



# Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

*Newsletter*  
No. 33, Summer 2009

## Poe Walking on the High Bridge

*Dale Ramsey*

Edgar Allan Poe was an Aqueduct walker.

Poe readers who still own a copy of his *Tales* in the Great Illustrated Classics edition from 1952 may remember the dramatic image of a melancholy Poe walking in the snow in his billowing thick cloak, a long straight avenue receding behind him. The landscape on either side, with its barren trees, drops away to nothing in the distance. That is because Poe is crossing the High Bridge on this frosty walk, with the span over the river behind him.

High Bridge, of course, continued the route of the Old Croton Aqueduct from the Bronx across the Harlem River into Manhattan. Construction of the bridge began in 1837, and it was completed in 1848. Poe was then a Bronx resident, living in a tiny cottage on Kingsbridge Road, in rural Fordham Village, just east of the Aqueduct. The Bridge opened on the Fourth of July the year before Poe's death in Baltimore, at the age of forty, in mysterious circumstances.

The picture, which is also on view at Poe Cottage, in the Bronx, is titled, *Poe Walking on High Bridge*. It appeared around 1900 as part of a series of illustrations by Bernard Jacob Rosenmeyer (b. 1870, New York City – d. 1943, Yonkers). The artist was well known in his day as a book and magazine illustrator and a genre and portrait painter.

When I first saw this picture, and learned of its significance for Aqueduct walkers, I thought that Poe's story, "The Imp of the Perverse," must surely have been



inspired in part by Poe's crossings of the High Bridge, which, at more than 100 feet above the river, deserves its name. In the story, Poe's narrator describes the perversity in human nature that drives one to commit horrifying acts:

WE STAND UPON THE BRINK OF A PRECIPICE. WE PEER INTO THE ABYSS—WE GROW SICK AND DIZZY. OUR FIRST IMPULSE IS TO SHRINK FROM THE DANGER. UNACCOUNTABLY WE REMAIN. BY SLOW DEGREES OUR SICKNESS AND DIZZINESS AND HORROR BECOME MERGED IN A CLOUD OF UNNAMABLE FEELING . . . THE IDEA OF WHAT WOULD BE OUR SENSATIONS DURING THE SWEEPING PRECIPITANCY OF A FALL FROM SUCH A HEIGHT. AND THIS FALL—THIS RUSHING ANNIHILATION—FOR THE VERY REASON THAT IT INVOLVES THAT ONE MOST GHASTLY AND LOATHSOME OF ALL THE MOST GHASTLY AND LOATHSOME IMAGES OF DEATH AND SUFFERING WHICH HAVE EVER PRESENTED THEMSELVES TO OUR IMAGINATION—FOR THIS VERY CAUSE DO WE NOW THE MOST VIVIDLY DESIRE IT. AND BECAUSE OUR REASON VIOLENTLY DETERS US FROM THE BRINK, THEREFORE DO WE THE MOST IMPETUOUSLY APPROACH IT. THERE IS NO PASSION IN NATURE SO DEMONIACALLY IMPATIENT AS THAT OF HIM WHO, SHUDDERING UPON THE EDGE OF A PRECIPICE, THUS MEDITATES A PLUNGE. . . . IF THERE BE NO FRIENDLY ARM TO CHECK US, OR IF WE FAIL IN A SUDDEN EFFORT TO PROSTRATE OURSELVES BACKWARD FROM THE ABYSS, WE PLUNGE, AND ARE DESTROYED.

Poe might have thought of flinging himself off the High Bridge. He and his wife and mother-in-law had moved to the cottage around May of 1846, partly because of Poe's dire poverty, and partly in the hope that the country air would help his wife, Virginia, who was to die of tuberculosis in late January of 1847. Poe's exertions to regain his earlier prosperity as a writer and editor were meeting with failure because of constant bad luck, the rejection of others in the literary field, and his own self-defeating actions.

