



Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct

Newsletter
No. 46, Spring 2014

Peebles Island

Audrey Nieson

When members of the Friends speak of Peebles Island, they do so with awe and reverence. (Peebles Island is shorthand for the state's Division of Historic Preservation which has its offices on Peebles Island.) Peebles Island specialists will be helping with interpretive panels for the new Visitor and Education Center at the Keeper's House in Dobbs Ferry. Below, Audrey Nieson, Senior Coordinator for Interpretive Services at NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, describes the resources the Division offers.

The headquarters for the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation's (OPRHP) Division for Historic Preservation (DHP) is located on Peebles Island, just twelve miles north of Albany at the confluence of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. The division makes its home in a former Cluett, Peabody & Co. bleachery complex, where for over 60 years, cloth was finished to be made into men's shirts. After the factory closed in 1972, the State of New York purchased the island, established a 140-acre park, and rehabilitated the buildings to serve as the Peebles Island Resource Center, which includes laboratories, offices, meeting spaces, workshops, and collections storage facilities.

The Division for Historic Preservation is organized into three bureaus, which together serve the needs of the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and New York State's system of historic sites and parks. The Bureau of Community Preservation Services and the Bureau of Technical Preservation Services administer statewide preservation programs developed through the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and the State Historic Preservation Act of 1980, including the State and



The Peebles Island Resource Center is located in a rehabilitated textile factory complex. The structure in the foreground, now Peebles Island State Park's visitor center, was the former powerhouse. In 2013, stabilization work began on the former 1909 Cluett, Peabody & Co. bleachery building, visible behind the powerhouse. The large brick structure will be used for much-needed storage. Photo by A. Nieson

National Registers of Historic Places, the review of state and federal undertakings and their impacts on historic resources, the administration of state and federal rehabilitation tax credits, and assistance to municipal preservation programs through the Certified Local Government Program.

The Bureau of Historic Sites and Parks (BHS), with the assistance of the Bureau of Technical Preservation Services, provides professional museum assistance and interpretive support to New York's thirty-two state



Sarah Stevens, Associate Textile Conservator, surface cleans the painted areas of a silk, Civil War flag from the New York State Military Museum's collection. After treatment, the flag was exhibited in Long Island and at the New York State Capitol. Photo by A. Nieson

historic sites and six state historic parks through the design and production of informational and promotional brochures, exterior interpretive signage, and temporary and permanent exhibitions for visitor centers and museums. Staff involved in exhibits conduct research; write scripts; select objects; design panels; create audio-visual programs and computer-based interactives; fabricate exhibit furniture; prepare mounts; and install cases, cabinets, panels, and lighting.

BHS staff is also responsible for OPRHP's historic and artistic collections and archives (estimated at over 1.5 million items). Managing these collections involves maintaining system-wide records, creating inventories, processing loans, overseeing the acquisition and deaccessioning of collections, maintaining photographic records, and preparing and overseeing secure and environmentally stable collections storage.

Staff in the bureau's six conservation laboratories specialize in the treatment and care of decorative arts; furniture; textiles, paintings; frames and gilded objects; and paper and photographic materials. Conservators monitor the condition of objects on display and in storage at state historic sites and state historic parks. They also advise facility staff on methods of handling, routine care, and storage; assist in the safe transport of fragile collections; and provide training in disaster preparedness/response for collections.

Although the Peebles Island Resource Center is not open to the public, Peebles Island State Park is open year-round and offers spectacular views of the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers and rapids, picnic areas, and miles of paths through the gently rolling and wooded landscape.

High Bridge: Looking Toward Reopening

With spring has come the start of planning for the eagerly awaited reopening of the High Bridge and a pickup in the pace of restoration work, slowed by the hard weather of the past winter. On March 13, at the High Bridge Recreation Center (which is in renovation for year-round use), the first of several community brainstorming sessions in Manhattan and the Bronx drew a large and energized turnout. The gathering was convened by the New York City Parks Department and Harlem River Working Group, both working hard on improvements to Highbridge Park and greater public access along the Bronx shoreline.

Ideas emerged in profusion. Celebrate for a week, two weeks, a year. Declare 2015 "The Year of the High Bridge." Have a regatta, fireboats, a Small Ships flotilla on the river. Dress in 19th century costumes and promenade on the bridge. Have a Hiker's Day, with new routes and loops made possible by the reopened bridge. Put up streetpole banners. Install directional signs in area subway stations. Have a day for artists, have a parade, have a choir. Have fireworks! (they're expensive!). Have docents and story-tellers, and lots of kids' events. And lots more.

