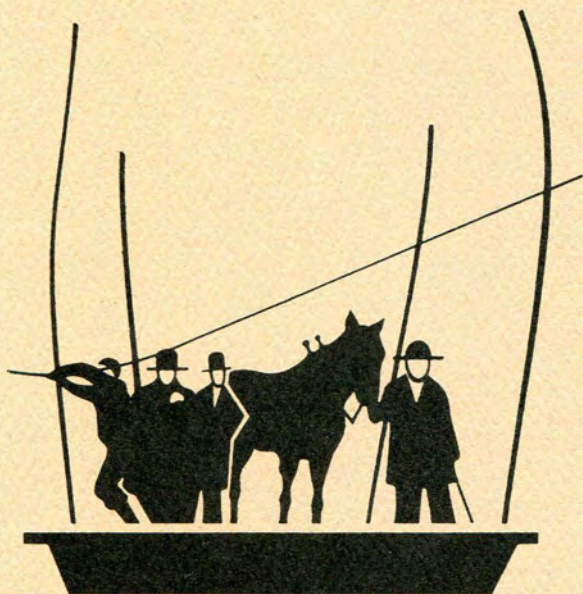




VISCHER FERRY
Nature & Historic
Preserve

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TOWN OF CLIFTON PARK

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TOWN HISTORIAN



OFFICE OF PARKS & RECREATION



HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

2002



Whipple Bridge

VISCHER FERRY NATURE AND HISTORIC PRESERVE

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1977, the New York State Department of Transportation and the Town of Clifton Park embarked on a unique partnership. Through this cooperative venture, over 400 acres of historically and ecologically significant land adjacent to the Mohawk River, much of it within the Vischer Ferry Historic District, was established as the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve. The Preserve has three areas of interest: a wetland ecosystem, the remains of the Erie Canal, and the site of the town's first settlement.

The Preserve is open to all, nature lovers and historians, for study, recreation, or simple enjoyment of this lovely natural area.

Human Presence

The land that now comprises the Preserve was farmed by the Mohawk Indians prior to the first white settlers' arrival. They called the area "Canastigione," meaning "corn flats". By 1672, Clifton Park's first settlers arrived from Niskayuna, Schenectady and Albany, and established a settlement on the Mohawk that became known as "Fort's Ferry." This area was part of the Canastigione land patent of 1708, granted to land speculators from Queen Anne of England. In 1822 local residents were employed in digging a large ditch through this area. They were paid so much for each cubic yard of earth removed. The Erie Canal officially opened from Albany to Buffalo in 1825 and was so successful that it had to be enlarged ten years later. A canal side settlement, Clute's Dry Dock, grew up in the eastern section of the Preserve, while in the western section was Canal Lock 19 and its support buildings.

In 1907 the Mohawk River was dammed to create the locks of the Barge Canal. This made the Mohawk River navigable but raised the water level to such an extent that annual spring floods occurred in the area of the Preserve. The settlements of Fort's Ferry and Clute's Dry Dock were abandoned at this time. What was once farmland became marsh. When the Barge Canal officially opened in 1917, the old Erie Canal was abandoned.

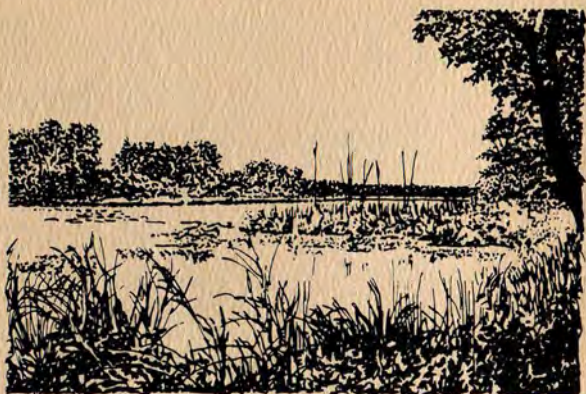
Dams and Dikes

Since 1907, spring ice flows from the Mohawk River inundate portions of Vischer Ferry. It is this annual flooding that created and sustained the wetlands that make up the Preserve. The floodwaters deposited nutrient-rich silt on the lands bordering the river, enriching some of the best farmland in the region. The wetlands along the riverbank were ponds and thriving cattail marshes that teemed with wildlife.