"During Poe's residence at Fordham, a walk to High Bridge was one of his favorite and habitual recreations," wrote Sarah Helen Whitman, who, like Poe, was a leading literary critic of the time. In a memoir, she described Poe enjoying the views from the Aqueduct on lonely walks "at all times of the day and night, often pacing the then solitary pathway for hours without meeting a human being." Back then, his perch in Fordham, which was becoming more settled as a result of the coming of the New York and Harlem River Railroad in 1841 (the Fordham station is nearby Poe's cottage) afforded a panorama of a bucolic Bronx; his home then stood in an area of fruit trees and pines, and on his walks to the High Bridge (by no means short, they were comparable, say, to a trek from Washington Square to Macy's), a view of Manhattan

sprawled away to the south.

But I was wrong about the inspiration for Poe's story. In fact, "Imp of the Perverse" dates to July of 1845, *before* the High Bridge was finished, so it could not have been the scene of that particular frightful inspiration. So much for my theory. Like most of us, Poe likely found the Aqueduct a superior place for escape and contemplation. Indeed, despite the spectacle of landscape and bridge-scape, he was contemplating the cosmos, which he described in his unique way to the world in his late and little known "Eureka." On the Aqueduct, Poe was not peering down but rising upward in his mind.

The artist behind *Poe Walking on High Bridge* may have well understood: B. J. Rosenmeyer lived, at the end of his own life, adjacent to Tibbetts Brook on Midland Ave., right by the Old Croton Aqueduct.



A youth group, sponsored by the education program of the Center for Architecture Foundation in New York City, near the Manhattan end of the High Bridge. The group's visit was guided by the Friends. The landmark High Bridge Tower, dominating the scene, was built in 1872 to bring Croton water to the highest elevations of north Manhattan. See *Calendar* for dates when the tower is open to the public. (Photo by C. Teegarden)



## Aqueduct Profiles – No. 1

*Robert Kornfeld, Jr.*

Myndert Van Schaick, more than anyone else, even Douglass and Jervis, deserves to be known as father of the Croton Aqueduct, and at the time of his death in 1865, that is exactly how New Yorkers saw him. Philanthropic and civic-minded son of a revolutionary war hero, he was the most effective advocate of building an aqueduct from the Croton River. He recognized the need when he was treasurer of the Board of Health during the cholera epidemic of 1832. As an Alderman and a State Senator he shepherded the project through the political process with brilliant maneuvering, and wrote the enabling legislation that authorized construction. He also intervened inconspicuously in the engineering controversy to support the advocates of tapping the Croton River over the Bronx River, a critical decision for the city's future.<sup>1</sup>

Van Schaick's influence was only beginning as water first filled the Distributing Reservoir in 1842. It was his social philosophy that guided the city's policy for pricing water, whereby water should not be free, even for the poor, because then people would not value it and would waste it. It should, however, be affordable to any family, and if tenants failed to pay they would not lose service, but it would be charged to the landlord who would have to recover it in the rent.

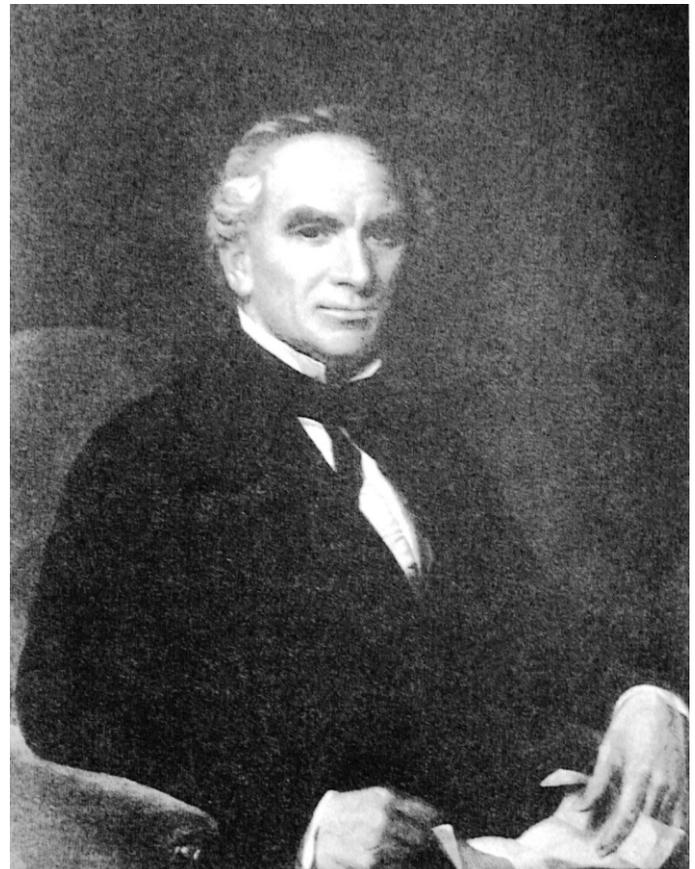
In Van Schaick's own words, "The parties who advocate these opinions [i.e. free water], say that Heaven's bounty of good and wholesome water should not be denied to any family. But it is a principle of natural law and moral justice, that every man should earn his own living and pay for what he consumes with his labor or its fruits...Therefore, as the water rent must ultimately fall upon the tenant, by an irreversible law of nature, justice and sound policy require that the price in common houses should be reduced to the lowest possible rates consistent with equity."<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the more likely approach for that time was stated in a New York Times article on March 30, 1835, which opines that, "From the wealthy and those who would require the luxury of having it [water] delivered into their houses; and from the men of

