

The History of the Flat Rock Brook Watershed

by Dustin Griffin

That 125 acres of woods, ponds, and meadows should survive within two miles of the George Washington Bridge, in one of the most densely populated and developed counties in the country, is cause for continual surprise and delight to the many visitors to Flat Rock Brook Nature Center. Those who walk the trails and listen to the birds in those wooded acres of course know, from the hum of not-so-distant traffic, that just beyond the leafy canopy lie three of New Jersey's busiest highways, the apartment towers of Fort Lee, and all of modern urban life that they represent. The Flat Rock woods in Englewood (Bergen County) seem a respite and a sanctuary from all that. But most visitors probably do not know that these 125 acres of the Flat Rock Brook watershed on the western slope of the Palisades were saved from developers only in the early 1970s. Fewer know that over the previous century the land was subject to a series of threats, any one of which might have meant that what eventually became a natural preserve would have been irrevocably lost.

The story of just what was saved is no simple fable of the preservation of a little piece of paradise in the midst of a fallen world, no wondrous tale of how a little piece of "virgin" forest was somehow saved in its "pristine" condition. Quite apart from the nature center building, access road, parking lot, gazebo, boardwalk, and trails, even casual observers recognize that a natural preserve, even if not manicured, is nonetheless very consciously managed, designed, and maintained for purposes of human enjoyment. Visitors who look more closely also see signs that the woods through which they walk were for nearly a century and a half made accessible for a variety of uses – residential, agricultural, recreational, industrial, even municipal (a trunk sewer line runs under the woods in the central Allison Park section). Some of those uses made more of an impact on the land than others. Some, it might be said, even added to the interest of the landscape and of its history. Ultimately, this is a story of the human uses of the Flat Rock Brook woods, as well as some unrealized proposed uses, from the arrival of the railroad in Englewood in 1859 to the establishment of the Flat Rock Brook Nature Center in 1972. Environmentalists will perhaps see in the story a reminder of the vulnerability of the natural world of trees, brook, and wildlife, and the importance of maintaining Flat Rock Brook as green space against threats and pressures yet unimagined. Students of local and environmental history can find in this microcosmic story a reflection of much larger forces, economic, demographic, technological, that transformed America from a wilderness to an agricultural and then to an increasingly urbanized landscape.

A few of Flat Rock Brook's visitors can remember first hand what the woods looked like before 1972. A handful can remember the woods from earlier years, going back to the 1930s. For the most part this is a story that has to be reconstructed from documentary sources – old maps, land sale records, old newspaper clippings – virtually buried in local archives, and from the distant memories of local residents.

The Palisade Forest

Until 1859, when the Northern Railroad was extended north to Englewood, the land that is now protected by Flat Rock Brook Nature Center was part of a vast hardwood forest that once blanketed the western slope of the Palisades for some twenty miles, from Weehawken up into New York State, and from the top of the Palisades down toward the Overpeck Creek in the valley below.¹ An 1882 history of Bergen County describes it as “one dense forest of magnificent trees, containing the finest specimens of oak and hickory to be found in the county.”² In addition to oak and hickory, chestnut was plentiful, along with red and yellow maple.³ Although fishing communities had sprung up at the foot of the Palisades in the early 19th century, there was very little human imprint on the clifftops, except for a road that led from Closter Dock landing up to the clifftop and then westward down into the Overpeck Creek valley. (It survives today as Closter Dock Road.) This is the route that Cornwallis took in 1776 when he tried to cut off Washington’s troops retreating from Fort Lee. And there may have been another rough military road than ran north-south, close to the cliff edge, from Sneden’s Landing as far south as Fort Lee. The present-day road from the clifftop to the Englewood boat basin was not built until 1860, when the proprietors of the newly-opened Palisade Mountain House grand hotel carved a steep access road down to a pre-existing dock in order to make their new resort accessible by steamboat to New Yorkers.⁴

Down in the valley were a few farms laid out by the European settlers, first Dutch and later English, who came to the fertile valley in the 17th century. Farms were typically composed of long strips of land, 500 feet wide and more, extending from the Overpeck Creek (or even from the Hackensack River) eastward all the way to the Hudson River so that they included some bottom land for hay and garden, some space higher up for house and apple orchard, and a woodlot higher still. The four surviving sandstone houses along Grand Avenue in Englewood are typical of the early farmhouses, though, built about 1800, they were not the first houses on the sites. The families who built and lived in three of them, the DeMotts, the Westervelts, and the Lydeckers, were among the first recorded owners of the land that is now Flat Rock Brook Nature Center. Each of the farms would have had a path or rough farm road leading uphill into the hardwood forest, in which the farmer would cut trees as needed for constructing farm buildings and for firewood. Horses dragged the wood down to the farmyard for rough trimming, or to one of the several water-driven sawmills located on the dammed tributaries of the Overpeck for sawing into planks.⁵

¹Flat Rock Brook flows into Overpeck Creek, which in turn flows into the Hackensack River.

²W. W. Clayton, History of Bergen and Passaic Counties (1882), p. 259.

³), p. 25, quoting from an unnamed source.

⁴An 1861 map of the area (G. M. Hopkins, Map of the Counties of Bergen and Passaic, N. J.) shows that settlements (including Coytesville) had grown up near Fort Lee, but that from Coytesville north to Huyler’s Landing in Closter there is nothing but Palisade Avenue.

⁵I borrow several sentences from my “A Short History of Englewood’s Trees,” in Englewood: Historical Sketches, ed. Dustin Griffin and Will Lee (2003).

