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Articles & Stories

A Look-Out Falls in Ferncliff Forest

by **Sheila Buff**

Few places in the Hudson Valley are as entangled with local history yet as untouched in appearance as the 192-acre Ferncliff Forest Game Refuge and Forest Preserve in Rhinebeck. To the early colonists of the Rhinebeck area, the land that is now Ferncliff Forest was too remote, hilly, and heavily wooded to be settled, and it stayed largely untouched

until the early 1800s. Small farms eventually grew up on land that is now part of the forest. In the 1850s William Backhouse Astor, Jr., the grandson of John Jacob Astor (the richest man in America at the time and the fourth-richest American ever) bought up several of the farms on that part of the Forest and consolidated them into an estate called Ferncliff Farm. William Astor was a Montgomery through his mother, and had deep roots in the Dutch colonial families of the Rhinebeck area. (In the latter half of the 1800s William's wife, Caroline Schermerhorn Astor—better known as the Mrs. Astor—presided over the 400 top members of American society in New York and Newport.) Over the years, William added more acres to the Ferncliff estate, eventually acquiring holdings that spread east of River and Mt. Rutsen roads all the way to the Old Post Road and what is now Route 9.



Another part of the land that is now Ferncliff Forest was

owned by Thomas Suckley, known locally as the man who built Wilderstein, the Queen Anne style mansion on Morton Road that is now open to the public. In 1878, Suckley donated the farm on his property to the New York Methodist Conference as a retreat for retired clergy. The clergymen built cottages and a chapel and tried their hand at agriculture. They were notably unsuccessful as farmers, however, and by 1900, the colony was shut down.

In the meantime, William Backhouse Astor's son John Jacob Astor IV had decided to increase his family's holdings in the area; the 106 acres of the Methodist colony were sold to him in 1900 for \$5,500 and incorporated into Ferncliff Farm. The Methodist chapel continued in use as a Sunday school for a few years beginning in 1902, but the cottage homes were torn down. The chapel fell into disuse and was eventually demolished. When Jack Astor went down with the Titanic in 1912, Ferncliff Farm went to his son Vincent, who continued to expand the family holdings until, by 1940, the estate had grown to 2,800 acres.

Vincent Astor died in 1959, leaving Ferncliff Farm to his wife, Brooke (who is still very much alive). Mrs. Astor decided to break up the land, selling some of it and donating the rest. In 1963, Homer K. Staley, a local real estate broker who had spent some of his boyhood on the estate, asked Mrs. Astor to donate the 190-acre area known as Mt. Rutsen. She agreed, giving the land to the Rhinebeck Rotary for a forest preserve and game refuge that would remain forever wild. Homer K. Staley was named the Ferncliff's first Forest Ranger, a voluntary post he held for 30 years. In 1988, Ferncliff Forest was transferred from the Rotary, and became a nonprofit corporation funded entirely by donations.

Ferncliff Forest today remains one of the few areas of old-growth forest in the region that is open to the public. Because the woodlands have never been clear cut, the plant life is quite varied, with many outstanding examples of large deciduous trees and numerous wildflower species. It's an excellent spot for bird watching and nature study, especially in the spring. The forest is criss-crossed by a number of trails, including the newly renovated Homer K. Staley Nature Trail, refurbished in 2004 with new historical markers by Eagle Scout Jacob Alstadt. The East Tower Trail and West Tower Trail both lead to the highest point in the forest, about 350 feet above sea level. The lookout tower that once stood here was removed earlier this year (see the sidebar).

Ferncliff Forest is located between Mt. Rutsen and River roads in Rhinecliff. Parking pullouts are found on both sides of Mt. Rutsen Road near the intersection. The forest is open year-round, the trails are easy to moderate and can be covered in a few hours—making this a great place for hiking with kids. Overnight camping is allowed by permit.

The old stone observation tower that until recently stood on the high point of Ferncliff Forest, 350 feet above sea level, was used for National Geodetic Survey purposes. During World War II it was renovated and made into an observation tower used by the Civil Air Patrol to watch for enemy aircraft along the Hudson River. The CAP tower was an enclosed structure with telephone lines and facilities for full-time observation. After the war, the tower was no longer needed for military purposes and maintenance stopped. Rhinebeck Rotary renovated the tower again in the 1960s for recreational use. Because the tower was above the tree line, it provided excellent, unobstructed views out over the Hudson and the surrounding area. The tower was a very popular attraction at Ferncliff, but over the years it became so rickety that repairs were no longer possible. Ferncliff Forest has mounted a fund drive to build a replacement tower now that the old one has been torn down. To donate to the fund, send a check made out to Ferncliff Forest, Inc., to: Ferncliff Forest, P.O. Box 1, Rhinebeck, NY 12572. For more information, contact H. Knick Staley at (845) 876-3196.