business, who would employ it in their work shops and factories, the revenue should be derived. – But to the poor, and those who would be content to receive it from hydrants at the corners and on the sidewalks, it should be as free as air, as a means of cleanliness, nourishment and health."

Van Schaick's position is so deeply ingrained in our civilization today that we don't even think of it as originating in social philosophy, but there are many parts of the world to this day where only the wealthy have running water and the poor make frequent trips with buckets to free public pumps and springs.

Van Schaick wrote the above passage not just as an interested party, but as President of the Croton Aqueduct Board, a position that he assumed in 1848, a pivotal year in which the Water Commissioners completed construction of the High Bridge and the future administration of the Aqueduct had not yet been shaped. His brief presidency defined the course of the future in every way. He created the Croton Aqueduct Department which combined the city and state agencies into one that would operate the entire aqueduct, build and maintain water mains and sewers in the city, pave the streets and provide water to every building lot as it was developed. He recommended in the strongest terms that the city build a huge new reservoir in what would



*Portrait of Myndert Van Schaick (NYU Archive)*

become Central Park, because the design of the original distribution system would not long accommodate the number of customers that he planned to serve. Finally, he brought in as Chief Engineer Alfred W. Craven, whose technical vision and high morals would guide the department for twenty years.

In 1855 another pivotal time brought Van Schaick to the presidency of the Croton Aqueduct Department. Under the guidance of Van Schaick and Craven the decisions were made to build the new Central Park Reservoir, expand the High Bridge with a new large pipe, build the High Service Tower and Reservoir at the High Bridge, and construct a series of impounding reservoirs and dams throughout the Croton Watershed to collect extra water in years of plenty and release it back into the river in times of drought.

His administration also built the permanent masonry Keepers' Houses along the entire line of the Aqueduct in 1857. The major projects would take longer to complete. The new Central Park Reservoir was begun in 1858. It and the new pipe at High Bridge were complete by 1862. The High Bridge Tower and Reservoir

were postponed until after the Civil War, and completed in 1872. The dams and reservoirs in the Croton Watershed were begun in the late 1860's and not completed until 1912.