In 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the first earthen dike and spillway system at Vischer Ferry. The intent was to control water

levels in the ponds between the canal and the river to improve duck nesting. In a few years the dike was washed away by spring floods. In 1952, the New York State Department of Conservation constructed a concrete dam and spillway as part of a new waterfowl management program for Vischer Ferry. The Department's plans for deriving revenues from duck hunting on the preserve backfired when the ducks vacated the site as soon as the shooting started. By the second day of the hunting season the ducks were safely dabbling or diving in nearby Stony Creek Reservoir where hunting is prohibited. Another attempt at controlling the water level in the ponds was made in 1962 with the construction of a second spillway. The intractable water could not be tamed. Yet, the character of the entire area was changed by these repeated efforts at altering and controlling the environment.

When the last generation of dikes was built, the earth was scooped out of the ponds and they were flooded to a depth of six to eight feet. Periodic dredging helped to maintain this depth, but drainage of the area had always been a problem, and the annual spring floods were devastating due to the dams. Vegetation that could survive the temporary spring flooding was now permanently inundated. The jagged skeletons of drowned trees are still visible around the preserve. Most of the trees, though, and all of the



CCC pond between canal and river

shrubby and herbaceous vegetation was completely submerged and formed a thick layer of decomposing material at the bottom of the ponds. Coupled with further mishaps, this was to change the face of the preserve drastically.

While the dams could not prevent the spring floods from raising the water to extremely high and abnormal levels, they inadvertently kept most of the river-borne silt out of the area. Year after year, the silt accumulated behind the dam, but in 1964, the ferocity of the spring floods broke the dike and millions of cubic yards of silt were deposited in the ponds. A veritable tidal wave of silt transformed the wetland in the space of a few hours. When it was over and settled, the inland ponds contained a mere two feet of water, the ponds near the river were only four feet deep, and silt blanketed much of the surrounding marshland.

The Present

The stage was set for the ecological changes that are in evidence today. Shallower water levels allowed invading purple loosestrife, pondweed, and water-chestnut to overrun the ponds. The deposition of such vast quantities of silt raised many of the higher areas sufficiently above the flood-line to allow upland vegetation, which thrives in drier habitats, to move in.

In the 1970's, the Department of Environmental Conservation, discouraged and defeated by the inexorable forces of nature, decided to let nature work its way, undisturbed. The fields, where corn was previously planted as food for wildlife, were abandoned, as were fields that had been mowed to provide avian habitat. These are now overgrown with plants representative of various stages of succession. Migrating geese and other waterfowl, as well as pheasants, had dined delightedly on the corn. In the 1960's, raccoons were abundant, being avid consumers of this State-supplied provender. When their benefactors balked at further handouts, and nature's harsh reign resumed, the populations of these creatures dwindled. Raccoons and pheasants are still found on the Preserve, but in fewer numbers.

NATURE

The Purple Plague

From July through September, the ponds and marshes dazzle and delight the eye with a vision of majestic carpets of blossoming magenta. Wherever you look the stately stems, sporting conical crowns of blazing color, sway in the moist breeze. Unseen, countless new shoots emerge; unheard, innumerable seeds are dispersed, as the gaudy wildflower encroaches upon the marsh.

Purple loosestrife first reached America from Europe around 1860. It thrives on disturbed wetland sites. Once it takes hold, this aggressive, hardy, long-lived perennial out-competes and displaces native plants. One alarming aspect of this as yet unstoppable invasion is that the loosestrife, itself nearly valueless to wildlife (it does provide cover), destroys such crucial wildlife staples as cattails. The cattail rootstocks are an irresistible, albeit starchy, mainstay of the muskrat's diet. Muskrat also rely on cattail stalks as construction material for their houses. Ducks and other waterfowl enjoy eating cattail roots; some small birds feast on cattail seeds. When purple loosestrife displaces the cattails and its associate plants, the habitat becomes impoverished in its wildlife.

The loosestrife's reproductive powers are prodigious. If mowed or cut down, it will sprout from roots and stubble to flower again, a mature plant, in less than fifty days. It can sprout and take root from stem fragments both in and out of water. Each plant can produce up to 3,000 flowers per season, each flower containing about 100 seeds. A one-acre pure stand of purple loosestrife can contain 80,000 plants. Put these figures together with the loosestrife's ability to out compete other plants, and the scope of the problem becomes clear.