With the arrival in Englewood of the Northern Railroad, pushing its way north toward Piermont, New York, everything changed. The main consequence of the railroad's arrival was rapid residential development. Now that the Northern Valley was accessible by rail, people might well build houses in "the country" and still manage not only to enjoy modern manufactured and consumer goods but also to commute to work "in town," that is, in downtown New York City, only an hour's commute by train and ferry.⁶ The immediate consequence, for the land that became Flat Rock Brook, was clear-cutting: railroad tracks needed thousands of eight-foot ties per mile, and locomotives still burned wood for fuel to power the boiler. The nearest source of good hardwood was the Palisades Forest, less than a mile uphill from the railroad line. The railroad owners did not need to acquire wooded land themselves: they only needed to pay the farmers for the right to cut and removed the wood. What is now Palisade Avenue, which takes the shortest path from the Overpeck Creek to the top of the Palisades, was laid out originally as a logging road, so that logs, cut on the Palisades, could be dragged downhill by teams of oxen to a steam-driven sawmill set up beside the railroad tracks. (The road was not paved until 1913). Another logging road, later called Palisades Road, was cut through the Flat Rock woods. Old maps show that it ran from what would become the railroad station at "Walton" (in what is now the industrial zone south of Route 4) up to what became Walton Street, and then at what is now Jones Road headed uphill in two S-curves, close to the nature center building, and then northeast to the top of the Palisades.⁷ Perhaps trees cut in the lower Flat Rock woods were dragged down to the Walton Station; perhaps the trees from the higher ground were dragged east to a sawmill in what is now Englewood Cliffs. Wunsch's sawmill, first set up on Van Nostrand Avenue in 1863, specialized in keels for ships, shoring, and railroad ties.⁸

By 1870 the clear-cutting stopped, in part because all the big trees had been cut, in part because railroad engineers found that, with the cost of procuring a supply of wood increasing, it was cheaper and more efficient to burn coal. Most of the logged land was no doubt left a denuded hillside. Late-19th-century logging was a brutal business of extracting logs and moving on, as old photographs of the woods in the northern and western U. S. suggest. The farmers who still owned the land that is now Flat Rock Brook – the Van Nostrands, the Demarests, the Van Brunts, along with the Westervelts and the Lydeckers – would probably not have thought logged-over land had much use or value, and would have been content to let it slowly restore itself. In time the land did indeed begin to restore itself, and according to local naturalists even the largest trees at Flat Rock Brook – oaks and tulip trees – are second-growth.

⁶According to the 1859 railroad timetable (reproduced in Adaline Sterling, The Book of Englewood [1022], p. 44), the 8:16 am train arrived at the foot of Cortland Street in lower Manhattan at 9:02. The evening train home took a little longer: lv. 5:50, ar. 6:54.

⁷See Walker's 1876 Atlas of Bergen County, New Jersey. Property deeds as early as 1860 and as late as 1887 (L5-608, C12-199) refer to "Palisades Road" as a legal boundary.

⁸Greco, The Story of Englewood Cliffs, p. 187. The sawmill, later relocated to Bayview Avenue, operated into the 1960s. Greco reports (p. 24) also reports that trees on the clifftop were cut for firewood and thrown down to the riverbank from "High Tom," a prominent rock just north of Palisade Avenue, for shipment downriver to Manhattan.

Early Landowners

But at least one man in 1859 thought that more might be made of the western slope of the Palisades. From 1859 to 1869 T. Elwood Walter, president of a New York insurance company, gradually acquired land, until he owned a 28-acre tract extending from Jones Road to present-day Summit Street, in what was then called the village of Floraville.⁹ Walter bought land from Joseph Coyte in 1859, 1862, and 1865, and from Francia DeMott in 1869. Copies of the deeds are found in the deed vault in the county courthouse in Hackensack (Book L5-452, S5-452, B6-563, N7-229). Coyte had bought the land from Garret Lydecker in 1852. By 1867 he had built a house at the intersection of Jones Road and Walton Street and another house about a quarter-mile east, connected to the first by a long driveway or road.¹⁰ The house on Jones Road, possibly a gate house though L-shaped and fairly large, survived until at least 1912,¹¹ but no trace of it can now be found in the thick second-growth woods near the banks of a tributary that winds its way through flat ground into Flat Rock Brook from the southeast. The more easterly house, also L-shaped, and still standing in 1891, seems to have disappeared by 1912, probably destroyed by fire. It was very likely built of wood, and was a long way from Englewood's firehouse, and in any case was almost certainly not hooked up to city water lines. But this house has left a trace. If you walk around the quarry pond up through the "Blackberry Meadow" you will see on your right, just after the trail swings right but before it enters the woods, remnants of an old cellar hole and three walls of a foundation.¹² There appear to be suggestions of the old driveway that headed down toward Jones Road.

⁹Walter was president of the New York Marine Insurance Company, and president of the Board of Marine Underwriters. He was perhaps attracted to Englewood by Daniel Drake Smith, President of the Commercial Marine Insurance Company from 1852 to 1879, and Walter's predecessor as president of the Board of Marine Underwriters. Smith arrived in Englewood in 1863. T. H. Lyell, Walter's predecessor as president of the New York Marine Insurance Company, was another early settler of Englewood (W. W. Clayton, History of Bergen County, N. J. [1882], p. 261).

¹⁰The buildings appear on an 1867 map, From Palisades to Paterson, as well as the 1876 Walker Atlas.

¹¹The 1902 E. Robinson Map of Bergen County, New Jersey shows a house, very probably Walter's, just southeast of the intersection of Walton and Jones, as does the Bromley map of 1912.