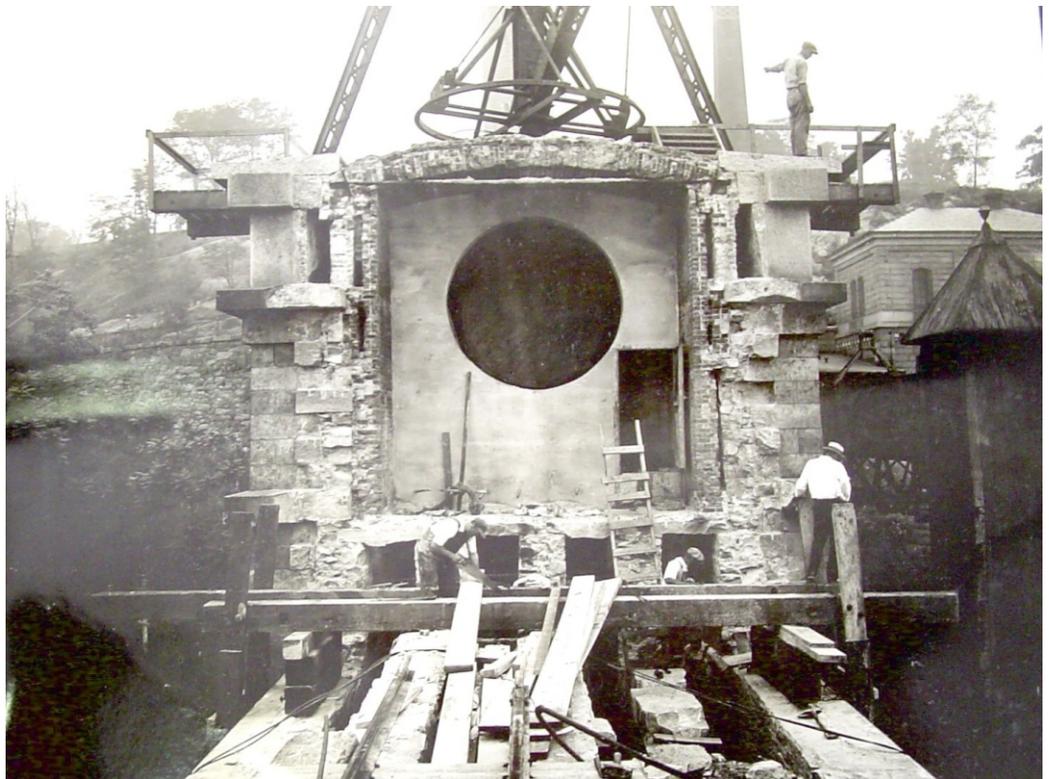
One of the great occasions in New York City history was the dedication ceremony of the New Reservoir in Central Park in 1862, thirty years after Van Schaick's involvement in the Croton had begun. Among the public speeches by dignitaries, Luther Marsh of the company that built the reservoir said this of the aging Van Schaick, "To him, I think, more than any other man, is this city indebted, not only for this reservoir, but for the Croton Aqueduct itself...Carved conspicuously somewhere on the rocky front of this monument, to endure while water flows, should be the honored and honest name of MYNDERT VAN SCHAICK."<sup>3</sup>

1. "Water for Gotham" by Gerard Koepfel provides a detailed description of Van Schaick's involvement from 1832 to 1837.
2. Quarterly Report of the President of the Croton Aqueduct Board, 1848
3. Annual Report of the Croton Aqueduct Department, 1862

*In August 1927 demolition work was well underway on five of the original stone arches of the High Bridge. The arches were replaced by one large steel arch, as it appears today. This view looks toward the Manhattan side. The cross-section reveals various details of the bridge not seen since its construction, as well as part of the old pump house (right), now demolished, used to raise water to the top of the High Bridge Water Tower and to the adjacent reservoir.*

*The black circular void in the middle is to accommodate the reinstallation of the sections of the 90-inch main removed during demolition of the arches. The original 1848 capstones of the parapet can be seen under the approximately five feet of height added for the 90-inch main. Also visible are the four hollow channels in the spandrels between the arches, one of the design innovations of John B. Jervis. Workmen of the 1920's had no safety belts or hard hats.*

*—Tom Tarnowsky*



Courtesy NYC Municipal Archives

*Trailside, Summer 2009*

## A Quiet of Sorts

*Ed Perratore*



When we need to work something out or merely escape from our stressful routines, we seek a quiet place. But it's possible to have too much quiet. Just over a mile from the Old Croton Aqueduct trail, at the Yonkers headquarters of

Consumers Union, there's a room for testing speakers that's completely devoid of ambient sound. Called an anechoic chamber, it has two solid doors, foam-padded walls, and a foundation cut away from that of the rest of the building. It's a place where even screams would get soaked up, and such utter silence tends to unsettle visitors.