Even more distressing is the loosestrife's effect on the entire ecosystem. Its roots are shallow and horizontal, interlacing to form a dense mat. Most loosestrife stalks are tough enough to stand throughout the winter but those that die or are blown over decompose on this dense mat or in the shallow water surrounding it. Loosestrife seedlings grow on this substrate. Thus, the purple loosestrife spreads and engulfs not only other, less hardy plants, but the water habitat as well. The constant formation of the root mat and deposition of layer upon layer of decaying plants, raises the water level, making the marshes increasingly shallow. In drought years, less than one foot of water may remain in many of the marshes that have been invaded and conquered by purple loosestrife. Some ponds dry out completely. The onslaught of purple loosestrife alter the environment in such a way as to hasten its transformation into a drier, upland habitat.

Scientists are conducting experiments to find effective means of controlling purple loosestrife. Manipulation of water-levels in wetlands, application of chemicals that will kill the plant, and controlled burning are among the methods tried so far.

The Water Chestnut (*Trapa natans*)

An invasive aquatic plant species evident during the summer in the Vischer Ferry Nature Preserve is the water chestnut. A leafed aquatic plant, the water chestnut can be easily observed at Clute's Dry Dock, Wagar's Pond, and in various portions of the canal.

The water chestnut is an annual that grows quickly in shallow water. It can grow to great lengths and form dense mats. While walking in the preserve during the summer, you may find small bulbs with sharp thorns protruding from them all along the shore line. These menacing looking objects are produced by the water chestnut plant and populate the shores of the canal and the Mohawk River. BE CAREFUL!! Stepping on a water chestnut bulb is a mistake you won't make twice.

Not native to this area, the water chestnut was introduced in Scotia to Collins Lake as an ornamental plant in the late 1800's. Over the years, the water chestnut has been spread to other water bodies in the region primarily by waterfowl. Geese, ducks, and other waterfowl inadvertently pick up the barbed bulbs of the water chestnut and deposit them in the next body of water they land in.

Like many invasive species the water chestnut begins its growing cycle early. The early growth gives it an advantage over slower native species. The water chestnut does not have many (if any) natural predators present in the area they are "invading". Combine these features with its fast growth and the water chestnut often dominates the area it has been introduced to. By July, the inundation of the canal with water chestnuts severely restricts water recreation in the canal. The mats are so dense even canoeing can be extremely difficult. By September, the dense mats create another problem. The volume of material left to decay as the summer ends can significantly reduce the dissolved oxygen in the water. This condition can be detrimental to fish populations.

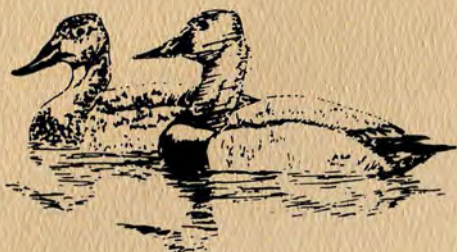
While visiting the Vischer Ferry Nature Preserve keep an eye out for this intruder.

An Avian Haven

Despite the many ecological transmutations the site is undergoing, the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve remains an excellent birding area. The ponds and marshes are like islands alive with all manner of water birds and surrounded by uplands filled with birds that prefer a higher, drier, more forested habitat. Successional fields offer a further contrast and play host to their own unique bird species.

The Wetland

As befits any self-respecting wetland, waterfowl and water birds abound. February finds the first gulls sojourning at Vischer Ferry. These opportunistic and cantankerous birds move through the area until the end of March. April arrives, bringing a host of migrating waterfowl. Lovely



Canvasback

blue-winged and green-winged teals; green-legged, white-bellied coots; dapper loons; graceful pintails; and big-billed shovelers all stop here. Mewing red-heads, black ducks and canvasbacks are species declining due to wetland destruction, but all can be found here during spring migration. Marsh-loving red-winged blackbirds and swamp sparrows are

abundant, but their declining populations at Vischer Ferry bears witness to the changing character of the wetland. Pied-billed grebes may be heard "barking" on the ponds, but will sink slowly out of sight beneath the water if their ruckus attracts unintended attention. The chunky, chestnut-bodied ruddy duck is the only duck that has this same talent for submergent escapes. A seldom used tactic at Vischer Ferry, the ruddy duck lives amicably among the exquisite mergansers, ubiquitous Canada geese, elusive Virginia rails, and all the other waterfowl at Vischer Ferry. Mallards and wood ducks nest on the Preserve. Mallards raise their young among the dense marsh grasses; wood ducks generally nest in a tree cavity close to water. (The crested and multi-hued wood duck was once proposed as our national bird because of its great beauty and peaceful habits.) From August to October, migrating great blue herons can be seen wading in the



Great Blue Heron

pond waiting for a catch of fish or frog - its favorite foods. If startled, this great, gray bird will flap away on wings that span up to six feet. Mute swans grace the Mohawk River in spring; common and snowy egrets, once killed almost to extinction because of the millinery desirability of their plumes, are frequent fall visitors to the river.