¹²A few artifacts – including a green salt cellar that I found in preliminary "excavations" in the summer of 2001 – establish the fact of former human habitation. Peter Brooks, the first director of Flat Rock Brook Nature Center, who knew of the foundation, thought the structure was originally a farmhouse (Walkbook: Flat Rock Brook [n.d.], p. 3), but that seems very unlikely. The foundation ruins that survive today may represent only a part of what were once larger foundations.

It is unclear how long Walter or his family lived there. By 1886 Walter himself had died, and his family do not appear in the Englewood city directories of 1894, 1900, or 1903. In 1905 his heirs sold the property to a real estate speculator.¹³ By 1912 the land belonged to another speculator, J. Fletcher Burdett, who frequently bought and sold property in the area. There is no evidence that Burdett ever built a new house on the property, but the land might well have attracted potential buyers. Already by 1912 real estate companies (including the Englewood Realty Company and the Edgewater Realty Company, which had a sales office on Broad Avenue, just north of Walton St.) were buying property on the west side of Jones Road, and a substantial cluster of large houses had been built at “South Hills,” a development bordered by Fountain Road and Hutchinson Road, among them a palatial estate called “Greystone,” built about 1900.¹⁴ One of the attractions of the neighborhood was the Englewood Golf Club, established in 1896 on Jones Road, about eight hundred feet south of the Walters driveway, on property acquired from the estate of William Walter Phelps. A prominent golf course and host to major tournaments through the 1920s, it was to operate until the 1970s.

Meanwhile, at the northern end of the Flat Rock Brook property, another Englewood landowner began developing the commercial possibilities of the well-watered hillside. At some point prior to 1876 and probably soon after 1859 Englewood builder James Vanderbeck, descendant of an old Bergen County Dutch family,¹⁵ bought one of the old Lydecker farms. The land lay on either side of East Linden Avenue and extended from the Northern Railroad eastward to the Hudson River. Vanderbeck lived further west on Linden Avenue, just east of Dwight Place, and appears to have built houses on adjacent lots for three sons.¹⁶ Over time he sold off many parcels. Vanderbeck died at some point prior to 1891, but in that year his estate still owned a 77-acre piece that included what is now known as “Macfadden’s Pond.” The pond is indicated on the 1876 map, and on an 1886 map it is called “Vanderbeck’s Mill Pond,” which strongly suggests that the pond water, dammed as it falls into the gorge on its western side, was used to power a sawmill.¹⁷ It is likely that Vanderbeck cut and milled his own lumber at the mill pond. Whether he built the mill or bought it from the loggers who had supplied the railroad in the 1850s and 1860s is not known, but in either case it would have been relatively easy to haul ties

¹³Charles A. Williams (Book 615, p. 242), who bought and sold property in the area for several decades.

¹⁴It once belonged to Emil Kluge, who bought the house in 1912 and owned it through the 1920s.

¹⁵He was one of the first elders of the new Presbyterian Church in 1860, and a member of its building committee. His family moved to Englewood in 1802 and operated the Liberty Pole Tavern. He built a building on the corner of Palisade Avenue and Dean St. in 1871, and one of his sons seems to have inherited his contracting business. John B. Vanderbeck [sic] is listed in the 1894 city directory as a contractor.

¹⁶The 1876 Walker Atlas shows houses owned by Garret Vanderbeck, John B. Vanderbeck, Court Vanderbeck, and James Vanderbeck. The 1891 map indicates that the last of these was now owned by Mrs. James Vanderbeck.

¹⁷James Vanderbeck is listed in the 1882 Englewood Assessor’s Book as owner of the mill.

or milled planks out by wagon.¹⁸ Water from the millpond was also piped 3500 feet east to supply the famous Palisade Mountain House hotel on the edge of the Palisades, from 1860 until it burned in 1884.¹⁹ As late as 1917 the pond was serving as a reservoir.²⁰ In 1902 Vanderbeck's sons, who had inherited the property, sold it to the Englewood Realty Company, which was acquiring land in this area too.²¹ The pond appears as a "millpond" on no maps after 1891, suggesting that after that date the mill was no longer in operation.

The Palisade Railroad

As early as 1880 speculators who studied maps of the area realized that although property in the Overpeck Valley had been made more valuable by the arrival of the Northern Railroad, land on the top of the Palisades was relatively cheap – because it was less accessible. In the days before the automobile and bus, it would not have been easy to get from the railroad station in Englewood up to Sylvan Avenue in what is now Englewood Cliffs.²² But if the cliff top had its own rail line, then a lot of property on top of the Palisades would suddenly be a lot more valuable. By 1882 it was reported that "a Palisades Railroad is in contemplation."²³ The rail line was not merely a pipe dream. The Palisades Railway Company was incorporated in November 1885, for the purpose of building a narrow-gauge rail line on the top of the Palisades from Jersey City north to Piermont, N.Y. The line was to run parallel to the Northern Railroad but one to two miles to the east, so as to "open up suburban settlements" – it was apparently assumed that commuters would want to be within walking distance of the station. The company surveyed the land and announced that construction would commence in the spring of 1886.²⁴ Starting in Jersey City, the line was to run north to Coytesville and then was to veer northwest, crossing what is now Summit Street just north of Middlesex Avenue, before turning north again and running between Summit Street and the brook, in what is now the northern section of Flat Rock Brook Nature Center, to Palisade Avenue and then further north.

¹⁸Access to the mill would have been by South Woodland Street (which on the 1876 map is shown extending south of Linden), or more likely by Linden (which on the same map is shown extending east of South Woodland quite close to the pond).

¹⁹According to Henry Hyde, police chief of Englewood Cliffs from 1950 into the 1960s. His father, Michael Hyde, sold milk to the Mountain House. Quoted in Greco, The Story of Englewood Cliffs, p. 28.

