



# Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

*Newsletter*

**No. 11, March 2002**

## Bronx Park Redesigned as Tribute to Aqueduct

*Charlotte Fahn*

A small Bronx park with a big Aqueduct story to tell sprang back to life on a bright winter day in January, thanks to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Highbridge Park, a little less than an acre in size, sits at the Bronx end of the High Bridge, which carried Croton water across the Harlem River into Manhattan. Located at 170th St. and University Ave., for a long time the park was a barren space high above the river, albeit one with marvelous views and a gatehouse and Aqueduct ventilator. Now the restored park is a beautiful public space, replete with design references to the great water tunnel lying just beneath it.

"Today, we stand directly over the ... Old Croton Aqueduct, the first of its kind ever constructed in the United States.... In redesigning the park, we wanted to honor this hidden relic of New York City history," former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern said

in his remarks at the January 14th ribbon-cutting. The design, by Parks Department landscape architect Ricardo A. Hinkle, uses a herringbone band of brick, an echo of the paving pattern on the bridge itself, to mark the precise alignment of the tunnel. Bronze letters set in a band of green concrete read "Under This Strip Lies the Old Croton Aqueduct Which Supplied Water to New York City 1842-1958."



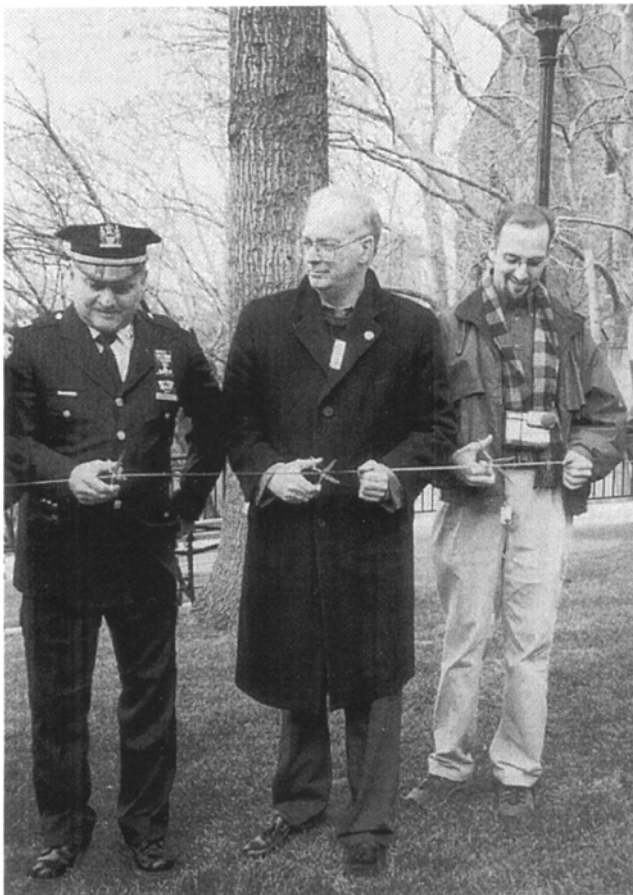
*A pair of tall trees borders new benches, game tables, railing and strolling path in restored Highbridge Park in the Bronx. View is across the High Bridge toward Highbridge Tower in Manhattan. (Photos by C. Fahn)*

Five ground sprays for summer play, meant "to capture the spirit of the Aqueduct," will drain into a stone channel that parallels the water tunnel, which here made its crucial turn westward to cross the Harlem River. The arched design of the park's handsome new perimeter fence repeats the theme of the 1848 bridge's historic railing. There are new benches, oriented to take advantage of the spectacular overlook, game tables, new plantings

and stone walls, and a sign about the Aqueduct and the park's redesign. Funds for the \$739,000 renovation were earmarked by former City Councilman Wendell Foster.

The park is part of the larger story of the High Bridge, probably the best-known element of the Old Croton Aqueduct. The bridge, designed in the style of the great Roman aqueduct bridges, is a pedestrian crossing said to be the oldest existing New York City bridge connecting two boroughs (note: in 1848 the Bronx was still part of Westchester). In its time it was a favorite destination for country outings and the subject of innumerable artists' works. Attending the park's opening were Police Capt. Nicolas DiMuro and Mr. Eugene Robinson, who as youngsters crossed the bridge to swim in the city pool in Manhattan's Highbridge Park. The pool is on the site of a reservoir that was next to High Bridge Tower, still a beautiful feature on the skyline.

