THE KEEPER’S HOUSE ON THE OLD CROTON AQUEDUCT
A VISITOR AND EDUCATION CENTER

Laura Compagni / Laurel Marx  OCTOBER 2014
Executive Summary

New York City’s water supply is currently the envy of municipalities around the globe. However, this didn’t just happen. It has involved more than 200 years of planning, building, and contentious debate about land use, property rights, and environmental regulation.

In the 1830s, a glass of water from a public well in New York City could cool you off and quench your thirst – or it could kill you. This began to change when the Old Croton Aqueduct opened in 1842 to become New York City’s first major water supply system. It consisted of a masonry dam on the Croton River, a 40.5-mile long gravity-fed aqueduct, and two reservoirs in Manhattan. These masonry structures made up the first section of what is now an enormous urban water supply system that stretches over 100 miles into central New York State and transports water to over 8 million city dwellers each day. The planning and construction of this water supply system has continued virtually non-stop since it started 176 years ago.

In the beginning, Croton Aqueduct planners built six houses along the route of the original Aqueduct. They served as on-site residences for maintenance supervisors. The Keeper’s House in Dobbs Ferry is one of two remaining of these six houses. The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct are restoring the house and designing a Visitor and Education Center that will feature an exhibition on the history of New York’s world-renowned water supply system.
Old Croton Aqueduct Visitor and Education Center

THIS INTERPRETIVE TREATMENT PROPOSAL PROVIDES BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT REGARDING THE OLD CROTON AQUEDUCT PRESERVATION PROJECT. IT ALSO DESCRIBES A DESIGN APPROACH FOR THE EXHIBITION SPACE.
History serves as a lens through which people can understand contemporary issues in a new way.
Historical Background

Before the planning of the Croton Aqueduct in the 1830s, New Yorkers debated the best way to deliver and distribute clean water to a town under constant threat of devastating fires and water-born epidemic diseases. Planners and engineers designed this first gravity-fed system to bring water from the Croton River Valley to New York City in 1842 through the 41-mile brick tunnel we now know as the Old Croton Aqueduct.

As unforeseen population growth and consumption rates exploded throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the quantity of water New Yorkers needed and the distance they had to travel to find it increased exponentially. By the 1860s, builders began expanding the original Croton system. Throughout the early 20th century, they continued to build massive reservoirs and tunnels northward into the Catskills and beyond.

In 1968, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation purchased 26 miles of the original 40.5-mile aqueduct from New York City. The trail that runs on top of this section of the tunnel became the Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park. It is a linear park which runs through the river towns from Yonkers to Cortlandt. The Aqueduct, including its ancillary structures, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1992.\(^1\)

The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct (FOCA) in partnership with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation have begun the process of transforming the Keeper’s House into a visitor and education center.

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1. This designation covers the sections of the Old Croton Aqueduct that run through Westchester and Yonkers. It also includes the High Bridge that crosses the Harlem River. It does not include the portion of the OCA that runs through Manhattan.
Visitor Center Goals

The Old Croton Aqueduct Visitor and Education Center will feature a collections-based exhibit that explores the history of both the Old Croton Aqueduct and the extended Croton, Catskill, and Delaware watershed systems. This exhibit will raise awareness about the historic landmark hidden beneath the trail and orient visitors as they plan an excursion along this 26-mile linear state park. The exhibit will also provide historical perspective on current problems related to land use, water, the environment, and public policy.

Today, the original Old Croton Aqueduct winds through dozens of communities from Croton-on-Hudson to the Bronx and through Manhattan. One purpose of the Visitor Center will be to raise awareness of the Aqueduct’s history so that trail users and residents will participate in helping the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation to preserve it. If people understand the historic significance of this brick tunnel, they will be more likely to value its uniqueness and to care for it. In many ways, the Aqueduct Keeper’s House will serve its original purpose as an on-site hub of oversight and stewardship of the masonry structures under and along the trail.

Another goal of the new Visitor Center will be to create a destination for city hikers and mountain bikers who take Metro North to Dobbs Ferry and use the Keeper’s House as a place to orient themselves for scenic rides and walks to historic destinations along the trail. Interpretive maps will be available so people can plot their course along this historic greenway.