In the meantime, work on the bridge is proceeding. Rusty areas on the steel arch spanning the Harlem River have been repaired; lead paint has been removed and the steelwork is being repainted. The bridge's 1848 stonework is being cleaned; natural ("Rosendale") cement will again be used for mortar. The walkway bricks, which dated from several periods, were removed to permit the arched roof of the pipe chamber below to be waterproofed. A small area of the restored deck at the Manhattan end will be paved with 1860s bricks, the remainder with new brickwork. The new access ramps, one at either end, are in construction. The historic railing has been shipped to a foundry for refurbishment. Keep your eye on the bridge; there's lots of activity up there—a welcome sight. — *C. Fahn*

Reconnecting the Aqueduct Trail in Van Cortlandt Park

A long-standing plan to reconnect the Aqueduct trail across the Major Deegan Expressway in Van Cortlandt Park, the Bronx, received wide media coverage at an event in the park on March 29. Congressmembers Jose Serrano and Eliot Engel and about 60 advocates turned out in the rain to demonstrate for city funding for the pedestrian bridge, which would also reconnect parts of the park. A site for the bridge has been identified in a professional feasibility study. Friends of Van Cortlandt Park organized the event; Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct were among the co-sponsors. — *C. Fahn*

Destination Trees along the Old Croton Aqueduct

Celine Daly

Destination: a place worthy of travel or an extended visit.

— Merriam Webster Dictionary

To the eyes of the man of imagination,
nature is imagination itself.

— William Blake

I love trees. That's my starting point.

When I think back over my life, I realize I have always sought out certain trees for refuge and rejuvenation. I found some old photos of my grandparents' house recently and recognized each and every tree. I spent hours sprawled on the branch of the apple tree in the pasture behind my childhood home. When I moved to Westchester three years ago and explored along the Old Croton Aqueduct (OCA), I found myself returning to the same trees over and over again. Captured by their beauty and grandeur, I identified them and learned what I could about the species. When friends came to visit, we planned afternoon walks to see my favorite trees. They had become "destination trees."

What makes a destination tree? Everyone will have his or her own criteria, but mine are based on an intuitive connection to the tree. Usually the trees I seek out are old and venerable, or rare and unusual in some way that makes me marvel at the creativity and endless possibilities of nature. Location is just as important; destination trees are accessible to the public and situated in a nice place to stay for a while.

Along the Old Croton Aqueduct, we are graced with many trees that fit the criteria for destination trees. The most accessible and notable trees are located in the massive old estates along the Hudson River. In the late 1800s, picturesque gardens were a status symbol. Designed by famous landscape architects, such as Frederick Law Olmsted and Welles Bosworth, the ornamental gardens survive to this day as parks and historic trusts open to the public. Many of the trees are well over 100 years old and have been given space to grow wide canopies. Some are even older because of the practices common at that time of preserving some wild sections of the landscape and planting fully-grown trees to create instantly mature gardens. The OCA directly borders or passes through some of the estates that are open to the public, including Untermyer Gardens, Lenoir Nature Preserve, Lyndhurst, Rockwood Hall and the Rockefeller State Park Preserve.

Trees store the memories of these places and the people who have passed through them. Rooted deep in the earth with arms reaching to the heavens, the trees have lived longer than we have, bearing witness over

many human generations. I often wonder what they have seen as I sit beside them. I admire their strength, grace and stability, and the way they provide shade and shelter to all creatures without discrimination or complaint. Trees remind me of the cycles of the seasons with their changing foliage. Many cultures consider trees to be sacred since they offer us a way to reestablish a connection with nature and the essential life force. Trees are essential for the ecology of the planet and we depend on them for clean air, food, medicines, shade and beauty. Yet most of us barely notice trees as we walk by on our way to somewhere else. When we make a specific tree our destination, we give it the importance and appreciation it deserves.

Visit destinationtrees.com to find out more about destination trees along the Old Croton Aqueduct with photos, information on the species and history of the tree, maps and directions. The website is a work in progress so if you find a destination tree along the OCA that is not included, please leave a comment on the blog or contact me directly at celinedaly@gmail.com.