While the High Bridge has been closed to the public for decades, today's greenway and historic preservation movements have led to renewed interest in seeing it reopened. Looking toward that day, Commissioner



*L to r.: Police Capt. DiMuro, Bronx Parks Commissioner William Castro, and park designer Hinkle ready to cut the ribbon.*

## William Hoppen

With sadness, we report the death of William Hoppen last month. Bill was a charter member of the original Croton Aqueduct Committee formed in the early 70s to prevent paving of the Aqueduct trail. He was volunteer legal advisor to our board, handling the mounds of paperwork needed to set up the Friends and keep it functioning, and was an early activist in the 1994 campaign to prevent a gas pipeline from being laid in part of the Aqueduct right-of-way. A host of other environmental organizations in the New York region benefited from his expertise as well. His devotion to the Aqueduct places all of us who care about the trail in his debt.

Stern said the restored Bronx park will "serve as a green gateway allowing visitors the opportunity to complete the Aqueduct's historic journey from the Bronx to Manhattan." The Friends are part of a High Bridge Coalition formed last year to work toward a bridge reopening.

The Parks Department deserves kudos for raising public awareness of the Aqueduct in its park restorations. Another Bronx park set right on top of the water tunnel is at Morton Place and University Ave. (between Burnside and Tremont avenues). The redesigned Morton Place Playground (funded in 1998 by Adolfo Carrion, Jr., now Bronx Borough President) has a map of the Aqueduct in its paving and a large interpretive sign about the Aqueduct and its importance to the life and growth of the city.



*Seating for the opening ceremony and brick paving are directly on top of the Aqueduct tunnel; top of gatehouse and ventilator in background.*

## Finding Your Way on the Trail: Phase I

Have you noticed the slender green posts, each with an arrow and the letters OCA - for Old Croton Aqueduct - routed in white, that have sprouted on the trail in recent months? These helpful guideposts, designed by Brian Goodman, manager of Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park, and fabricated by crew member Richon Lawrence in the old barn at park headquarters in Dobbs Ferry, are meant literally to point the way at places where trail users often can't discern where the trail continues.

The posts, 6 x 6 inches and 60 inches tall, fit the trail manager's long-held philosophy about directional signs: "you should be able to see them if you want to and to walk past them and not see them if you don't want to."

Among the locations are Five Corners in Hastings, Cedar St. in Dobbs Ferry, Prospect Ave. in Tarrytown, the Route 117 crossing in Rockefeller State Park Preserve, and, in Ossining, the GE Management Institute and Ogden Road. Phase II of the program, funded by the Friends, will follow: enlargements of portions of the Friends' map, for those places where more detail than a simple arrow is needed.

**Note:** As helpful as these guideposts will be, they do not answer another need: trail users have a hard time figuring out where on the trail they are, because most streets do not have a street sign at or near the



*Tony Rivera of the state's trail crew at a just-installed guidepost at Five Corners in Hastings.*

*(Photo by B. Goodman)*

point where the trail crosses. A simple street name posted on an existing pole at occasional street crossings would be an immense help. This would have to be done by the local villages. Our readers in Aqueduct communities could help all of us by bringing this up with their local public works superintendent.

## Second Conservation Easement in Briarcliff Preserves Land Next to Trail

Trail users will be happy to learn that a 5.3-acre parcel of land abutting the Aqueduct in Briarcliff Manor will remain permanently green, thanks to an initiative taken by Judith and Steven Martin to preserve the land in its natural state. In late 2001, the Martins signed a conservation easement on the undeveloped parcel they had purchased some time after moving to Briarcliff in 1995. The parcel, on the east side of the trail in the Long Hill Road area, lies between their home and the Aqueduct. The Martins' intent in making the purchase was to find a way to retain the green character of the land and its river views in an area where development possibilities are always in demand.

After trying several approaches, the Martins started working with attorney Susan Carpenter of Westchester Land Trust to place a conservation easement on the land. They learned from Carpenter that an easement would have a broad public benefit because the parcel adjoins the Aqueduct, a state historic park and

important local and regional greenway. The Martins and their neighbors enjoy the many pleasures the trail offers. Judy Martin first learned about the trail at a program held by the Garden Club of Irvington, and Steve, an engineer, has been interested to learn about its unique engineering history.