Visitor Center Services

The Visitor Center will provide basic services for local trail users and for visitors from outside the Rivertowns area. These services will include:

- ADA restroom and water
- Interactive trailmap accessed at Visitor Center or on smartphone
- Trail maps for sale
- Book and gift store
- The State Parks Site Manager available to answer questions
The original house in Dobbs Ferry was a wood structure finished in 1846. It was replaced by the current brick house in 1857.
Project Sponsors

The Old Croton Aqueduct was the first long-distance water supply system ever built in the United States.

The Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct (FOCA) is a private, non-profit volunteer organization formed to protect and preserve the Old Croton Aqueduct (OCA). The Friends work to raise public awareness of the Aqueduct and the trail above it, and to secure the resources that will enable this historic greenway to remain unspoiled in perpetuity. Their mission is to act as a public voice for the Aqueduct as well as a source of information for those interested in its past and future.

FOCA supports this mission by advocating for a safe and accessible trail; by advocating for the preservation of both the Aqueduct and ancillary structures along the Aqueduct; and by providing public education experiences. They sponsor lectures, tours and school group programs. Tours explore key features including the High Bridge, the interior of a waste weir, the Double Arches bridge in Ossining, the New Croton Dam, and various sections of the trail. FOCA has published two award-winning maps with guides for both the New York City section of the Aqueduct and the section that runs in Westchester County, north of the City, to the Croton reservoir. FOCA also publishes a newsletter that includes items of historical interest and sponsors an annual Aqueduct awareness event that features education programs.

Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, in partnership with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, has succeeded in raising $1.2 million for the restoration of the Keepers House in Dobbs Ferry. A federal transportation grant provided $694,000, a New York State grant for historic preservation provided $200,000, and the remainder came from donations from private foundations and individuals. Architectural planning for the restoration is finished and construction bids are expected in the fall of 2012. Additional funding will be needed to complete exhibition planning, design, and fabrication for the Visitor Center interior.
Interpretation is story-driven, rather than a simple compilation of facts.

Exhibit Team

**Audrey Nieson**  **EXHIBITION PLANNING ADVISOR**

Audrey Nieson, Interpretive Programs Coordinator, Bureau of Historic Sites, New York State Division for Historic Preservation, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (NYS OPRHP), has worked for the past 25 years to coordinate interpretation and the development of over 70 exhibits, 2000 interpretive signs, dozens of brochures and educational materials for New York’s state historic sites, state historic parks, and state parks.

As a statewide coordinator, Ms. Nieson has assisted numerous facilities in the identification of primary interpretive themes and the use of various media to present information. She has also developed and coordinated statewide visitor satisfaction surveys at New York State park facilities and has conducted formative and summative evaluation for both orientation and temporary exhibits at state historic sites.

**Laura Compagni**  **EXHIBIT DEVELOPER**

Laura Compagni is the Director of Education and Public Programs for Save Ellis Island, an education and preservation partner to the National Parks Service at Ellis Island National Park. In this new role, she has developed primary source-based programs for students of history and art. She is also coordinating a new interpretive program for the Ellis Island Hospital steam laundry. She uses material culture as a lens through which people can understand historic places.

Previously, Ms. Compagni was an Educator for the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and the Bartow-Pell Mansion Museum. Her work experience also includes developing a community outreach program for Brooklyn Children’s Museum, facilitating strategic planning for Weeksville Heritage Center, and processing archival collections for the Bronx Historical Society. She serves as a Board member for Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct and Interpretive Planner for the Old Croton Aqueduct Visitor and Education Center scheduled to open in 2014.

Ms. Compagni earned a BA in American History at the University of New Hampshire and an MA in Public History from New York University where she focused on urban and labor history.
We must tell complex stories in compelling ways. Defy expectation and the experience will last much longer.
What did the Old Croton Aqueduct mean to different people? How does its significance change as we look at it from different points of view?

Exhibit Team cont

**Robert J. Kornfeld, Jr. CONTENT SPECIALIST**

Robert J. Kornfeld, Jr., AIA, is Vice President of the Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. He is a Vice President of Thornton Tomasetti, and Director of their Architectural and Engineering Historic Preservation services.

Mr. Kornfeld is a Director of the Historic Districts Council and member of the Architectural Review Board of the Village of Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. He has served as a Section 106 Consulting Party on behalf of a number of organizations. As architectural historian of the Croton Aqueduct system, he researched and prepared the National Register nomination for the Jerome Park Reservoir and assisted with preparation of the original grant application to restore the Keeper’s House in Dobb’s Ferry. He is an expert in historic documents, illustrations, maps and artifacts associated with the Croton system.