²⁰Property deeds in 1908 and 1917 (Bk. 681-650 and Bk. 963-555) refer to the "reservoir" and to "water pipes."

²¹Bk. 546-80.

²²Until the Palisade Mountain Hotel burned in 1884, a stagecoach traveled from Liberty Pole uphill to the hotel (Greco, The Story of Englewood Cliffs, p. 27).

²³History of Bergen and Passaic Counties (1882), p. 258.

²⁴Railway Age, vol. 10 (Nov. 26, 1885), p. 748; Railroad Gazette, vol. 17 (Nov. 20, 1885).

But the project was put on hold : as late as 1891, when a map shows the rail line as the “Proposed Palisade R. R.” it had obviously not yet been built. The cause of the delay was apparently that the organizers had encountered difficulties in acquiring right of way. Two years later, in January 1893, the project was revived. This time it lined up a number of new supporters, not surprisingly including two leading local men, William Walter Phelps and William O. Allison, who owned land in Flat Rock Brook through which the line would have to pass, land that stood to appreciate in value if the rail line were to be built.²⁵ By June 1893 three hundred men were reported to be at work constructing a double track from Weehawken north to Fort Lee; a single track was planned from Fort Lee through Englewood. The line quickly reached Coytesville, but it was ominously noted that “right of way has not been secured north of Englewood.”²⁶ Work apparently ceased, and by the spring of 1894 the Palisade Railway was in receivership, in order to “facilitate reorganization.”²⁷ And in that year a rival company, the Bergen County Traction Company, built a trolley line from Edgewater up to “Palisades Junction” at the top of the Palisades, thence west into Palisades Park, then north along Broad Avenue to Leonia and into Englewood. (Broad Avenue at that time extended only as far north as present-day Van Nostrand Avenue, where the trolley tracks turned left and continued west to Dean Street, then right and north into downtown Englewood.)

Need for a line through Flat Rock Brook appears to have declined, since a trolley link to New York City was now a good deal closer to anybody who might buy property on the part of Englewood’s East Hill that lay south of Palisade Avenue. But the re-organized Palisade Railway company did not give up. In 1895 it bought a 66-foot-wide swath of right of way from several property owners.²⁸ The line through Englewood, however, was fated never to be built. In 1899 the company became part of the Jersey City, Hoboken, and Paterson Street Railway Company, which in 1907 was renamed the Public Service Railway. Finally, in 1926, the project was abandoned, and the narrow strip of right of way was sold to the Englewood Stone Company.

Palisade National Military Park

When the Palisade Railroad project was derailed in 1893, another intriguing idea for developing the Palisades emerged. It was driven more than anything else by the desire to prevent the destructive work of quarrymen, who were busily blasting away the face of the cliffs. Large-scale quarries were first established early in the 19th century to extract basaltic “trap rock” for use in making Belgian paving blocks for the streets of Manhattan, as residential and commercial

²⁵Railway Age, vol. 18 (January 20, 1893), p. 57.

²⁶Railway Age, vol. 21 (June 9, 1893), p. 464.

²⁷Railway Gazette, vol. 26 (April 3, 1897), p. 278.

²⁸On January 9, 1895 it bought land from Minnie Corring (Book 393, p. 435) and on February 12, 1895 from the Alpine Land Company (Book 413, p. 547).

construction expanded northwards. But by the 1860s demand for cut stone had declined, and the quarries were quiet for a while. In the 1890s new technology made it possible to mine economically, and new demand arose for crushed rock to be used as ballast beneath railroad tracks and substrate under macadam roads. As the blasting continues, notable features of the cliffs were disappearing, and voices were raised that something had to be done to “save the Palisades.” Even the state legislatures of New York and New Jersey were aroused. They came up with what they thought was an ingenious solution: get the federal government to buy the Palisades, not just the shoreline but the cliff top too.

In March 1895 a bistate commission was established to persuade Congress to acquire the cliffs and set them apart “as a reservation or for the purposes of fortification.” The vagueness of the language suggests that the commission had not yet thoroughly investigated the matter, or had not reached a consensus. One idea being considered was that artillery might be installed on the cliff top to repel an enemy attempting to invade by sailing up the Hudson; another was that a “military post” was just what was needed, a place for troops to train, with barracks and parade grounds. A third idea was to create a great public park. One proposal called for acquiring some 12,000 acres, extending twelve miles north from Fort Lee and about a mile inland from the Hudson. That would have reached as far west as Macfadden’s Pond in the Flat Rock Brook woods.²⁹ The New York Times became an active supporter of saving the Palisades and unabashedly promoted the project in its news stories. At one point in early October 1895 it ran six stories on the topic in seven days. It saw three kinds of benefits – “the preservation of forests and striking natural features,” “pleasure grounds” for the benefit of three million people in the region, and the “military protection” of those same people. The land on top of the Palisades, proponents declared after a tour, was virtually empty – nothing but “swamp and rattlesnakes and a dozen denizens on top of her ten miles of cliffs.” The cost of acquiring twelve thousand acres was estimated at \$5 million.

Of course there were critics. Why should the federal government acquire property for military purposes when it already owned a lot of acreage around New York Harbor? Wasn’t this just going to benefit the people of Bergen County? Wasn’t it, some said, of benefit primarily not to New Jerseyans but to New Yorkers, whose view was now spoiled when they looked across the river at the quarries?³⁰ By the fall of 1895 proposals were being scaled back: one new idea was to acquire only the shoreline – eight hundred acres at a cost of \$300,000 – and to build a scenic road from Fort Lee to the New York state line. In December a bill, prepared by the bistate commission, was introduced in Congress by Rep. B. L. Fairchild of New York. It called for the creation at a projected cost of \$500,000 a “Palisade National Military Park” on the cliff top, to run the length of the Palisades but to extend no further west than Hudson Terrace and Sylvan Avenue. The Flat Rock Brook woods had already dropped out of the proposed park. Soon enough critics had noted that it might be difficult to drill troops on a military reservation only nine hundred feet wide. The War Department opposed the bill. Not surprisingly, owners of large

²⁹Another proposal suggested only 1500 feet, and yet another a mile and a quarter.