Stand a block east of the corner of Tarrytown Road and South Broadway, perhaps the busiest thoroughfare in Westchester County, and you might experience the opposite effect. Besides the din of the bustling traffic, some bound for the Tappan Zee Bridge, clientele of the nearby Stop & Shop add to the revelry, every few seconds, with the smash of bottles in the recycling machines.

Just outside the shopping center's parking lot, however, you can walk north along the Aqueduct Trail to find the clatter dissolving amid the calls of robins and chickadees. Granted, there's often no getting away from the mowers and assorted other gear fired up on properties abutting the trail. Some backyards, especially in certain stretches of Yonkers and Tarrytown, open right out onto the trail, so closely you can almost feel you're tramping through kitchens when you hear the occasional voices from within. Yet for all that the trail interweaves with its host communities; we who hike it enjoy just enough silence, a quiet of sorts, that lets us take a breather from the rest of life.

It's a silence rooted in the trees lining the trail. You won't find an old-growth forest anywhere for many miles, but you will find history. What has grown since the Aqueduct's construction flanks the trail in soil once sprinkled with the sweat and blood of many an immigrant laborer. Does the hush after the last swing of a pickaxe so long ago, the last thrust of a shovel, endure today to soften peripheral noise?

You won't find it everywhere on the trail. But when you do, this very muffled stillness tends to settle in. Whether or not we stop to notice, it's a silence that helps us to sort out the happenings of the day, of our lives, into

their proper order. The spiritual among us might even be reminded, now and then, that we're less alone than we think.

A complete escape from our pressures and concerns may not be realistic in these troubling times. But the Old Croton Aqueduct trail gives us what we need: a respite, a place whose surroundings turn down the volume of everyday life, even the shattering of glass, without stifling it altogether.

## Aqueduct Community News

**Irvington:** Bikers and walkers can now use the Aqueduct trail to load up on fresh fruit and vegetables! Irvington's new Farmers Market, which is open on Wednesdays from 4.30 pm to 8.30 pm at the Main Street school, actually abuts the trail.

**Yonkers:** A severe hail- and rainstorm on the night of July 7 took down 70 to 80 trees on the trail across from the Hudson River Museum, including a sugar maple thought to be one of the largest trees on the Aqueduct.



*Tony Faillia of the Aqueduct crew faces an impenetrable wall of fallen trees that completely blocked the trail north of Shonnard Terrace in Yonkers. (Photo by S. Oakes)*

### Save the Date! 5th Annual Aquefest, Sunday, Oct. 4, 2009, 11am-5pm

Hike, bike, jog or stroll. Our annual trail-long celebration is filled with music, art, tunnel tours, Aqueduct history and more! So far we're planning "celebration stations" in Yonkers, Hastings, Dobbs Ferry and tunnel tours of the weir chamber in Ossining. Volunteers needed in Irvington, Tarrytown and north to Croton. To volunteer your time, talent or to help organize your stretch of the trail, please contact Eileen Charles at [ewords@mindspring.com](mailto:ewords@mindspring.com).

## President's Corner

**Keeper's House:** We have some good news on the restoration of the historic Keeper's House in Dobbs Ferry. As a first step, earlier this year the Friends undertook work to restore the porch, with Board member Carl Grimm as our lead architect and project supervisor. The porch now has a beautiful roof, new gutters, columns that have been faithfully restored and a new porch floor. Then in June, we received from the Department of Transportation the long-awaited approval for the design scope. The next step is for our project architect, Stephen Tilly of Dobbs Ferry, to put out construction bids for the work required.

In terms of fund-raising, we have not quite reached the estimated construction costs which have escalated since the award of the initial grant, due to inflation. But fortunately, we have received notification of an additional historic preservation grant offered by the state. This grant is for \$200,000 and involves a mandatory match which will mean more fundraising. There's no such thing as a free lunch as I learned in the advertising business! However, it will allow us to meet the new figure for construction costs and to move on to the last and most exciting phase: turning the Keeper's House into a visitor and education center with displays, computers and some interior furnishings.

