



Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

Newsletter
No. 5, February 2000

On the Trail of James Bremner, First Aqueduct Overseer at Dobbs Ferry

The following account by Mavis Cain is of research she and Bill Cassella pursued last fall. -- Ed.

We have been searching for months for facts about James Bremner, Engineer, who was appointed Overseer in 1845 for the Fourth Division of the Aqueduct (of a total of eight divisions). It is surprising that so little is known about him inasmuch as keeping the water flowing to New York City was a vital job and he held his post from 1845 to 1872, nearly 30 years. We know he earned about \$1.25 a day and had the privilege of living in the Overseer's House on Walnut Street in Dobbs Ferry. Since he lived in such an attractive and visible house for so long, he must have been a respected and well-known citizen of the area.

Our sleuthing into his life story began with the Westchester phone directory. Just maybe, if there were a James Bremner in it, he might be a descendant. There was - but he was not. Today's Mr. Bremner did tell us, though, that a number of Bremners came over from Scotland at the end of the 18th century and were probably Presbyterians. Bill Cassella then tramped through the graveyard on Ashford Avenue that had been part of the Old White Church, the only Presbyterian graveyard in use at the time. Way at the back he found James' well-worn tombstone, broken in half. It told us that James Bremner had died in 1872 in his 73rd year. I called Joe Gilmore, pastor of South Presbyterian Church in Dobbs Ferry, for help. Joe went through the records and discovered that James Bremner had joined the church in 1846 with his wife, who died in 1847. But there was no record of children or of a subsequent marriage. Of course children might have been born before 1842.



*Gravestone of James Bremner in the old graveyard,
Dobbs Ferry. (Photo by W.N. Cassella, Jr.)*

The next step was to view the microfilm of the Yonkers newspapers of 1872 at the Yonkers library for a possible obituary. Bill Blanck, president of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, and I spent hours reading fascinating bits of gossip about broken marriages, abandoned babies and strange deaths but found only one mention of James Bremner, in the *Yonkers Statesman*, Nov. 9, 1872, and that was more about his

successor. It was noted that Edward Van Wart, captain of the riverboat "The Adelphi," would become Overseer after the death of James Bremner. Bill Blanck had one more idea - to search the Internet. We found reference to a John Bremner, married to Jane Arveh of Aberdeen who had a son James born in 1799. We're not sure if the whole family emigrated or if only James did, as a young man, or even if this is the James Bremner who was Overseer.

Our research, though yielding sparse information, led the Friends to focus Aqueduct Awareness Day on Mr. Bremner (see following story). Our interest in the elusive Mr. Bremner continues. If someone in the rivertowns has an ancestor who might have had some connection with him, please call Mavis Cain, 914-693-0529, or Bill Cassella, 693-6876. Join us on the trail of James Bremner!

Mr. Bremner Makes an Appearance

Overseer James Bremner was the star of the Friends' 1999 Aqueduct Awareness Day festivities last October 23rd, thanks to an expert portrayal by Hastings actor Larry Houghteling, complete with Scottish brogue. Larry had done his homework and, dressed in James Bremner's presumed Sunday best, regaled visitors to the



Larry Houghteling as James Bremner on the Overseer's House porch.



Hikers led by Marge and Dan Schlitt stop for a photo op.

front yard of the Overseer's House at 15 Walnut Street in Dobbs Ferry with tales of the Aqueduct. Display panels and an Aqueduct video were on view in the barn, and refreshments as well as literature and lots of trail talk were served up to all visitors. An enthusiastic group of Awareness Day walkers, led by Marge and Dan Schlitt with their usual elan, stopped by for cookies and pictures before continuing north on the trail.

Our thanks and appreciation are extended not only to Larry, Marge and Dan, and Historic Site Manager Brian Goodman and his crew, but also to the many contributors of goods, services, and time who helped us bring it all together: musicians Paul Mandry, Donna Green, and David Diamond, whose instruments included the Australian didgeridoo and who played spiritedly all afternoon in the chilly weather; the Pace Environmental Litigation Clinic who loaned us the display panels; the Stew Leonard Market; and dedicated members of the Friends who carried out a myriad of tasks.