³⁰One of the avid editorial proponents of the project was in fact the Yonkers Statesman, whose articles were reprinted in the Times. Yonkers is just across the Hudson from the Palisades quarries.

estates on the cliff top opposed it, and preferred the plan for a scenic road below the cliffs. Testimony was heard that even a scaled-down plan would cost not \$500,000 but \$4 million. The chairs of the committees considering the bill in the House and Senate did not support it, and never reported the bills out for a floor vote.³¹ It was probably clear to most contemporaries that the national military park was a pipe dream. It was even clear to the New York Times that if the Palisades were to be saved, the federal government was not going to do it.

The Quarry

In 1900 the quarrying of the Palisades cliffs finally ceased, after a long campaign in which the Federation of New Jersey Women's Clubs, meeting in Englewood in 1897, played an important part in persuading the states of New Jersey and New York to form an Interstate Park Commission with the authority and the money to acquire the quarries on the shoreline and land on the clifftops.³² But demand for crushed stone did not cease with the closing of those quarries and other supplies would have to be found. In Flat Rock Brook was another source of the same rock, on land owned by M. E. Driscoll, who had bought a tract of land from the Phelps estate. Spectacular evidence survives today in the form of the Flat Rock Brook quarry cliffs – some seventy feet high – of the quarrying operation carried on from about 1900 to 1925 at what was the eastern end of Van Nostrand Avenue. Those cliffs, one of the most scenic features of the nature preserve, are manmade. What was once a steep wooded hillside sloping west and south was gradually cut away to expose the vertical diabase rock cliffs and to leave at their foot a flat quarry basin, where the uncovered subsoil, once deep underground, was nearly impermeable. It seems likely that the rock was initially uncovered by erosion after the steep hillside was denuded of its trees, and that, before the quarry was established, travelers along the old logging road spotted the exposed rock and saw commercial opportunities.

Exactly when quarrying began on Driscoll's land is not certain. The quarry first appears on local maps in 1912. It may have begun as early as 1903, when the Englewood Crushed Stone Company was already in operation. And it was no later than 1908, when the Prentice Company of Englewood (which may have taken over Englewood Crushed Stone) was operating a quarry with an address on Jones Road and offering for sale "broken stone for macadam and concrete work and building stone." The company, owned by the Prentice family, several of whose members lived on Linden Avenue, was in business by 1903, selling coal and wood along with hay, straw, and oats from its yard opposite the railroad station in downtown Englewood.³³ By 1924 the Prentice Company had been renamed the Englewood Coal and Lumber Company, which suggests that by this time it had dropped out of the crushed-stone business. And in 1924

³¹I have reconstructed the story from contemporary reports in the New York Times, quoting from articles in the following issues: July 29, 1895; August 27, 1895; September 29, 1895; October 9, 1895; December 21, 1895; February 3, 1896; March 29, 1896; and March 30, 1896.

³²The story, often told, is well summarized in John Serrao, The Wild Palisades of the Hudson (1986) and Robert Binnewies, Palisades: 100,000 Acres in 100 Years (2001).

³³A photograph of the Prentice yard appears in Englewood and Englewood Cliffs, compiled by Bobbie Bouton-Goldberg and Irmari Nacht (1998), p. 83.

Driscoll sold the land to another company, the Englewood Stone Company, with offices at 25 Palisade Avenue,³⁴ which seems to have continued the quarrying operation for a couple of years. Apart from the quarry cliffs themselves, very little remains of these businesses. The stonecrusher and other machinery are gone. A few ruins of low stone buildings below the nature center building survive.³⁵ A couple of sections of railroad track found on the site some ten years ago were probably used to transport the stone from the quarry face to the point where it was loaded into horse-drawn wagons and later gasoline-powered trucks.

In 1926 Englewood Stone bought other property to the east of the quarry.³⁶ In that year, however, something must have changed the company's views about the business, for the quarry was closed, the company dissolved, and the land sold to a real estate development company.³⁷

Woodland Park Cemetery

After the first waves of enthusiasm for a railroad through the Flat Rock Brook woods subsided, another group of speculators expressed interest in developing the property – this time the idea was to lay out a 125-acre cemetery. The proposal produced a local storm of controversy when the news first broke in December 1907. Why, it was asked by critics, did Englewood need another cemetery? Was there no more room in local cemeteries, or was somebody trying to make a fast buck?³⁸

Brookside, Englewood's first cemetery, was laid out in 1876 on land along Engle Street thought unbuildable, and expanded to its present size in 1880. Another small cemetery, Woodland Cemetery (about two acres), was established before 1860 in what is now Englewood Cliffs, just a hundred yards or so east of the nature center's eastern boundary.³⁹ It was apparently

³⁴According to Richmond's Englewood Directory (1926-27), the Englewood Stone Company had been in business at least since 1922.

³⁵Englewood tax records show that in 1917 the Prentice Company paid taxes for \$1000 of personal property at the quarry, suggesting that by then the operation was rather modest in size.

³⁶From W. J. Wunsch (who ran a lumber yard in Englewood Cliffs) on September 22 (Bk. 1443, p. 299) and from Public Service Railway Co. on December 29 (Bk. 1464, p. 51).

³⁷The Irving-Jones-Sylvan Company (a name based on three local streets, suggesting the area in which it planned to operate).