Above: Weeping beech at Lyndhurst. This is located along the main entrance road, just off the OCA as it passes through the estate. Weeping beeches are ornamental trees native to central and northern Europe. As the branches droop to the ground, a new trunk grows up. The canopy completely surrounds the tree making it look like an overgrown bush until you walk inside and discover another world. The age of this tree is unknown. It is not listed on the 1905 planting survey, but it was common practice to plant fully-grown trees in ornamental gardens. There are several weeping beeches at Lyndhurst, Untermyer Gardens and Rockwood Hall.



European (copper) beech at Lyndhurst (Diameter: 85 inches, age unknown). Copper beeches are scattered throughout Lyndhurst, Rockwood Hall, Lenoir Nature Preserve and Untermyer Gardens. There is even one in front of the Irvington Town Hall on Main St., just off the OCA. Many of these magnificent trees are suffering from a fungal disease and are being cut down. This healthy specimen is located across the road from the large weeping beech at Lyndhurst.

Northern red oak in the field below Rockwood Hall (Diameter: approx. 73 inches). Located in an open field, it has been able to spread a wide canopy. Considering the size of the tree, it is likely that it pre-dated the development of the estate gardens in the late 1800s and was preserved. Spend time in the presence of this tree, sitting on the bench underneath it or leaning your back against its trunk. It's a perfect spot to gaze out over the river and just be.



Life and Labor at the New Croton Dam

Laura Compagni

Marcello and Mary Rose Rotella and their sons fled political unrest and economic decline in southern Italy to seek work in the United States. The Rotellas sailed from Naples in 1886 and landed in New York at Castle Garden after an eight day trip in the steerage section of a steam ship. Entrance into the United States would have been relatively easy at that time, before the federal government developed legal restrictions to control migration from eastern and southern Europe.

The Rotellas landed in a dense and dirty city, notorious for its overcrowded immigrant neighborhoods. In 1892, they moved to a labor camp known as The Bowery on the Croton River next to the New Croton Dam worksite.

paid stone cutters and masons \$3.00 a day while nippers, waterboys, and drivers' wages remained very low at \$1.00 for a 10-hour day.²

Contractors on the New Croton Dam maintained these wages and hours, barely enough to cover a basic subsistence, even after the State of New York changed its laws in 1897 to make eight hours the legal limit. Long hours, low wages, and contractors' disregard for the new law angered the lowest paid workers who addressed their grievances by organizing recurrent strikes. The Rotellas would lead the largest of these strikes, demanding an eight-hour day, a \$ 0.25 raise, and weekly pay checks.

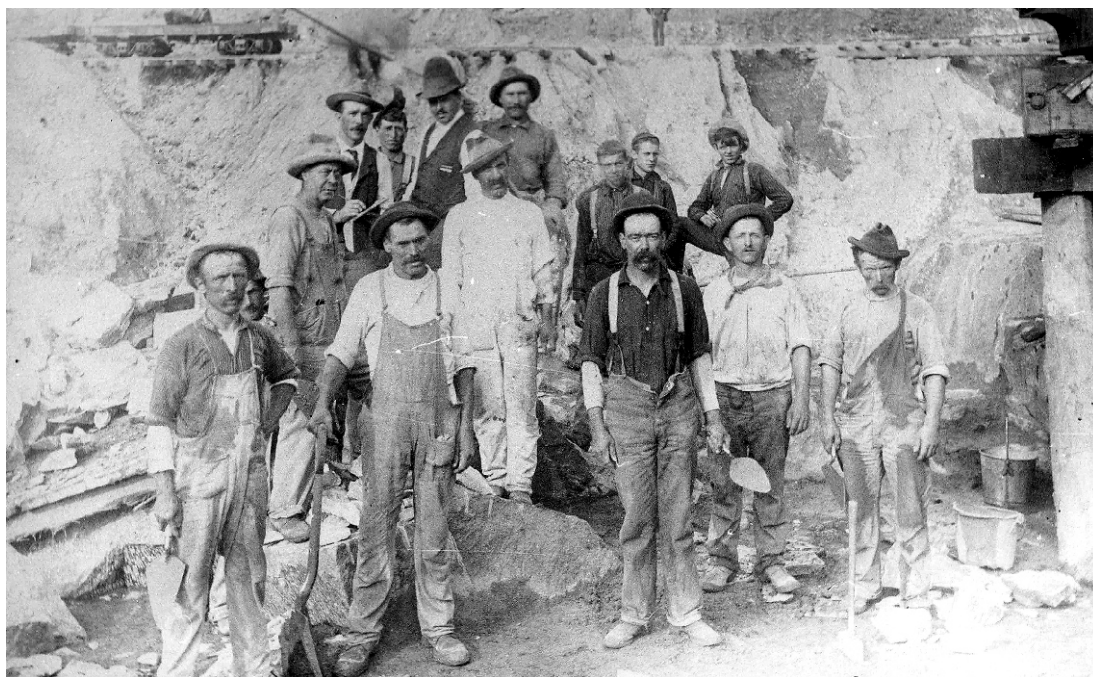
Dam and quarry workers accepted the difficult and dangerous work of excavating, blasting, shaping, and

transporting massive rocks. Reports of crushed limbs dotted the local newspapers.