**Dobbs Ferry Aqueduct Trail Access:** Another grant that we had little hope of getting is a federally funded recreational trail grant. We asked for funds to provide better access to the Aqueduct trail in Dobbs Ferry at Cedar and Main Streets. At present, as most of you know, the steep slope presents a major obstacle for the handicapped, mothers with strollers, bikers and many casual walkers. State Parks Commissioner Carol Ash approved our application and says that Federal Highway Administration approval is anticipated. It was a very competitive program and we are happy and proud to have been chosen for our area. — *Mavis Cain, president.*

## New Status for Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park

The Friends have received the welcome news from New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation that, administratively, Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park will henceforth be a stand-alone park, no longer a satellite of a larger park. This is an important turning point in the history of the

Aqueduct as a state park.

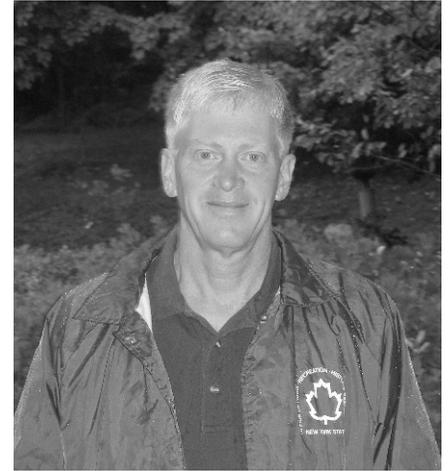
Since 2003, the Aqueduct park has been affiliated with Rockefeller State Park Preserve; before that it was affiliated with Franklin D. Roosevelt State Park. These affiliations involved sharing managers: thus, Alix Schnee and Steve Oakes have until now had

responsibilities in both Rockefeller and the Aqueduct parks. Now Steve's duties will be entirely on the Aqueduct, while Alix continues as Manager at Rockefeller.

Both parks fall within the State Parks agency's Taconic Region, which administers all state parks and historic sites in Westchester County and several counties to the north. Jayne McLaughlin is Director of the Taconic Region and Frank Boger is General Park Manager. The decision to change the status of the Aqueduct within the region is the result of their recent review of the current and future needs of both parks, which included discussions with the park managers and the Friends.

Happily, Alix will continue to work closely with the Friends on the Keeper's House project. Alix has a doctorate in museum education and was previously manager of Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site in Yonkers for nine years and then John Jay Homestead State Historic Site. She also understands the Aqueduct as a trail neighbor, having lived next to it in Yonkers for 18 years. Steve came on board at the Aqueduct and Rockefeller in autumn 2007 from his previous duties at John Jay Homestead. He too has personal knowledge of the Aqueduct - he grew up in Dobbs Ferry and was a frequent biker on the trail.

We look forward to having more of Steve's time on the Aqueduct as he works with trail users, trail neighbors, and local officials, and to helping him in whatever ways possible. — *Charlotte Fahn*



*Park manager Steven Oakes  
(Photo by Sciame)*

**For inquiries about Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park or to report trail conditions, call Park Manager Steven Oakes at 914-693-5259; mailing address: 15 Walnut Street, Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522.**

## Walks, Talks and Tours

**Sundays, 1-4 pm: Aug. 16 and Sept. 20. Tuesdays, 6-7 pm,** preceding free popular music concerts. **High Bridge Water Tower** will be open to the public for visits on dates given above. Free; advance registration is not required. Rain or shine. Location: Highbridge Park, Manhattan. From 174<sup>th</sup> St. and Amsterdam Ave., take the short paved path toward the tower. Information: 212-304-2365 (Urban Park Rangers) or [www.northmanhattanparks.org](http://www.northmanhattanparks.org), click on Events (Concert information: [www.cityparksfoundation.org](http://www.cityparksfoundation.org).)

**Sat. Sept. 19, Ramble walk on the Aqueduct Trail sponsored by the Friends.** Meet at 10 am at the Keeper's House, 15 Walnut Street, Dobbs Ferry. Visit the house and walk south with a detour to Hillside Woods in Hastings. For information: 914-693-0529

**Sat. and Sun., Oct. 10 and 11. Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct** will again lead walks along the route of the Aqueduct in the Bronx (Sat.) and Manhattan (Sun.) during 2009 OpenHouse New York. Guides will talk about the Aqueduct and point out historical sites of interest along the way. Free; registration is required. Registration and walk details in Sept. at [www.ohny.org](http://www.ohny.org). Information by tel.: 914-693-4117.