Migrating raptors are no strangers to Vischer Ferry. Keen-eyed bird watchers may see marsh hawks (also known as northern harriers) swooping low over the ground looking for small prey animals. Osprey are common, feeding on river fish or carp stranded on the ponds by the receding spring floods. Cooper's hawks may be hard to distinguish from the slightly smaller sharp-shinned hawks, but both rest and feed here during migration. Both merlins and sharpshinned hawks have followed migrating sparrows and warblers, major components of their diets, to the Preserve. Merlins are also known to take shorebirds, a penchant that makes Vischer Ferry extremely attractive to them. Redtailed hawks prey primarily on rodents that scurry about the floor of the forested uplands. Even bald eagles have been seen soaring over the Preserve.

The Woods

The upland woods play host to their own avian species. Songbirds invade the Preserve beginning in May. Numerous warblers converge on Vischer Ferry. Eye-catching black and white warblers are often seen working their way up and down the trunks of the poplars, cottonwoods or gray dogwood trees in the Preserve. These warblers are looking for bugs

hidden in the crevices of the bark. They compete with the strictly bark-ascending brown creeper and the rigidly bark-descending nuthatch (both Vischer Ferry denizens) in seeking out this insect food. The woods also attract migrating willow and least flycatchers; ruby-crowned kinglets; yellow-throated, solitary and red-eyed vireos; northern and Louisiana water-thrushes and rose-breasted gros-beaks. On gentle spring evenings the visitor to Vischer Ferry may thrill to the enchanting song of the veery, or to the rich, flute-like song of the wood thrush - considered by many to be among the most beautiful songs of any North American bird. Both



Downy
Woodpecker

thrushes nest on the Preserve. The considerably less melodious sound of the rat-a-tat racket or parental hairy and downy woodpeckers (and flickers), boring for bugs to feed their progeny, ricochets around the woodlands throughout their nesting season.

The younger, successional woods, where saplings and bushes predominate, conceal the nests of chestnut-sided and yellow warblers. The latter is often the hapless victim of the notorious brown-headed cowbird, a brood-parasite, that may lay its huge egg in the nest of this diminutive warbler. The huge cowbird chick will then starve or otherwise kill the warbler's own offspring. Another nester here is the tree swallow

that raises its young in saplings close to the ponds. Wilson's and Nashville warblers, yellow throats, redstarts and towhees all use these woods during migration. Occasionally, the dazzling, turquoise iridescence of the male indigo bunting can be glimpsed as it perches looking for food. The only sightings of prothonotary warblers ever recorded in Saratoga County have occurred at Vischer Ferry in August.

The best time to see woodland birds is in May. (By June, the dense foliage makes viewing difficult.) In the spring, walk the woodland edges, along the trails, where the open vantage makes observation easiest.

The Fields

Sections of the Preserve that used to be mowed by the State for planting in corn or for wildlife habitat, are now left undisturbed and are undergoing natural succession (small sections of the Preserve, such as the trails and certain bird-banding areas, are still mowed annually.) Plant communities dominated by grasses, herbs or shrubs attract distinct bird species. Bank and barn swallows abound. Flocks of black and butter-colored gold finches feast on grass and herb seeds. Tiny ruby throated hummingbirds flit from flower to flower, sipping nectar. Listen for the clear whistle of Baltimore (northern) orioles, and the unmistakable mewing of gray catbirds. Ring-necked pheasants and ruffed grouse reside in the fields, feeding, in season, on their favorite fruits: nannyberries, elderberries, and grapes.

Mammals, Etc.