This is the second easement on land next to the trail in Briarcliff. Last year Dorothy and Peter Rinaldo placed an easement on their property in the Kemy's Brook area, also with assistance from Westchester Land Trust. Our March 2001 newsletter explained such an easement as "a voluntary agreement by a landowner that there will be no development on the property. The easement remains in force 'in perpetuity,' that is, regardless of future ownership." In addition to protecting the character of the property, the owner receives several tax deductions. For further information call trail manager Brian Goodman (914-693-5259) or Westchester Land Trust (914-241-6346).

## Taking in the Treasures of the Trail

Thanks are owed to Diane Alden of Croton for excerpts from the journal she started last summer of her daily walks on the Aqueduct, which goes through her yard. She writes, "Many thanks to Jim Capossela" (whose 20-year journal was excerpted in our November 2000 issue), "for inspiring me to keep a journal." A too-brief sampling follows.

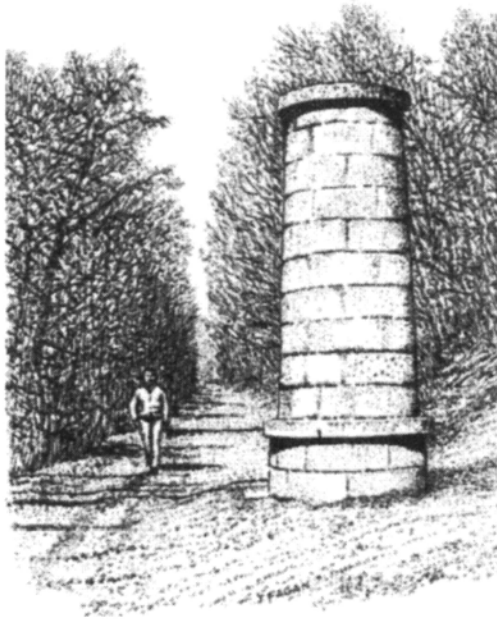
**July 26, 2001** - I got a good walk in between rain showers at 8 am today - cool and damp, two young deer grazing along the path, the pileated woodpecker working on a long dead hemlock...today I studied the root structure of different trees.... The ash roots look like my concept of elephant feet, large, stubby and with flowing wrinkles following the shape of the roots themselves. The bark on the oak roots appears less flexible with fewer wrinkles.

**September 11** - Walked with Ray (husband) and Mojo (neighbor's dog)...on the way back the cool breeze sent birch leaves spiraling down, mostly golden with a bit of green chlorophyll still evident around the central veins.... The oval shape must influence the way the leaves fall....Arriving home tired and yet energized by the walk, a bit of sought-after calm settled over me.

And then I found out what had happened while we were out. Cannot find words to describe the horror and the enormity of it. The world and civilization held together by a fabric of trust - of course there are daily tears to be mended, but today the fabric has been rent - at this point it is difficult to imagine how it will be repaired.

**September 25** - I seek solace in reflecting on the fragile beauty of the natural world. Last night a storm was brewing up and at twilight I sat out on the deck overlooking the trail. As the wind ruffled the trees...I realized that each type of tree sounds slightly different as the wind moves through the leaves...walking on the path today, the sudden sound of falling water came into my consciousness - a course of sharp stones directing the rushing water down the steep cliff leading to the Aqueduct... The water is piped under the trail and makes its way down to the Croton River ...

**December 24** - Without the protective camouflage of leaves I can see the structure of the trees. The maples have their symmetry, while others seem more random.... Large dark masses are visible high up - collections of leaves and twigs - bird nests (crows?), squirrels' nests?



*Aqueduct near Ossining.  
(By Jack Fagan, from "New York Walk Book."  
7th ed, NY -NJ Trail Conference)*

**January 5, 2002** - Winter has arrived and underfoot the earth is less giving, ice crystals crunch under foot. The witch's butter is now shriveled and dry. Some of the moss remains green in spots and the hemlock groves along the path are now much more evident....The wind rustles the dry leaves of the beech trees. Sometimes the wind comes up as I pass the house near one of the ventilation towers and then I can hear the wind chimes hung from the porch.

**January 20** - First significant snow of the winter. I went cross-country skiing on the trail at the end of the day ... I made it to the last ventilation shaft by the dam and then hurried home using my previous tracks. The half moon that had risen helped light the way....

**January 31** - Walked today, as I often do, with my neighbor Diane.... We see many small saplings with vertical patches of bark rubbed off - signs that a male deer has been rubbing his antlers, we speculate.... Several gypsy moth egg cases are evident on the bark of trees, I scrape them off and stomp on them, knowing my small efforts will not alter the...possibly impending invasion. But I make the effort anyhow. On the east side we see many maroon wineberry canes, all leaning toward the sunnier western slope....The nearby blackberry canes are purple, with a whitish sheen on them.