³⁸Sterling, The Book of Englewood (1922), p. 247.

³⁹The cemetery appears on the 1876 Walker map, and is mentioned in a property deed from 1860 (Bk. G4, p. 187). Long neglected, the cemetery is still to be found at the dead-end of Hickory Street in Englewood Cliffs. The oldest gravestones date from the 1880s, the most recent from the 1970s. Some of the ground is still unused.

laid out by Joseph Coyte to serve the residents of the small community of Coytesville that he founded and developed. On December 3, 1907 the Woodland Cemetery Association applied to the Englewood Common Council for permission to enlarge the grounds. The enlarged cemetery was to include the old, and to extend south to Myrtle Avenue, north approximately to today's Van Nostrand Avenue, and west as far as Jones Road, comprising some 85 acres in Englewood (including a large piece of today's nature preserve), 25 acres in Englewood Cliffs, and 16 acres in Fort Lee.⁴⁰ The proponents produced a prospectus stating that "the beautiful stretch of country and lovely hills will become dotted with 15 to 20 miles of gently winding roads, and peaceful paths will wander amid flowering shrubs and trees." Woodland Park (the proposed name) would be, they claimed, "the most beautiful cemetery in the state." A broad 3/4-mile-long road was to be constructed, and the whole would be surrounded by an iron and stone fence. No healthy trees would have to be cut down.⁴¹

The incorporators included several men from Englewood, among them Porter Fitch, who had just been elected councilman for the Third Ward (apparently included in the group to secure local political support), and state senator E. W. Wakelee. It was reported that they had also tried to get Walter Westervelt, another Englewood civic leader, to serve as their chair. But Westervelt, just defeated by a narrow margin in the race for councilman-at-large, later claimed that he "never had any interest in the Matter."⁴²

The Englewood Press was instantly suspicious. In an editorial on December 17 it asserted that the Woodland Cemetery Association had cheaply bought "isolated, deserted property for which there is no demand" and expected to reap "fabulous dividends." On December 14 it declared that the land was utterly unsuited to the proposed purpose: there are "only two inches of earth on most of the proposed cemetery," the newspaper charged, "and the Association "would have to blast to sink a corpse." At a public hearing on December 17th seventy angry property owners from the Second Ward, including residents of South Hills and members of the Englewood Golf Club, turned up to oppose what they called a land "grab" by an "anonymous supulchre syndicate." Their spokesman argued that the cemetery would prevent "some of the most healthful sites in the city" from being developed for residential purposes"; that the cemetery would be used "largely by nonResidents" (i.e., New Yorkers); that it would cause a "constant procession of funerals"; that it would "pollute the Drainage and affect the ice in Crystal Lake" (a pond downstream on Flat Rock Brook, then used for commercial ice-cutting); that it would remove a large tract of land from the tax rolls; and finally that it would decrease the value of surrounding property. Opponents scorned the proponents' prospectus, whose inspirational language was "such as would almost induce the reader to lie down and die for the distinction of becoming a pioneer in the new burying ground." Other arguments against the proposal came from the Nordhoff Improvement Association, which claimed that the city was already "amply provided with Burial Grounds" and would be threatened with "Places of refreshment with liquor

⁴⁰Minutes of the Englewood Common Council, December 3, 1907; Englewood Press, Dec. 7, 1907.

⁴¹Englewood Press, Dec. 14, 1907.

⁴²Minutes of the Englewood Common Council, December 17, 1907.

Licensed Necessitated by funeral parties and Visitors.” Petitions signed by local residents were presented; even Dwight Morrow (a resident of Englewood and by then already a rising young New York City law partner) rose to object to the proposal.⁴³

After hearing such testimony the Common Council refused the application and appointed two of its members to present arguments against the proposal to the New Jersey Board of Health, should the applicants ask the state board to override the Council’s vote. That effectively ended the project. On January 27, 1908, Council minutes noted that no appeal had been filed with the state Board of Health, and that the time allowed for such filings had elapsed. Once again the Flat Rock Brook woods were spared from development.

The Paterno Construction Company

Twenty years later the speculators were back, this time in the form of one of the biggest New York City real estate developers of the early twentieth century. By the 1920s Charles V. Paterno was known as a “veteran New York builder,” even as “one of the best know apartment builders in the world.”⁴⁴ In the 1890s he had constructed apartment buildings on Morningside Heights; later he had built the Hudson View Apartments on Washington Heights, and 270 Park Avenue, the last described as one of the world’s largest apartment buildings. Having helped build on Washington Heights (by the mid-1920s fully developed), Paterno knew that the new bridge over the Hudson River (what would be the George Washington Bridge), about to begin construction, would open up the Palisades for comparable development. In 1926 he announced plans to build an “Apartment House City” on land just south of Palisade Avenue in Englewood Cliffs.⁴⁵ In January 1927 the New York Times reported Paterno’s plan to build a ninety-story apartment building – the world’s highest – atop the Palisades on the former Dana estate just north of Palisade Avenue in Englewood Cliffs, as part of a complex that would house 15,000 residents.⁴⁶

Large apartment buildings on the Palisades were clearly Paterno’s primary interest in the late 1920s. But he understood that stimulating economic activity, including both residential housing and commercial building, would help make his apartment projects viable by attracting new residents to the area.⁴⁷ Accordingly, he began accumulating property in the Flat Rock Brook woods in 1926, through his Bridge Plaza Realty Company, for subsequent development and

⁴³Minutes of the Englewood Common Council, December 17, 1907.

⁴⁴New York Times, January 16, 1927; New York American, July 25, 1926.

⁴⁵New York American, July 25, 1926.