Birds share their habitats with numerous mammals. Nervous cottontails nibble leaves in the fields; raptors regularly patrol these open spaces looking for unwary rabbits or mice that are their prey. Striped skunk, opossum and sun-loving woodchucks can be found around the successional fields. Long-tailed weasels and red foxes regularly venture into the fields for prey. They also hunt chipmunks and squirrels in the woods. Porcupines amble about the forests unmolested (for obvious reasons). Raccoon are ubiquitous; deer are most often seen where gray dogwoods meld into successional fields. Muskrat are much in evidence: their tunnel holes pock the trails that ring the ponds (Watch your step!). Mink may even live at Vischer Ferry, feeding on small mammals and an occasional snapping turtle.

Painted turtles love to bask in the sun. Up to a dozen or so of these colorful reptiles can be seen lined up on a log like sunbathers at a reptilian resort. The wetlands are home to a variety of amphibians, as well. On spring evenings, chorusing spring peepers serenade visitors. Bullfrogs add bass to this amphibian symphony. Spotted salamanders and red-efTs devour the eggs of these as well as green, wood, and southern leopard frogs - all of which dwell at Vischer Ferry. Red efTs love tasty tadpoles, and often lurk about egg masses, gobbling up the newly hatched amphibians.



LEGEND

1. Parking
2. Daniel Fort Home
3. Farmers Bridge
4. John Clute Home
5. VanVranken Homesite
6. Lock #19
7. Dam
8. Foundation Holes
9. Clute's Dry Dock
10. Whipple Bridge
11. Fort's Ferry
12. Pearse Homesite

Map
Not to Scale

CHECK LISTS



Least Bittern



Marsh Hawk

Birds

bittern, American
 bittern, least
 blackbird, red winged
 blackbird, rusty
 bunting, indigo
 cardinal
 catbird
 chat, yellow breasted
 chickadee, black capped
 coot, American
 cowbird, brown headed
 creeper, brown
 crow, common
 cuckoo, black billed
 dove, mourning
 duck, black duck
 duck, canvasback
 duck, mallard
 duck, pintail
 duck, red head
 duck, ruddy duck
 duck, shoveler
 duck, teal, blue winged
 duck, teal, green winged
 duck, wood duck
 eagle, bald (sighted)
 egret, great (on river)
 egret, snowy (on river)
 finch, purple
 flicker, yellow-shafted
 flycatcher, great crested
 flycatcher, least
 flycatcher, Traill's
 flycatcher, yellow-bellied
 goldfinch, American
 goose, Canada
 grackle, common
 grebe, pied billed
 grosbeak, rose breasted
 grouse, ruffed

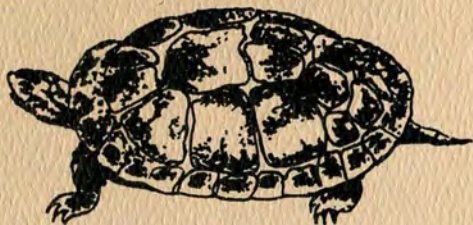
gull, herring
 hawk, Cooper's
 hawk, marsh
 hawk, red-tailed
 hawk, sharp-shinned
 heron, great blue
 hummingbird, ruby throated
 jay, blue
 junco, slate colored
 kingbird, eastern
 kinglet, golden crowned
 kinglet, ruby-crowned
 loon, common
 merganser, hooded
 merlin
 nuthatch, red breasted
 nuthatch, white breasted
 oriole, Baltimore
 osprey
 ovenbird
 owl, saw-whet
 owl, screech
 pewee, eastern wood
 pheasant, ring necked
 phoebe, eastern
 rail, Virginia
 redstart, American
 robin
 sparrow fox
 sparrow, field
 sparrow, Lincoln's
 sparrow, sharp tailed
 sparrow, song
 sparrow, swamp
 sparrow, vesper
 sparrow, white crested
 sparrow, white throated
 starling
 swallow, barn
 swallow, tree
 tanager, scarlet

thrasher, brown
 thrush, gray-cheeked
 thrush, hermit
 thrush, Swainson's
 thrush, wood
 titmouse, tufted
 towhee, rufous-sided
 veery
 vireo, Philadelphia
 vireo, red eyed
 vireo, solitary
 vireo, warbling
 warbler, bay breasted
 warbler, black and white
 warbler, black throated blue
 warbler, black throated green
 warbler, Blackburnian
 warbler, blackpoll
 warbler, Canada
 warbler, Connecticut
 warbler, golden wing
 warbler, magnolia
 warbler, mourning
 warbler, myrtle
 warbler, Nashville
 warbler, orange crested
 warbler, palm
 warbler, parula
 warbler, prairie
 warbler, prothonotary
 warbler, Tennessee
 warbler, Wilson's
 warbler, yellow
 warbler, yellow palm
 water thrush, northern
 waxwing, cedar
 woodcock, American
 woodpecker, downy
 woodpecker, hairy
 wren, house
 wren, long billed marsh
 wren, winter
 yellowthroat

