

## Croton Point Marian F. Graves 1957

Navish - Senasqua - Sarah's Point – Teller's Point - Croton Point. These are the names that tell the history of Croton Point, which in the past three hundred and fifty years has been the scene of a fortified Indian village. A home for the first white settlers in the town of Cortlandt, it played an important part in the Revolution, became known for superior grape, was the site of a prosperous brick making industry, and finally a place of quiet beauty. The river was designated by Westchester County as a Park, part of which is now used for a children's camp.

Before the coming of the white man, the Kitchawank Indians established a fortified village on Croton Neck, site of the present bungalow area, for the purpose of protecting their oyster beds in Haverstraw Bay and adjoining waters. It is believed to have been one of the best fortified spots along the river in 1609 when Henry Hudson explored this region. In 1924 when Westchester County took possession of the Point there were still evidences of the villages and the Indian burying ground.

At an earlier period (about 1682), the southern point and perhaps all of the area came into the possession of William and Sarah Teller. The Indians had called the point Navish and the flat meadows where the Children's Camp is now located Senasqua, meaning grass. After the transfer of the property, the southern tip came to be known as Sarah's Point and later maps show the whole section as Teller's Point.

The Tellers are believed to have been the first white settlers to have taken up residence in the Town of Cortlandt. One of their sons married Sophia Van Cortlandt sister of Stephanus, first Lord of the Manor.

### **Andre Captured**

During the Revolution, the Point remained in the hands of the Colonists most of the time. At the time of the capture of Major Andre, the ship, The Vulture, which was to take him down the river, was anchored off the point. Its hasty departure brought about by cannonading, forced Andre to change his plans of escape and led to his capture.

In 1804 the whole area consisting of some 250 acres was purchased by Robert Underhill, owner of the flour mills along the Croton River. The land was fertile and Mr. Underhill became a prosperous farmer. The story is told that during the war of 1812, he planted eighty acres of watermelon in order to supply the New York market which had been cut off from its normal supply in the south because of the British patrol. Another successful undertaking was the raising of castor beans. It

is also said that at one time the growth of mulberry trees was encouraged with the idea of promoting silk worm culture.

After the death of Robert Underhill, his two sons, Dr. Richard and William A. Underhill, divided the property and each developed a successful business. Dr. Richard, although trained as a doctor of medicine, gave up practice in New York to devote his time to agricultural pursuits. He became known as one of the leading agriculturalists of the country, and the producer of the famous Croton Point wine. In 1865, the Times described Croton Point wine as "decidedly the best and safest beverage that ladies can offer their callers on New Year's Day."

Dr. Underhill carried on numerous agricultural experiments and at one point developed a yellowish green grape which came to be known as the Croton Grape. In spite of the high quality of the fruit and its valued flavor for wine it did not become a popular grape because the vine was difficult to grow except in a certain type of sandy soil. The fruit was first exhibited by Stephen Underhill, nephew of Dr. Richard, in 1868.

### **34 Brick Yards**

William A. Underhill confined his energies to the northern section of the Point where a village grew up around his brick yards. The brick yards started about 1830 and were among the thirty-four brick yards along the Hudson in the Town of Cortlandt in the eighteenth century. Joining him in his business was his brother-in-law, Richard Talcott, a machinist and later his son-in-law and Richard Walker who assumed responsibility for the transportation of the bricks.

Advertising for the bricks stressed "their fine edge and durable qualities" and "extra large brick for the Cube Trade - hard, smooth and strong - produced in the steam brick works at Croton Point on the Hudson." Many of the bricks were marked with the makers initials W.A.U.

In the days when there was a village at Croton Point, access to the Point was over the hill along the north side of the Point. The bridge over the railroad was known to local residents as the Kissing Bridge. Most of the people living on the Point were associated with the brick industry; there was a store, a school, tavern, and other facilities for a small village. Maps of the area in 1880 show the existence of several streets, mostly in the area of the present parking lot.

About 1900 the Underhill holdings on Croton Point passed into other hands. The supply of clay was exhausted. The Village no longer prospered. During World War I it appeared that the Point would become the site of enormous factories. Fortunately, it finally became the property of Westchester County and its development as a public recreation area began in 1924.