Many images remain of workers hand shaping and moving 2,000-pound boulders using chisels, slab trimming hammers, simple clamps and chains, and wooden derricks. The lowest paid work at the dam involved splitting rocks and the back-breaking excavation of earth with picks, hand-shovels and wheelbarrows.

Poor living and working conditions, 10-hour days, and low wages eroded the congeniality of the dam

workers over time. In 1897, a laborer named Angelo Paladino went to the contractor and asked for a wage increase. He accused the contractors of forcing workers to pay back most of their wages for high-rent company housing and over-priced food from the company commissary. Labor families had few choices at the isolated settlement. The contractor fired Paladino, instigating 750 workers, half of them Italian, to walk off the job. According to the *New York Tribune*, the state militia began to mobilize soldiers, but then cancelled their call to duty after strike leaders met with contractors. Negotiations took place and the strike ended without a pay raise.³



Workers at the New Croton Dam. Courtesy of the Croton Historical Society.

Water Commissioners representing the City of New York awarded the job of building the massive New Croton Dam to a contractor named James S. Coleman. Coleman hired almost 1,500 men to construct what would be, at the time of its completion, the tallest dam in the world.¹

Coleman hired Marcello Rotella and his eldest sons, Angelo and Tony, to work as laborers. The three men joined the force of stone masons, blacksmiths, pipe-fitters, coal passers, hoisting engineers, quarrymen, muckers, and waterboys. Common laborers most often worked for \$1.25 for a 10-hour day. Edward Wegmann, a chief engineer on the project, specified a wage scale that

Angelo Rotella played a key role in organizing the next major work stoppage three years later. In April of 1900, the lowest paid workers announced that they would refuse to continue at \$1.25 for a 10-hour day. Rotella insisted that \$1.50 for an eight-hour day constituted a fair market rate and a legal workday. Neither Coleman nor the water commissioners accepted responsibility for addressing their demands. On April 15th, 700-800 laborers did not report to work. Rotella warned that the strikers would use force, if necessary, to stop the work from continuing until contractors met their demands. Over 100 deputy sheriffs from local towns organized to restore order, but they faced a large force of armed strikers. Newspapers reported that they possessed revolvers, rifles, and dirks. A clash seemed inevitable.

Contractors recruited and transported new laborers to the site and then ordered the work to resume. The strikers stopped the job by taking control of building materials supply lines. They deterred horse-drawn teamsters from delivering cement from Croton Landing on the Hudson River to the dam site by threatening the drivers with stones, clubs, knives, and revolvers. When an engineer then attempted to make the delivery by train, the strikers surrounded him, "a howling mob armed with firearms, knives, clubs, and stones." It was reported that, "so loud were their threats and so terrifying their gestures that the engineer desisted, in fear for his life."⁴ The strikers had successfully shut down the job.

Two weeks after the strike began, New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt authorized the use of the state militia to take control of the Croton Valley and to protect a force of new workers, transported from New York City, to replace anyone who refused to return to work. Newspapers reported that "rioting Italian laborers have been terrorizing the neighborhood." Rumors circulated that the strikers had threatened to blow up the old dam.⁵

An Italian general consul named Giovanni Branchi attempted to negotiate on the strikers' behalf. He argued that the workers did not wish to disobey the law but that \$1.25 for a 10-hour day amounted to starvation wages and that the laborers had no choice but to demand a wage that would support their subsistence. These wages seemed particularly oppressive to the general consul because bad weather would periodically stop the work from proceeding, making it difficult for laborers to earn enough money to cover basic costs each month. The isolated location of the dam site meant that workers could not easily find other employment when bad weather shut the job down.