Mammals

chipmunk
 deer (transient)
 fox, red
 mice (assorted)

mink
 muskrat
 opossum
 porcupine
 rabbit, cottontail
 raccoon
 skunk
 squirrel, gray
 woodchuck



Painted Turtle

Reptiles and Amphibians

frog, gray tree
 frog, green
 frog, leopard
 frog, pickerel
 frog, wood
 frog, bull
 peeper, spring
 red eft
 salamander, blue-spotted
 salamander, jefferson
 salamander, red-backed
 salamander, spotted
 snake, milk
 snake, norther water
 snake, red-bellied
 snake, ribbon
 snake, brown
 snake, common garter
 toad, American
 toad, Fowlers
 turtle, painted
 turtle, snapping
 turtle, stinkpot (in river)



Erie Canal at Vischer Ferry c. 1890

HISTORY

The main entrance to the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve at Riverview and Van Vranken Roads features an 1869 cast iron Whipple truss bridge (10). It was originally erected over the Erie Canal at Fultonville, Montgomery County, New York, and is typical of canal bridges that once crossed the canal throughout New York State. When the Erie Canal closed in about 1917, the bridge was moved to the Cayuduta Creek in Fonda where it served as a private farm bridge. In 1997, Union College under the leadership of Professor Frank Griggs dismantled the bridge, restored it, and in partnership with the Town of Clifton Park erected the bridge at its present location (1) where a similar bridge once stood.

The bridge was designed and built by Squire Whipple (1804-1887), a Union College graduate, class of 1830. He has been called "the father of iron bridges." Whipple patented his iron truss bridge in 1841, and it was to become a standard design for iron bridges built in the second half of the nineteenth century. The bridge stands on the original abutments of the original bridge at this site, made somewhat higher with stonework from the dismantled Rexford Aqueduct.

Remains of the Erie Canal, Lock 19, Clute's Dry Dock, and Fort's Ferry are all evident in the Preserve. The three different self-guiding tours which follow will assist in locating and interpreting these historic sites. All of the tours begin at the main parking area (1) at Riverview and Van Vranken Roads. Numbers in parentheses refer to the map on pages 10-11.

LOCK 19 TOUR - Distance: 1.4 miles Yellow Trail Markers

Proceed west along the Erie Canal towpath toward Vischer Ferry. The 10 mile stretch of canal that runs through the southern portion of the Town of Clifton Park was carried across the Mohawk River at Crescent and Rexford on giant aqueducts. This section of the canal which follows the earlier 1825 route was built in 1842 as a result of an enlargement program. The enlarged canal was seven feet deep and 70 feet wide at water surface versus the four feet deep by 40 foot wide measurements of the earlier canal.



Lock 19 at Vischer Ferry, c., 1885

The first home seen along the canal (2) was built by Daniel Fort sometime prior to 1832. The present garage once served as a canal store.

The next structure on the westerly walk (3) is the remains of a stone abutment to a farmer's bridge. These bridges were constructed to give farmers access to fields that the Erie Canal had severed. Prior the damming of the Mohawk River in 1907 to create the Barge Canal, the land to the south of the canal was fertile farm land. Farmers' bridges were numerous along the canal. The State, in an effort to save expense, constructed the bridges only high enough for a canal boat to pass under. If it had not been for the State's penny-pinching, the words of the song "Low Bridge Everybody Down" would not have been written. Remains of several other farmers' bridges are seen as one proceeds westerly along the towpath to Lock 19.

The second home encountered along the canal (4) is made of brick and bears the date of construction, 1832, on the lintel over the front door. It was built by John Clute and faces the canal rather than the road. The house probably served in some capacity to the canallers who passed by its front door, perhaps as an inn. One of the out buildings served as a store. There was also a station barn for mules across the canal opposite the house. In front of the house was a spring known as "Willow Spring" from the tree that grew nearby. Canallers replenished their water supply from this spring, before continuing on. The little settlement that grew up around this house and spring became known as "Willow Spring." The original stonework of the enlarged canal is plainly evident at this point.