## Why Is Fifth Avenue Posh?

From reader *Brian Hatch*: This question came to mind while I was tracing the 1842 alignment of the Old Croton Aqueduct. The last two miles traveled under Fifth Avenue, from 80th St. where the Aqueduct exited the receiving reservoir in today's Central Park, to 42nd St. where it entered the distributing reservoir at the site of today's New York Public Library.

Two clues to the mystery: (1) Maps from the 1870s show that every north-south avenue had a railroad built on it during the post-Civil War boom—except Fifth Ave.



(2) The postwar economic boom also produced a raft of Gilded Age mansions, led by the railroad tycoon Vanderbilts and others. But unlike earlier elite enclaves that moved about the city, such as lower Broadway, Stuyvesant Square and Washington Square, these mansions sprouted up along Fifth Ave. And stayed there. New waves of mansion-building moved northward along this avenue over the years. To this day, Fifth remains *the* address in the city.

But why Fifth? Some say it was destined for greatness from the beginning, being designated in the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 as the dividing line for east-west addresses. But Fifth languished in its early decades, the elite enclaves found elsewhere.

I believe Fifth is fashionable because it was the only avenue without a railroad. This absence would be a clear plus to the wealthy. Not only were the noisy and smelly trains absent, but the development activity that follows transit was also minimized. Fifth was wide, grand and centrally located, but most of all much quieter than the alternatives. I further believe that Fifth didn't have a railroad because it would put trains uncomfortably close to the sole source of potable water for the city at the time. Trains might derail and cut off the water supply. Their tracks would also complicate servicing the water line.

Today's aqueducts are in deep bedrock. But in the mid-1800s, the Aqueduct was just below street level. Deadly fires, cholera and yellow fever were still fresh memories, and Fifth Avenue alone carried the antidote

to the plagues. It would be logical for the hard-won supply of safe water to be protected by keeping railroads away from it.

So perhaps it is the Old Croton Aqueduct - and railroad barons who didn't want to be near their own railroads - that made Fifth Avenue posh. *Brian Hatch welcomes comments at bh@brianhatch.com (please send cc to czfahn@yahoo.com) or by mail c/o Editor.*

## Publications

**"Water for the Millions,"** Chapter Five (pp. 158-187) in *Great Projects: The Epic Story of the Building of America, from the Taming of the Mississippi to the Invention of the Internet*. James Tobin. 2001, Free Press, New York, NY. 322 pp. \$40. ISBN 0-7432-1064-6.

James Tobin provides a concise, graceful, and handsomely illustrated history of the Old Croton Aqueduct in this account, one of eight chapters in his book about engineering projects that have "shaped American landscapes and expressed American dreams." He puts a human face on the consequences of New York's foul water: during the 1832 cholera epidemic, which caused the death of 3,500 New Yorkers, dying victims suffering an overwhelming thirst moaned "Give me cold water!" But...there was little clean water to give."

(cont'd next page)



*Demolition of the Aqueduct's distributing reservoir at Fifth Ave. and 42nd St. in 1900. (From "Great Projects." Original source: New-York Historical Society)*

## Cedars Next to Trail at Risk in Tarrytown

In response to a request by the Friends for an independent assessment of the trees in the rear yard of 224 South Broadway, Tarrytown, the state Dept. of Environmental Conservation's urban/community forester for this region has reported that the small grove of eastern redcedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) is the finest he has ever seen. The trees are between the house and the trail, and present a grand view to trail users, most clearly in winter. At the far end of this grove is a "magnificent" triple-stemmed linden, already considered a significant tree by Tarrytown, which is a designated Tree City USA. The report states that "all trees [are] in excellent health and structure." The property is between the Medical Arts Building and Prospect Ave.

The eastern redcedar "is typically a small to medium, slow growing tree," the report states. Although it does not estimate their age, given their unusually large size for this species they are probably nearly 100 years old.

If a current application to the Tarrytown Planning Board to construct additional multifamily housing on this site is approved at its proposed size, the cedars would likely be cut down and new, young trees planted as "mitigation". Trail neighbors, Tarrytown residents, and the Friends continue to speak out at Planning Board

hearings against the development proposal in its present form on a variety of grounds. Please contact the Friends for further information.