He received a BA in 1979 and an Master of Architecture in 1985 from Columbia University.

**Tom Tarnowsky CONTENT SPECIALIST**

Tom Tarnowsky is an active Board member, tour guide, and researcher for Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. He specializes in raising awareness about the history of the New York City water supply through his collection of rare archival images that illustrate unique engineering and design features of the Aqueduct and its ancillary structures, including the New Croton Dam.

Mr. Tarnowsky worked as a photo researcher in the Art Departments of New York Magazine, The New Yorker, and Newsweek. Since 1979, he explored the world’s most pressing concerns by producing photos for various sections of Newsweek, devoted mostly to the national news. He valued the educational aspect of his role as photo researcher as well as the challenge of meeting weekly deadlines and working with talented writers, editors, and production specialists.

**Charlotte Fahn CONTENT SPECIALIST**

Charlotte Fahn is a longtime Board member and past President of Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. She was researcher, co-author, and editor of FOCA’s award-winning Map/Guides of the Old Croton Aqueduct in Westchester County (1st ed., 1998; 2nd ed. 2008) and of Map/Guides of the Old Croton Aqueduct in New York City (2004), as well as founder of, and for 10 years editor of, the Friends’ newsletter.

She is active in advocacy matters for FOCA, and as docent, gives talks and leads Aqueduct tours in New York City and in Westchester. Professionally, Ms. Fahn was a member of the policy staff and a Program Director at the Parks Council (now New Yorkers for Parks), an advocacy organization for New York City parks and open space, with prior experience in technical publishing and at the American Geographical Society.
What are the philosophical, political, and technical issues we have faced in protecting the quality of our water?

Mavis Cain  **FUNDRAISING**

Mavis Cain is President of Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. She has successfully overseen fundraising and architectural planning for the Old Croton Aqueduct Visitor and Education Center since 1999. Ms. Cain also leads school group education programs that raise awareness of the history of the Old Croton Aqueduct and advocates for a clean, accessible, safe trail in all bordering communities along this 26-mile state park.

She has been particularly successful in building a strong, committed, and active Board that remains dedicated to the organization’s mission to act as a public voice for the Aqueduct and the trail above it. Professionally, Ms. Cain was a Creative Director of the international advertising agency, Lintas, in London, Brussels and Hamburg. She also headed several New York creative groups including J. Walter Thompson and Bryan Houston, Inc.

Ms. Cain is a graduate of McGill University where she was awarded the Governor General’s gold medal for Modern Languages followed by a year of study at the University of Zurich Switzerland on an exchange scholarship.
Public Program Themes

Through changing exhibits and public programs, FOCA and NYSOPRHP also hope to situate the history of the water supply system within current City and State debates about New York’s watershed.

To what extent, we will ask, will New Yorkers return to a time when the quantity or the quality of our water might again be in question because of choices and policies regarding land use and technology? Certainly the people most concerned about climate change and hydro-fracking would argue that we are already having this conversation. It is our hope that historic perspective on the evolution of the New York City water supply will add insight to our public discourse about its future.

Water and the Environment
- How does the history of New York’s effort to preserve and transport water fit into the broader context of American environmentalism?
- In what other ways has public policy, technology, and engineering succeeded or failed in addressing water and environmental problems?

Water and Labor
- Who were the individuals and groups of people who planned, built, and maintained the Old Croton Aqueduct and the greater NYC water supply system?
- How did they view their work and what knowledge did they need to succeed?
- How has this changed over time?

Water and Urbanization
- To what extent did the Old Croton Aqueduct help to transform 19c New York?
- What else happened in this period of urbanization and industrial growth to shape the City’s thirst for more water?
- How did technology play a role in the growing city?

Water, engineering, and Technology
- What were the engineering principles that shaped the Old Croton Aqueduct?
- What were the historic roots of these principles?
- To what extent did the OCA represent innovation in design, technology, and use of materials or power?
- What innovations in technology are we using today?

Water and Public Planning
- How did the Old Croton Aqueduct and other large-scale public projects of the mid- and late- nineteenth century get funded, planned, constructed, and managed?
- Who influenced this process and who did not?
- What were the philosophical, technical, and political issues they confronted?
- How have these issues changed?

What challenges do we face now and in the future in protecting the quality of our water?