**Sun., Oct. 18. High Bridge Water Tower** will be open as part of "Uptown Treasures 2009." A bus circulates among eight different cultural treasures in north Manhattan, including the tower. Free; advance registration is not required. Information: [www.uptowntreasures.org](http://www.uptowntreasures.org) or 212-696-7995.

## Map Orders



The Friends' color map-and-guides of the Aqueduct in Westchester (Old Croton Aqueduct State Historic Park), and of its route in New York City, are available by mail. The maps are \$5 each (members, \$4). Add 75 cents shipping and handling for the first map, 50 cents for each additional map. Please specify which map(s) you want.



Send a check for the total to the Friends at 15 Walnut St., Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522. Or download an order form from our website: [www.aqueduct.org](http://www.aqueduct.org). Questions? Call 914-693-0529.

## MEMBERSHIP COUPON

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

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal          | <input type="checkbox"/> New Member               |
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Please make check payable to Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct. Send it with this coupon to the Friends at Keeper's House, 15 Walnut St., Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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

## Kids Learn the Amazing Story of the Aqueduct

On June 2, two classes of third graders from Manhattan's PS116 rushed up the steps of the Ossining railroad overpass into the sunshine and a stunning view of the Hudson River. Some may have been surprised to hear that this was the very same river that they could see in Manhattan. The third graders made the trip to learn about the Old Croton Aqueduct.



*Board member Tom Tarnowsky answers questions in the water tunnel. (Photo by Elisa Zazzera)*

At the Ossining Recreation Center, Friends President Mavis Cain and Board member Carl Grimm explained what life was like in Manhattan before the advent of fresh water and how the self-educated John Jervis, who left school at 15, came to build such a marvel of engineering. Next came the video that told the Aqueduct story in more detail and the descent into the weir and the brick-lined water tunnel itself.

What did the kids learn, the teachers wanted to know. The answers were many and varied: New York City had no clean water before the Aqueduct was built; the people celebrated the Aqueduct on October 14, 1842 with a parade; local people once hated the Aqueduct because they had to give up their land to the builders; some people drowned when a storm caused the first dam, built partly of dirt, to collapse and the second one was built of stone; Irish immigrants built the water tunnel and local workers were angry because the Irish were willing to work for less money.

One parent, Kathryn Lu, said her son Dylan, who had gone on the class trip four years earlier, still remembers the weir and the tunnel and why the Aqueduct was built. His sister, Alessandra, one of the third-graders on this trip, thought the film "was cool but going down into the weir made it much more interesting." It made her realize how difficult it must have been to build things without the big machines you see now, her mother said. So far this season, the Friends have led seven tours for school groups.

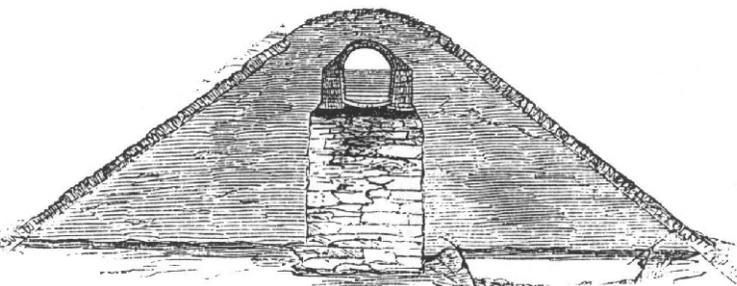


PS116 teacher Michele Yokell with students before descent into the Ossining weir. See article on page 7. (Photo by Elisa Zazzera)

**Newsletter:** Ruth Gastel, *Editor*. News items, reminiscences, and comments welcome: 914-479-1414 or [ruthg@iii.org](mailto:ruthg@iii.org) or by mail c/o the Friends.

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Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct  
 Keeper's House  
 15 Walnut Street  
 Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522



**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:* Keeper's House, 15 Walnut St. Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522-2109; *telephone* 914-693-4117, [www.aqueduct.org](http://www.aqueduct.org)

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