⁴⁶New York Times, January 16, 1927.

⁴⁷His “policy,” the Times reported, was to encourage “realty activity [in Englewood] so that the expected increase in population will enable him to carry out his proposed apartment house plans” (Sept. 18, 1927).

resale.⁴⁸ He moved fast, drawing up a formal subdivision plan in March for a tract on either side of Van Nostrand Avenue in Englewood and Englewood Cliffs, through which he proposed to build a grid of roads, to be divided into 495 lots each twenty feet wide, for mixed residential and commercial usage.⁴⁹ Minimum frontage required by Paterno to build a house was to be sixty feet – buyers were expected to buy three, four, or five contiguous lots. To make the deal more attractive to the town, Paterno agreed to sell two blocks of land, including the site of the old quarry, to the city of Englewood for the purpose of building a fire house, a public school, a playground, and a public park, infrastructure that would be needed to accommodate the new residents.⁵⁰ The plan was quickly approved by Englewood Cliffs on March 27. On May 3 the Englewood Common Council also approved Paterno’s application, and by May 11 he began auctioning off the building lots under a large tent erected at the corner of Sylvan and Van Nostrand Avenues in Englewood Cliffs, with a giant hot-air balloon flying overhead to attract attention. His advertisement assured buyers that especially after the new bridge opened and after the Paterno apartment projects in Englewood Cliffs were built, real estate values would “JUMP.” Van Nostrand Avenue, he predicted, would in a few years “become a thoroughfare of greater importance than Palisade Avenue.” And the “vast amount of new population, new home builders, new storekeepers and merchants with the consequent buying, selling, and trading in real estate, should make the man regret who did not seize an opportunity, such as this Auction Sale presents.”⁵¹ His sales pitch seems aimed not at prospective residents but at speculators who stood to make a killing by reselling the lots in a few years.

The lots began to sell, but not like hotcakes. Additional auctions were held on May 28, May 30, June 4, and June 9. Although some of the lots sold for as much as \$1300, many went for “a few hundred dollars” (New York Times, June 7, 1927). Still, not all the lots were sold, and the sale resumed on September 17 and 24,⁵² when the remaining lots were finally sold. Paterno’s construction crews bulldozed a grid pattern of streets – three east-west and four north-south – through the Flat Rock woods, from Jones Road up to Summit Street. Then Paterno moved on, resuming his focus on apartment buildings. On May 5, 1929, he filed plans to build another \$15 million complex of six-to-fifteen story apartment buildings in Englewood Cliffs, with two thousand units.

⁴⁸He was still acquiring property as late as January 1927, when he bought land on which the quarry sat (Bk. 1468, p. 207).

⁴⁹The “Map of Property of Paterno Construction Company,” dated March 1927, was filed in the Bergen County Clerk’s Office on May 6, 1927, and labeled Map No. 2259. A copy of the map is in the McKenna Papers.

⁵⁰The sales took place on April 29 (#1487-577 and 1487-578). The firehouse was to be located on present-day Eton Avenue (later developed residentially), the school, playground, and park in and around the quarry.

⁵¹New York Times, January 16, 1927.

⁵²New York Times, September 18, 1927.

Less than six months after that, in October 1929, the stock market crashed, the national economy began contracting, and the local real estate market collapsed. None of Paterno's apartment projects in Englewood Cliffs would be built. None of the investors who bought lots in Paterno's Englewood project would ever build on them. The City of Englewood never built the new firehouse or public school, playground or public park. Beginning in 1932 the city seized many of the lots for nonpayment of property taxes.⁵³ The remainder constituted a patchwork of sixty-nine building lots in the hands of forty-nine largely absentee owners. The land was now crisscrossed by unpaved rough dirt roads – Middlesex, Van Nostrand, and Irving Avenues, and Camden, Burlington, Borden, and Atlantic Streets, which intersected them at right angles.⁵⁴ But otherwise, once the bulldozers had departed, the land was left untended and remained so until the early 1970s.⁵⁵

The City of Englewood, however, decided to make some minimal use of the property it had bought in 1927. In the late 1920s local residents apparently took target practice at the quarry basin and the Englewood police used it as a pistol range. In July 1932 a new pistol range, reportedly the best in the country, was opened in the quarry. Iron and steel targets were installed to replace the two wooden targets that wore to splinters every few months. A small stone building was constructed and the site landscaped.⁵⁶ The pistol range seems to have remained in operation until after World War II.

Macfadden's Pond

Just as the Paterno development scheme for the south part of the Flat Rock Brook woods was at its peak, land at the north end of the woods, including the old Vanderbeck mill pond, changed hands. On September 14, 1927, the grand house and estate at the corner of East Linden Avenue and South Woodland Street had a new owner, Garden Suburbs, Inc., a company wholly owned by publisher and land-developer Bernarr Macfadden. He was an eccentric millionaire who had built a publishing empire of body-building, physical culture, and girlie magazines.

This was not the first time that title to the property was held in a corporate name. From 1917 to 1923 it had been owned by the shadowy Zealandia Company of Indiana, a real estate company whose president was a Mr. Lillian Campbell.⁵⁷ The substantial Italianate palazzo was

⁵³Englewood Press, November 18, 1932.

⁵⁴This partly accounts for today's trail system: Camden corresponding to the teaching trail opposite the front door of the nature center, Borden to the broad ridge trail. Van Nostrand survives as a road cut up to Summit St. Flat Rock old-timers will remember the Middlesex Ave. right-of-way, which used to appear on trail maps.

⁵⁵The upper stretch of Van Nostrand Avenue was probably bulldozed again (and crushed stone laid down) in the 1960s, to provide access from Summit St. for fire trucks.