Just west of a new red house on the north bank of the canal is the site of the Adam Van Vranken homestead (5). This home was probably built by the mid-18th century. When the canal came by its front door in 1822, it served as an inn for canallers. It was later abandoned and fell into ruin during this century. The ruins of the barn still stand along the canal. Adam Van Vranken inherited this eastern-most land of the original Van Vranken farm purchased in 1672 by his grandfather, Ryck Claese. The old Van Vranken cemetery is located on this property, but the stones were removed long ago.

The terminus of the tour is at Erie Canal Lock 19 (6). Lock 19, a double chamber lock, was constructed in 1842 to replace Lock 32, a single

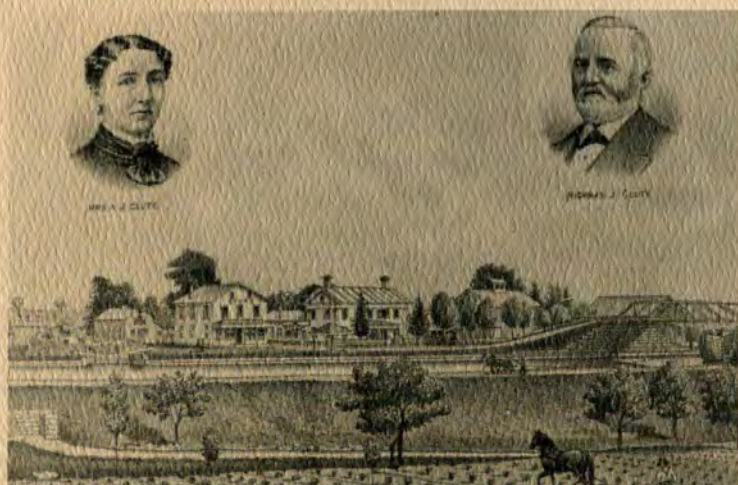
chamber lock built at this site in 1822. The stone work was quarried at Rotterdam junction. Lock 19 was one of 23 locks that lifted the Erie Canal boats from the boat basin in Albany some 216 feet to Schenectady. In 1885, the chamber on the berm side (opposite the towpath) was lengthened and the difference in stone work is evident. Thus, the chamber on the far side was easily converted to carry one or two canal boats. To carry two boats, the center set of wooden gates was left open. This type of lock configuration could accommodate boats to be locked through in opposite directions, or if need be, three in one direction at a time. On the high side of the canal above the lock, the stone reinforced berm is clearly seen. The sandy soil of Southern Saratoga County made reinforcement necessary. This area of the canal widens out to accommodate the frequent back log of boats waiting to be locked through. It was called the "wide water."

Of the 72 double locks used on the Erie Canal, Lock 19 is one of the best preserved. One can readily imagine the bustling activity that once surrounded this lock. The lock tender's house, the canal store, the fights to see who entered the lock first, and toots on canal horns signaling the lock tender to open the gates are all gone now. However, in 1875, an average of 95 boats a day entered Lock 19 during the 197 days the canal was open that year.

From the lock you may continue west out of the Preserve to Vischer Ferry, a distance of about one mile or return to the parking lot at the entrance by following the trail markers southeast along the river a distance of about 3 miles or by retracing your steps.

CLUTES DRY DOCK TOUR - Distance: .7 miles Red Trail Markers

Starting from the main parking area and following a trail eastwardly directly behind the main sign for the Preserve, one finds remains of the Erie Canal on both sides of the trail. On the left, or north as you proceed



Clute's Dry Dock, c. 1878

east, are the remains of the original 1822 canal which measured four feet deep by 40 feet wide at water surface. On the right, or south of the trail, which is actually the 1822 towpath, is the enlarged 1842 Erie Canal which measured seven feet deep by 70 feet wide at water surface. When the canal was enlarged, several sections were shortened, and at this location the old and the new exist side by side.

Heading east along the 1822 towpath will bring you to a dam (7) that was built in the 1950's to control the water in the ponds behind it. Crossing the dam you can continue east along the 1822 towpath to Clute's Dry Dock or you can follow the dam south a short distance and continue east along the 1842 towpath which will take you to an area on the canal opposite the Dry Dock. This is the only point these two trails join.

Proceeding eastward on the 1822 towpath, you soon find yourself on the berm side of the 1842 canal as the later canal again followed the course of the earlier one at this point.