## Publications (continued from page 5)

He also tells the story of Aaron Burr's manipulations, which delayed, probably for decades, the achievement of a clean water supply, and of the key role of Alderman Myndert Van Schaick and others like DeWitt Clinton, Jr., and Stephen Allen whose efforts contributed to ultimate success, as well as engineers David Douglass and John Jervis. He describes how the great project affected Westchester at the time.

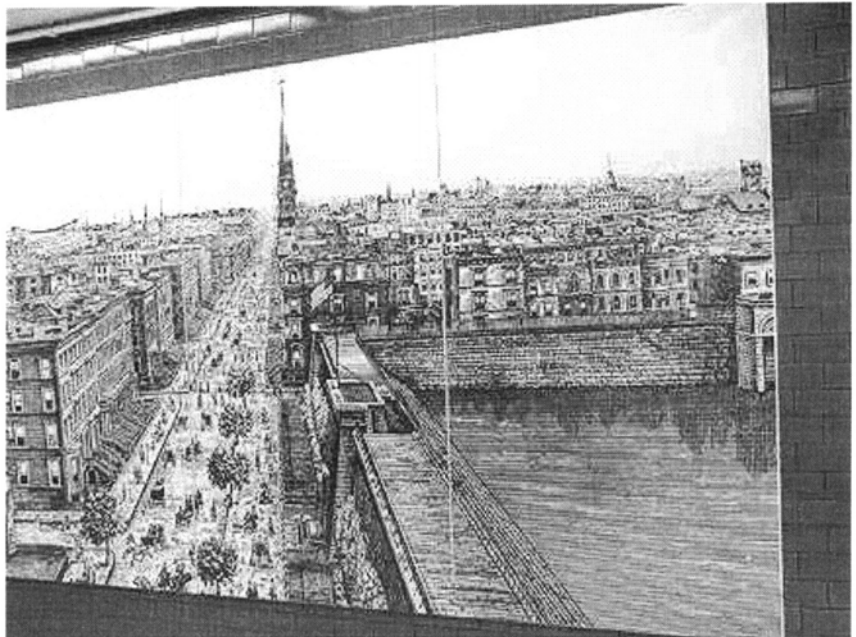
Tobin views the Aqueduct as a quintessentially democratic undertaking. He writes "As men raised in an avidly democratic culture that revered the Roman Republic, Van Schaick and Clinton took inspiration from "the nine stone aqueducts that supplied ancient Rome . . .," and quotes from a Water Commission report stating that "no population ... ever before voluntarily decreed ... such a work." He makes another point too rarely made: that besides its utilitarian importance, "a work of enduring beauty ... was emerging in the Westchester countryside."

There is virtually no engineering detail, but this is not a technical book. Its usefulness is enhanced by notes on the author's sources – he particularly acknowledges Gerard Koeppel's *Water for Gotham* – and an index.

– Charlotte Fahn

## WEB News

*Aqueduct buffs will be interested in the fascinating Web site, [www.forgotten-ny.com](http://www.forgotten-ny.com). On the site's home page click on "Streetscenes"; then click on the item "there's no stoppin' the Croton from hoppin'" in the list of features. You'll find a well-illustrated article about the Aqueduct, leading off with an unusual view (right) of the Aqueduct's distributing reservoir. This is a photo of a photomural, titled "1880's: Fifth Ave Looking South from 42nd St. With Croton Reservoir in the Foreground, Present Site of the New York Public Library," on the wall of the subway passageway at 42nd St. between the 6th Avenue line (of the old IND) and the #7 train. (Original source: J. Clarence Davies Collection of the Museum of the City of New York)*





## Mark Your Calendar!

**April 7, Sun.** Symposium, **Water: In Ancient Times and Today**, 2-6 pm, Concordia College, Bronxville, \$10 donation. Co-sponsors: Archeological Society of America, Westchester Chapter; Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct; and Concordia College. See flyer for details or call the Friends, 914-693-4117.

**April 13, Sat.** A walk on the trail from Dobbs Ferry to Lyndhurst with the Westchester chapter of the Archeological Society of America, with a stop to see the Wickers Creek archeology display at Dobbs Ferry Town Hall. Meet at 12 noon at Aqueduct park headquarters, Walnut St., Dobbs Ferry. Friends of the Aqueduct are invited to join the walk.

**A two-part program sponsored by the Saw Mill River chapter of the Audubon Society and Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct:**

- **April 18, Thurs.** Talk by historian Carl Oechsner about how the urgent needs of a growing New York City for safe drinking water led to construction of the Old Croton Aqueduct. 7:30 pm, Croton Free Library.