The strike took a turn for the worse on April 15th. A

guard stood at the top of the dam on the south side of the valley, just before dark. A young soldier named David Douglas walked toward the guard to relieve him and to begin his nighttime shift. From the darkness, three shots rang out and Douglas dropped to the ground, shot dead from a mysterious ambush near the Italian settlement on the south ridge of the Dam site. Investigations never identified the source of the bullet.

Rotella told journalists: "I am sorry this sergeant was killed. I am sure no Italian shot him. But of course there are hot heads in every community."⁶ The police used the shooting as evidence against the strikers. They quickly acquired warrants and rounded up at least 20 men, including Angelo Rotella, his father, and his brother, charging them with various crimes such as inciting a riot, assault, and carrying a concealed weapon.

Authorities delivered the arrested strikers to the Peekskill jail where local authorities detained them for trial in White Plains.⁷ As the militia took control of the valley and ushered in 200 replacement workers, it was announced that the strike had ended and work would resume.

Contractors increased hand drillers' wages to \$1.50 but kept all common laborers at the \$1.25 wage. This tactic served to divide the workers, pacifying part of the group while maintaining the low wage of the remainder. These unresolved issues would persist at the dam until its completion in 1905. Laborers organized work stoppages to demand fair wages and an eight-hour day in September 1902. They protested again in May 1903 in response to a wage reduction from \$1.35 to \$1.23. Despite the persistent delays, violence, human suffering, and the appeal of the Italian general consul, the New York City water commissioners and contractors who controlled the project refused to make any concessions that would square wages and hours with the 1897 labor code, knowing that newly arrived immigrants would eagerly take the place of the strikers. And so the New Croton Dam was built.

End Notes

1. For more on this story, see Diane Galusha, *Liquid Assets: A History of New York's Water System*, (Fliesman's, NY: Purple Mountain Press) 2002; Mary Josephine D'Alvia, *The History of the New Croton Dam*, available at the Croton Historical Society.
2. Edward Wegmann, *The Design and Construction of Dams* (New York: John Wiley & Sons) 1918.
3. "Deputies Under Arms," *New York Tribune*, October 23, 1897; "Militia Called Out," *New York Tribune*, October 25, 1897; "Peace at the Cornell Dam," *New York Tribune*, October 26, 1897.
4. "Militia to go to Croton Dam," *New York Tribune*, April 3, 1900.
5. "Militia on Way to Croton Dam," *The Daily Gazette*, April 4, 1900.
6. "Not Shot By a Striker," *The World*, April 17, 1900.
7. Bill for the transportation of the strikers to jail. Westchester County Archives.

Awards

Two exciting awards were won by the Friends this season. Greater Hudson Heritage Network gave the Friends an "Award for Excellence" – primarily for our film that spreads the word about the history of the Aqueduct and the pleasures of the trail. The Westchester Historical Society selected us for the Sy Schulman History Award, named in honor of the county's Chief Planning Commissioner in the 1960s, a man who championed the cause of preserving and promoting local history. The award is given to an organization committed to historic preservation and teaching local history,

An even more outstanding award was won by member Paula Matthusen. It was presented by the American Academy in Rome and covers a year's study in Rome. Paula submitted her acoustic music composition about the Old Croton Aqueduct titled "Eden: Arch of Promise Bending." Congratulations Paula!

Constance Porter, 1921-2014

Connie Porter, as she was known to friends and colleagues, died Tuesday, February 18 at the age of 93. Connie was a life-long environmentalist and FOCA Board member. She will be remembered by many in the Rivertowns community as the person who in 1974 enlisted the help of Bill Hoppen, a fellow resident of Irvington, to save the Old Croton Aqueduct trail as a natural, unpaved walkway. Together they formed the Croton Aqueduct Committee which successfully campaigned to counter a proposal to make the trail part of a series of paved bicycle routes. In 1976, the State Legislature passed a bill to establish a Croton Aqueduct Scenic and Historic Corridor. Thank you, Connie.

Sanctions Levied Against Aqueduct Tree-Toppers

Prosecution of a disturbing act of self-interest has finally been brought to a close by the state Attorney-General and legal counsel of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. In 2005, three homeowners whose properties abut the Aqueduct hired a tree company to remove the tops of trees along the trail in order to open their views of the Hudson and Palisades. The completely illegal action, which took place at night adjacent to Rudolph Terrace in Yonkers, killed or injured 34 trees. Peter Iskenderian, Aqueduct State Park manager at the time, worked arduously with authorities to identify those responsible and initiate prosecution. As reported in the March 26 *Journal News*, Potanovic & Sons Professional Tree Care will pay sanctions valued at \$64,000, perform remedial work in parks, and issue an apology letter to the public. The homeowners will make payment to Robert Potanovic toward the money he owes the state. In a statement announcing the court-ordered settlement, Attorney-General Eric Schneiderman commented, "State parks and historic sites belong to the people of New York, and all New Yorkers suffer the loss when these resources are harmed."