The stone abutments of two farmers' bridges (3) are passed. These bridges allowed farmers access to the land divided by the canal. Some of the missing stonework from these abutments can be found in the foundations of area homes. When the old Erie closed in 1917, the stonework became fair game. These stones were originally quarried at Rotterdam junction, and the canal structures were so skillfully constructed that no mortar was needed to bind the stonework together.

After passing the second set of bridge abutments, several foundations can be seen to the left (8). This area which surrounds Clute's Dry Dock was once a thriving community consisting of stores and the homes of workers who worked on the canal and in the dry dock.

The terminus of this trail is the dry dock itself (9) where canal boats were built and repaired. The opening to the canal held a set of wooden gates which could be closed. Once these gates were secured, a gate in the near left corner of the dry dock allowed the water to drain into a conduit which went under the canal and out into the Mohawk River.

This dry dock was established about the time the Erie Canal opened in 1825. At that time it was called "Volvyder's Dry Dock" after the family that then owned it. It appears as such on an 1834 map of the canal. It was undoubtedly enlarged with the canal in 1842 and by 1852, Nicholas J. Clute took over the dry dock operation. He and his family built their home at this location as well as a store. Along with the existing farm houses, barns and schoolhouse, the settlement at the dry dock boasted a considerable population. It was abandoned around 1900 as traffic on the canal lessened, and the settlement completely vanished as the water level rose due to the damming of the Mohawk River for the Barge Canal. Two of the homes were moved back up on Riverview Road and still stand today. Only the fine stonework and foundation holes remain of a once proud settlement.

Today the dry dock serves as a canoe launch with access into both the old Erie Canal and into the Mohawk River (by heading east in the canal to Wagar's Pond). A parking lot off of Riverview Road is adjacent to the dry dock.

You can return to the parking lot (1) the way you came, or you can follow a path from the dry dock out to Riverview Road.



The north landing of Fort's Ferry, c. 1890. Ferry scow in foreground.

THE FORTS FERRY TOUR - Distance- 1.5 miles Orange Trail Markers

From the main parking lot (1), cross the canal over what used to be called the "public bridge" (10). This bridge was larger and more solidly constructed than the farmers' bridges that dotted the canal, as it carried a public road across the canal.

Proceed south along what was called the "Public Bridge Road." This is perhaps the oldest road in the Town of Clifton Park. It led from the early settlement at Forts Ferry (11) on the bank of the Mohawk River north to Ballston Spa.

This road eventually ends at the Mohawk River. At this site (11), Nicholas Fort began his rope ferry in 1728 to service the settlement that was developing in this area along the river. A foundation hole (8) to the west marks the site of the Fort homestead. There was a public house also located at this site sometime prior to the American Revolution.

Retracing your steps north along the road from the river, take the gravel road to the right that leads east. Along the river was the original 18th century settlement of Fort's Ferry, and the original road extended along the riverbank. Today this area is the source of water for much of Clifton Park and several wells can be seen. The lower part of the pump house erected to supply electricity for the wells serves as the Fort's Ferry Information Center. The Clifton Park Water Authority maintains the gravel road.

The Fort family may have lived on the north shore of the Mohawk at this point as early as 1684. By 1765, there were a dozen farm houses

located along the river at this point as indicated on a map of the Clifton Park Patent. The names of these early residents includes Van Vrankens, Bradts, Pearses, and Forts, mostly Dutch families from the south side of the Mohawk. Many of these early 18th century homesteads disappeared when the river was dammed for the Barge Canal. The water level rose making this area uninhabitable during high water. The last of these early homesteads, the Pearse House (12) was destroyed by fire set by vandals in 1972. The foundations and an outbuilding of this house survive amongst heavy brush along the river east of the easternmost camp. This settlement at Forts Ferry was the earliest settlement in the Town of Clifton Park.

The trail that heads east eventually joins with another trail that leads north from the river. Following this road will bring you out on a dam (7) built in the 1950's to control the water in the ponds behind it.

Just before coming out to Riverview Road, take the trail to the left heading west across a wooden foot bridge. This is the towpath for the original 1822 Erie Canal (on the right), which at this point exists side by side with the 1842 enlarged canal to the left or south of the 1822 towpath. This path will return you to the main parking lot (1).



Pearse-Painter House at Fort's Ferry built c. 1760, destroyed by vandals in 1972.

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A GUIDE TO THE NATURE AND HISTORIC SITES
WITHIN THE VISCHER FERRY
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