Musicians Donna Green and Paul Mandry in front of the new exhibit at the trailer.
(Photos this page by C. Fahn)

Inspecting the Tunnel, ca. 1877

Our previous issue asked for help in identifying this print, captioned "Local Inspection of Croton Aqueduct -- The Return Against the Current." Through the Fall 1990 *Hastings Historian*, we traced the print to an article entitled "Croton Water" in the June 1877 issue of *Scribner's Monthly*. The artist is not named. We thank Laura Rice for lending us her 1877 *Scribner's* volume, the source of this graphic excerpt:



"Once a year, or oftener, usually in November, an exploration is made of the interior of the aqueduct from end to end, by Mr. Benjamin S. Church, the resident engineer, who for over twenty years has been in charge of this part of the work. The water is shut off at the Croton dam, and the aqueduct is emptied by the waste-

used on a railway. The effect is weird and awe-inspiring. Some of the men carry torches, whose smoke and wavering blaze curl and flash in the darkness and throw fantastic shadows and reflections on the moist walls. The voices reverberate like peals of thunder, and seem to awake responsive vibrations in the massive stone and brick work itself. In some conditions of the atmosphere, laborers repairing the masonry five miles below can be distinctly heard by those at the entrance, and at all times the human voice pitched in an ordinary key can be heard at a distance of two or three miles, in long low rumbles. A broad halo of light frames the men in, and behind this there is an impenetrable blackness . . . Thousands of tons of water are pressing against the gates at the entrance, and should a bar give way, or an order be misunderstood, the flood would rush down upon the unfortunates and engulf them with irresistible force. . .

". . . In some cases it is not necessary to empty the aqueduct when a local inspection is to be made, and five feet of water is allowed to remain, -- enough to float the

small metallic life-boat which is used to convey the laborers from point to point. On one occasion, Mr. Church was in this boat with two men, who did not at all appreciate the weird novelty of the situation. . . . The water was so high that they could not sit upright, and they had to lie flat across the seats. In this uncomfortable position they traveled some distance, but . . . gradually lost all presence of mind,

and by and by one of them lost his hat. Before Mr. Church could prevent him, he made a desperate effort to recover it, and, in doing so, tumbled overboard and was swept downward by the rapid stream. Fortunately, he could swim, and in a few minutes he was dragged on board again. . . . it was only with great difficulty that they kept afloat and eventually reached the opening." ■



SECTION OF THE CROTON AQUEDUCT SHOWING MANNER OF INSPECTING.

wiers [sic] . . . Many strange and exciting adventures befall the men detailed for this service; and though but one life has ever been lost, large parties have sometimes been in imminent danger. The man-holes having been opened previously, the laborers . . . enter the aqueduct at the dam, and travel downward either afoot or in an ingenious car propelled by a crank like the hand-cars

A Note of Thanks

After walking the trail last fall for the first time— from the Croton Dam to Tarrytown – Alan K. Hogenauer of Oakdale, NY, took the time to write to Brian Goodman, Historic Site Manager. “This is just a short thank-you as representative of the host of folks who initiated and have maintained the superb Aqueduct Trail. . . . The . . . landmarks on that initial third have more than convinced me to schedule the balance [of the trail] . . . Special thanks go to all those responsible for that superb 1998 Archville Bridge. . . many thanks indeed for all the effort that goes into protecting such a special set of places. Great work!”

In his letter, Mr. Hogenauer mentions the plaque commemorating the original Archville Bridge. The picture below shows the signs removed from below the old bridge (left and top right) and the plaque commemorating the new one. They are now trailside at the north end of the new bridge.

Principal text of plaque, top right: Old Croton Aqueduct The Adjoining Stone Table Commemorated the Construction in 1839 of the Arch Carrying the First Croton Aqueduct Over Broadway at this Point The Arch Was Removed and An Inverted Siphon Placed Beneath the Roadway in 1924 by The City of New York Department of Water Supply Gas and Electricity John F. Hyland, Mayor



Principal text of plaque, bottom right: Archville Bridge

This New Archville Bridge Was Constructed in 1998 By The Department of Transportation and the Rockefeller Family Joining the Old Croton Trailway State Park for the First Time in Seventy-four Years State of New York Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation George E. Pataki, Governor

Large stone tablet: This says “Erected A.D. 1859,” followed by the names of the NYC Water Commissioners and the head Aqueduct engineers: John B. Jervis, Chief Engineer; Horatio Allen, Principal Assistant Engineer; and H. T. Anthony, Resident Engineer.

1999 Croton Quest

The Shorewalkers, based in New York City, have completed an ambitious series of 10 guided walks—dubbed the Croton Quest—over the full route of the original Aqueduct. The first hike, in January '99, started from Fifth Ave. and 42nd St., where the Aqueduct's massive distributing reservoir stood on the site now occupied by the New York Public Library. The final walk ended at New Croton Dam. Aqueduct buff Nestor Danyluk of the Bronx was the energetic guide. Another Friends member from the Bronx, John Reutershan, was among those who took part in all ten hikes. John was inspired to write an ode to the journey to the tune of Gilbert and Sullivan's “Modern Major General.” Excerpts follow, with permission.

I am the model of a Questor of Old Croton conduit.
I hike it, rather like it, and indeed am truly fond of it.
Its history and mystery - I am compelled to talk of it
And every church and house and park within a weekend's walk of it. . . .