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.

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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:

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Lead (or assist with) walking tours | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outreach on the trail (meet and greet) | |

We need your help.

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

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

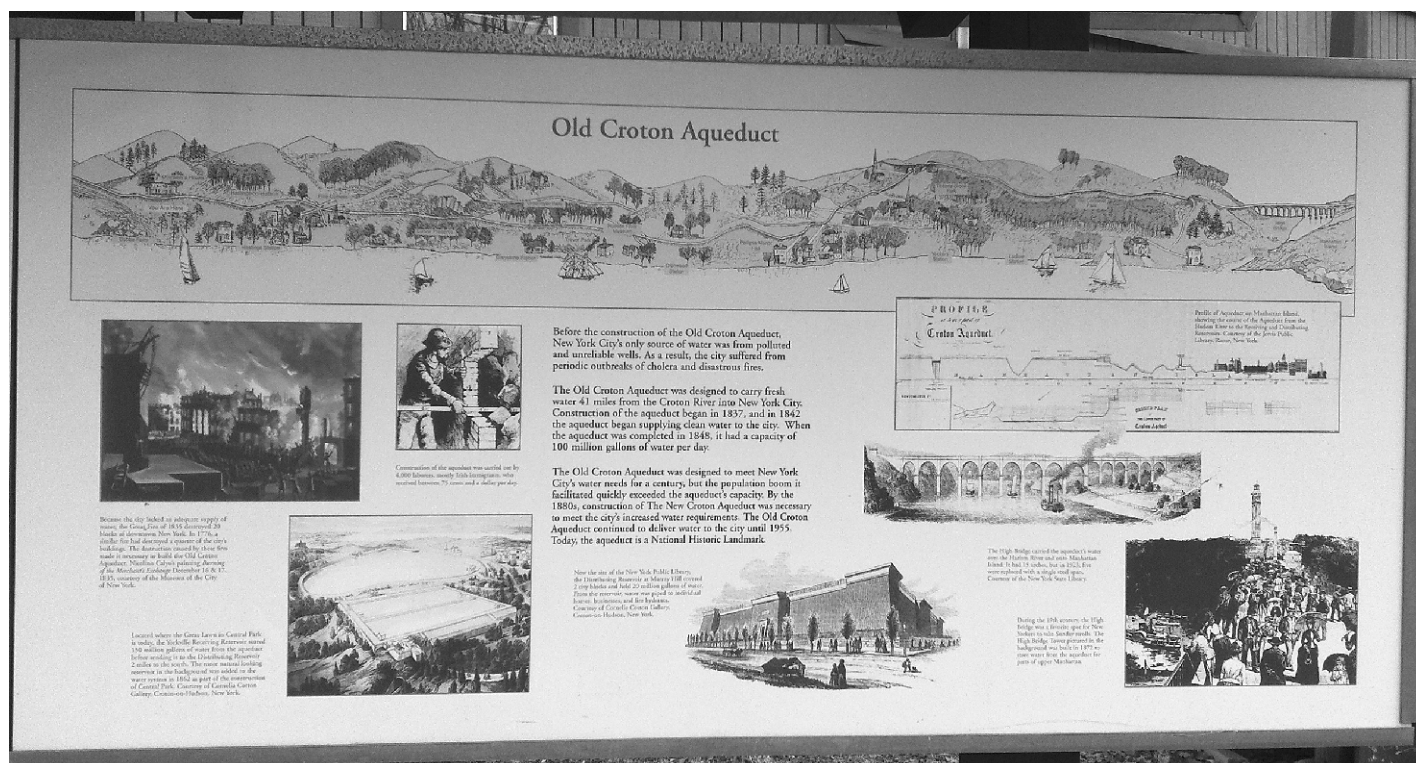
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Newsletter: Ruth Gastel, *Editor*. News items, reminiscences, and comments welcome: 914-479-1414 or ruthg@iii.org or by mail c/o the Friends.

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Part of the interpretive sign outside the Park trailer at Walnut Street in Dobbs Ferry. Photo by S. Kelsey

