can still "hear" the absolute silence.

Almost anything could be purchased in Nyack, but I was captivated by the electric contrivance in the Harrison and Dalley Department Store on Main Street. Mom would make a purchase and hand the clerk some paper money. The clerk put the greenbacks into a little cartridge or capsule, three or four inches long. This was then placed on a miniature railroad track, as on a child's toy train set. Suddenly, the little object zipped straight up on the track, turned to follow horizontally just under the ceiling, to disappear upward into a round mouse hole. I watched to see the fascinating cartridge return and stop in front of the clerk, who opened it, took out the silver and copper change coins, and handed them to my mother with her purchase.

The Nyack Indians always played football with the Tarrytown High School team. Many Nyackers accompanied our team on the wonderful ferry ride across the Hudson (no bridge). Later, in the afternoon, if a ferry returned to Nyack with a morose, glum crowd, you knew we had lost the game. But, if our boys won the game the jubilant returning fans would spread the river with exuberant cheering and singing, while the band blared triumphantly throughout the entire crossing.

The old Upper Nyack School stood at the head of what is still School Street. There were pleasant field trips to the beach at Hook Mountain, to Petersen's Boatyard, and to the old Upper Nyack Cemetery. Around Memorial Day, Miss



*Eugene R. Brown is author of *Birds Over Bear Mountain* (Palisades Interstate Park Commission Press, 2004) and a life-long resident of Upper Nyack.*

Esther Rose, our fourth-grade teacher, had us gather daisies from a field on Birchwood Avenue and take them, as a group, to the cemetery where we remembered the Revolutionary War soldiers. When I graduated from eighth grade at the school, Helen Hayes sat as our guest with the parents. (She congratulated me on winning the art prize.)

Before the frantic days of shopping malls and supermarkets, there were interesting deliveries to the doorstep. The milkman, with horse and wagon, came at dawn. The iceman, in summer, attracted bunches of kids begging for scraps of ice. "Willie-the-Baker" shrewdly timed his arrivals at our dining room door when our family was at supper. The aroma from Willie's long basket was enchanting, each of us wanting our favorite goodie. Jimmy Collins carried the mail by bicycle and there were two deliveries a day!

Besides the ferry, another great ride was on the "Old Erie" steam train from Nyack, along the steep hillside of Grand View. In winter, with an open view over the Hudson, it was like riding on an Alpine railroad. Kids' adventures were governed by the season, more so than today. Spring meant marbles and roller skates with skate keys dangling from our necks. Blue-sky days might suggest a ramble through haunted Spooky Hollow (never alone), over the Hook summit, and down the steep Indian Trail (long gone). There was no television, no electronic distraction. With no ghastly leaf blowers, autumn meant raking leaves into a smoky bonfire. Potatoes thrown in came out as crisp cinders on the outside, raw in the center, and incomparably delicious, drenched in butter!

Welcome to our New Trustees



Bill Batson, artist and author of the Nyack Sketch Log, producer of Nyack's Flash Sketch Mob, and Artist-in-Residence at Nyack's Farmer's Market

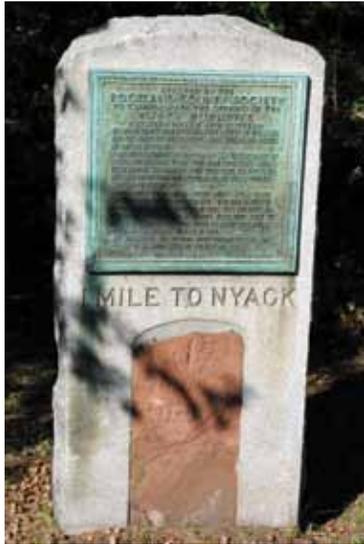


Carol Weiss, historian



*Lori Martin, assistant professor at John Jay College and author of *Black Asset Poverty and the Enduring Racial Divide**

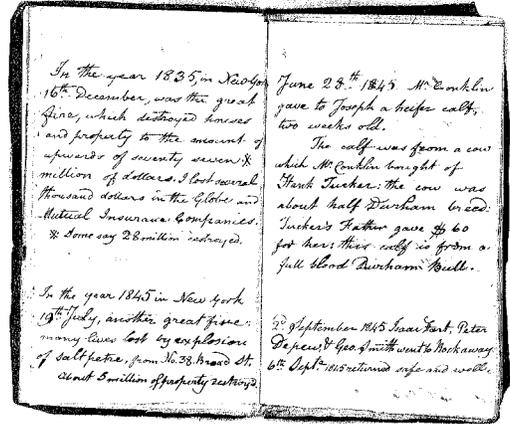
History Happened Here
 An exhibit featuring photographs of
 historical markers in the Nyacks



Bob Goldberg

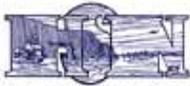
At the Nyack Library during February, March and April
 Curated by Karen Kennell and Patricia Condello

*Nineteenth-Century Treasures:
 a Quilt, a Diary, a Coverlet, a
 Notebook . . .*
 (and other things, too).



Saturdays in February and March, 1- 4pm
 Historical Society of the Nyacks at DePew House,
 behind the Nyack Library
 Enter through the lower level facing
 Memorial Park
 Curated by Win and Betty Perry

Newsletter



**Historical Society of
 the Nyacks**

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Editor's Note

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