I showed a church of Croton Stone, the Overseer's crumbling home
And many cheerful Aquefacts which strain the limits of this poem.
When next you hike the Aqueduct, your hiking guide, with any luck,
Will be the entertaining Croton Questor Nestor Danyluk. . . .

Dams, railroads, bridges, culverts, weirs, tombs, ventilators, Hall of Fame,
Mikado Inn where Tarzan slept (and possibly, as well, with Jane)
We visited the Philipases, Goulds, Irvings, local yards as well.
We ran across the highway - If we lost a few, oh, what the hell! . . .

And maybe in the future we can trudge the tunnel underground,
Slink through inverted siphons, harvest eels, and scare the bats around,
Emerging from the library as if employing magic tricks . . .
Oh Lord! We must retrace our steps, for we forgot to count the bricks! . . .

... and so the ode continues. Congratulations to a hardy group, completing 10 all-day hikes that took place no matter what the weather, and many thanks to Holly Daly for sending in the news.



Calendar Notes

Back by popular demand -- On **the afternoon of Sunday, March 5, Croton River explorer Ed Rondthaler**

will take us on another trip via slides, this time upstream from the New Croton Dam. We will follow the explorations of Ed and his wife, Dot, on the three branches which join to form the main body of the Croton, the river that first provided New York City with clean drinking water. Ed's talk last year, full of scenes and stories going downstream from the dam, was a great hit, so plan on joining us for another delightful afternoon. This Friends' winter program will take place at Phelps Hospital Center auditorium. Watch for details in the mail.

The **Beczak Environmental Education Center** of Yonkers is sponsoring a guided visit into the weir and Aqueduct tunnel in Ossining on **Sunday, March 19**. Call Beczak at 376-0859 for information and reservations.

A **Hudson River Valley Walking Weekend** sponsored by the Greenway Conservancy is being organized for **September 23-24**. Guided walks on the Aqueduct, the longest contiguous section of the Greenway designated to date, will be part of the program. Save the dates!

MEMBERSHIP COUPON

BE A FRIEND!!

Your tax-deductible contribution helps to protect and preserve the trail.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal | <input type="checkbox"/> New Member |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friend \$10 | <input type="checkbox"/> Family \$20 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good Friend \$50 | <input type="checkbox"/> Best Friend \$100 |

Please make check payable to *Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct*. Send it with this coupon and your name, address, and day and evening telephone numbers to the Friends at Overseer's House, 15 Walnut St., Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109.

To volunteer, or for map information including the name of the map retailer nearest you, call us at 914-693-4117. Questions or suggestions? Call 914-693-5259.

Aqueduct News / In Brief

In perfect fall weather, students and faculty from **Our Lady of Victory Academy in Dobbs Ferry held their sixth annual Victory Walk** on the Aqueduct to raise funds for the school. The 1999 Walkathon took place on October 27th, starting off with a pep rally in the gym and a bagels-and-cream-cheese breakfast. Each homeroom class dressed to match its chosen theme-for-a-day. The trail runs right behind the school. . . . **State Assembly member Michael J. Spano sponsored a Community Clean-up** of the area between Midland Ave. and the Aqueduct trail in Yonkers on Saturday November 6th, involving the Boy Scouts, County Parks, City of Yonkers, and the Friends. Thanks to Assembly member Spano for making a difference. . . . **Meet Clara and Ian, newest members of our Junior Auxiliary**, born to Eileen Charles and Past President Fred Charles on November 11, 1999. Perhaps they're practicing a stanza of the famous "Croton Ode" in this photo by Fred.



*Clara and Ian Charles
(or is it Ian and Clara?)*

Newsletter Editor:

Charlotte Fahn, 914-478-3961

Associate Editor:

Mavis Cain, 914-693-0529

Please send in your news items, reminiscences, and historical tidbits.



NEW YORK'S PRIMITIVE SOURCE OF WATER-SUPPLY—THE SPRING.

(From Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly, Jan. 1882)

Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

is a private, non-profit, volunteer organization formed to protect and preserve the Old Croton Aqueduct (Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park). The Aqueduct, completed in 1842, provided New York City with its first public supply of clean drinking water. It is a National Historic Landmark, one of the great engineering achievements of the 19th century. Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park encompasses the portion of the Aqueduct located in Westchester County. From the New Croton Dam to the New York City line it spans 26.2 miles, linking the Hudson River communities of Croton-on-Hudson, Cortlandt, Ossining, Briarcliff Manor, Sleepy Hollow, Tarrytown, Irvington, Dobbs Ferry, Hastings-on-Hudson and Yonkers. The Friends work to raise public awareness of the Aqueduct and trail, and to secure the resources that will enable this historic greenway to remain unspoiled in perpetuity.

Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, Inc.
Overseer's House
15 Walnut Street
Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109

Bulk Rate
 U.S. Postage
 PAID
 Dobbs Ferry
 NY 10522
 Permit No. 3038