- **April 21, Sun.** Carl Oechsner leads a field trip to the Aqueduct weir in Ossining followed by a visit to Croton Gorge Park to see the New Croton Dam and walk on the Aqueduct in this area. Pre-registration required: 914-666-6503 or by e-mail: [office@sawmillriveraudubon.org](mailto:office@sawmillriveraudubon.org).

**May 7, Tues.** Mementos of New York's Water Supply System in Highbridge Park [Manhattan], tour led by Prof Sidney Horenstein for NYC Parks Dept. Includes opportunity to climb to top of tower. Meet 6:30 pm at Highbridge Recreation Ctr., 173rd St. & Amsterdam Ave. 212-795-1388.

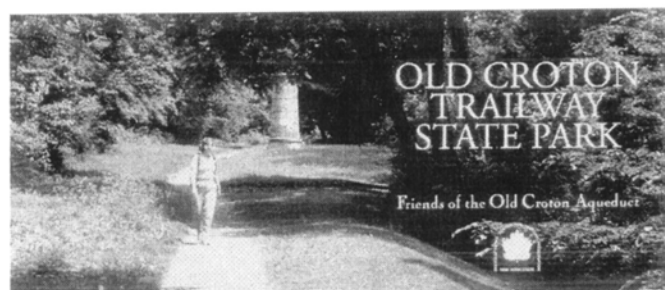
**June 8, Sat.** Tours of the Ossining weir at 10 am, 11 am, Noon, and 1 pm led by members of the Friends. Call 914-693-4117 after May 19 to reserve tour time.

**For information about the trail and Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park,** call the Historic Site Manager, Brian Goodman, at 914-693-5259.

## Trail Reminders

**Leash Laws Apply!** Dogs must be on-leash on the Aqueduct. New York State law requires a leash no longer than 6 feet. Call (693-4117) or write for our leaflet, *Doggie Doos & Don'ts: A Guide to Aqueduct Etiquette for Dogs and Their Owners*.

**Wheels on the Trail:** Now that spring is upon us and the trail is getting muddy, bikers and others using wheels on the trail should allow the trail to dry out before using it, to avoid causing ruts. Thanks!



## Map Orders

To order the Friends' full-color, award-winning map/guide by mail, send a check for \$5.25 (includes shipping and handling) to Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct, Overseer's House, 15 Walnut Street, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522. For the name of the retailer nearest you, call 914-693-4117.

## MEMBERSHIP COUPON BE A FRIEND!!

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

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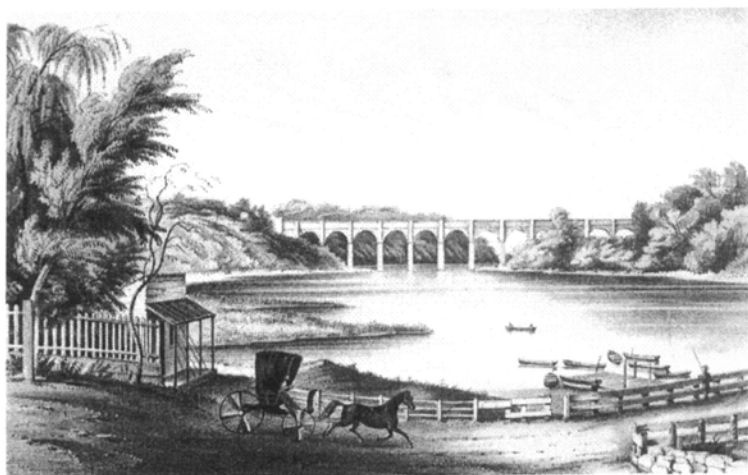
Please make check payable to Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. Send it with this coupon and your name, address, and day and evening telephone numbers to the Friends at Overseer's House, 15 Walnut St., Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109.

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*Please let us know if you would like to volunteer.*



*"The High Bridge at Harlem, N.Y." Nathaniel Currier, 1849*

**Newsletter:** Charlotte Fahn, *Editor*. News items, reminiscences, and comments welcome: 914-478-3961 or czfahn@yahoo.com or by mail c/o the Friends.

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### **Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct** is a

private, non-profit, volunteer organization formed to protect and preserve the Old Croton Aqueduct. 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. *Address:* Overseer's House, 15 Walnut Street, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109; *telephone* 914-693-4117.

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