⁵⁶Englewood Press, July 15 and 22, 1932.

⁵⁷He may have been a member of the family that founded the Campbell Soup Company.

apparently built about 1918, although who lived in the house from 1918 to 1923 remains unclear.⁵⁸ Whoever he was, he seems to have left almost no trace of his time in Englewood.⁵⁹ By 1923 the property was sold to Graham and Laura Sumner.⁶⁰ Sumner was a prominent local citizen and New York lawyer who had lived in Englewood at least since 1911 on the northwest corner of Jones Road and Linden Avenue.⁶¹ Like the previous owner, he expanded the estate by acquiring an additional three acres along Flat Rock Brook from William O. Allison, and seems to have added some outbuildings – a “studio” and a “camp.”⁶²

In 1927 the Sumners moved to Greenwich and sold the property, with house and lake and outbuildings, to Garden Suburbs, Inc., one of several companies controlled by Macfadden. If the unidentified builder of the house kept to himself, and Sumner established himself as part of Englewood’s establishment, Macfadden did neither. Although he was a publisher, his primary business seems to have been self-promotion. Then living with his third wife, Mary, and eight children in Nyack, New York, Macfadden, looking for more splendid quarters, moved his family to the Sumner estate and set about adapting the property to suit his interests. At the time of purchase the mill pond had apparently already been turned into an ornamental “lake,” complete with rustic bridge, diving raft, and a twenty-foot-wide waterfall, where the lake spilled into the gorge.⁶³ (The spillway from the pond, now part of the Flat Rock Brook preserve, is still to be seen. The present bridge across the outlet was constructed in the 1990s.) On the grounds of the estate near the pond Macfadden built a tennis court – it survived until the early 1970s – and a

⁵⁸One likely candidate is Arthur C. Dorrance (1893-1946), member of the wealthy Dorrance family that owned the Campbell Soup Company. In 1917 Dorrance, younger brother of John T. Dorrance (1873-1930), Campbell Soup’s president, was named president of Franco-American Food Company (a Campbell subsidiary) in Jersey City, and in 1923 was named Assistant General Manager of the parent company in Camden. (He would go on to become president of Campbell Soup in 1930.) The house was owned by the Zealandia company and its successor during the very years when Arthur Dorrance was working in nearby Jersey City.

⁵⁹City directories do not appear to have been published between 1917 and 1922. No record of a “Dorrance” resident in Englewood during those years has been found. John Lattimer’s report in This Was Early Englewood (pp. 162, 165) that the house was built by “Campbell Dorrance” has not been substantiated.

⁶⁰The seller is listed as the Zealandia Company and Linden Avenue Realty Company (#1219-244). Sale price was \$100,000 – no doubt reflecting the value of the recently-constructed house.

⁶¹Sumner (Yale, Class of 1897) served as president of the Englewood Board of Education from 1912 to 1920.

⁶²The 1927 deed of sale (#1526-126) preserves to Summer the right to remove “the studio building on the brook southwest of the main house, and the sentry house and open camp on the easterly shore of the lake.”

⁶³It was either Sumner or Macfadden who modified the old mill dam by constructing a concrete spillway. The earth-and-stone dam, more than 100' long, was probably reinforced or extended at the time. Retaining walls along the brook probably also date from these years.

swimming pool – the first in Englewood – and laid out a miniature golf course. For his daughters, Beverly and Braunda, who attended Dwight School for Girls in Englewood, he threw elaborate birthday parties that lingered long in the memory of some of the attendees. Peggy Escher of Englewood (one of Beverly Macfadden’s classmates) recalled some seventy years later that magicians and other performers were brought in from New York City, and that the house was decorated with statues of the nude Macfadden and his older daughters.⁶⁴

The strong-minded, not to say egomaniacal, Macfadden was apparently a difficult man to live with, and he and his wife separated in 1932. He moved out, and they were finally divorced in 1946. In the settlement she received the house and remained there until her death in 1969. She was remembered as a kindly lady in her old age, and apparently did not mind that neighborhood children used the pond as a swimming hole in the summer and skating rink in the winter. Although Macfadden may have lived at the estate for less than five years, his notoriety and eccentricity kept his memory current in the area. When in the late 1950s it was rumored that gold was found buried on a piece of property Macfadden once owned on Long Island, would-be prospectors dug holes all around Macfadden’s Pond in hopes of finding “buried treasure.”⁶⁵

Allison Woods

Immediately south of the Macfadden property stood a 75-acre parcel (part of a larger 200-acre tract that extended east to the Hudson River) belonging to the trustees of William O. Allison, millionaire mayor of Englewood Cliffs who at his death in 1924 left to a trust land he had acquired thirty years earlier. His will left directions that the land was to be “preserved” but also “maintained” and “developed” for the glory of God and the benefit of his fellow man. But because Allison left no more specific instructions, legal battles ensued, and after they were finally settled the trustees of his estate focused their attention on the trust property in Englewood Cliffs. The 75 acres in Englewood – today’s Allison Woods Park – were left as Allison had found them: second-growth woods and a section of Flat Rock Brook extending from below Macfadden’s Pond to wetlands along Jones Road. Except for enclosing the land with a chain-link fence, they made no attempt until the mid-1950s to “maintain” or “develop” the property, and residents in the neighborhood treated it as if it were simply part of “the woods” that extended south to the quarry and beyond.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Interview, May 26, 1999. Julia Lamb, another classmate of Beverly Macfadden, remembered the same details (letter of March 4, 1999).

⁶⁵Several local residents (Deborah King, Melody Norsgaard, and Steven Petranker) later reported treasure hunts on the Macfadden property in the 1960s, stimulated perhaps by feature stories at the time of Macfadden’s death in 1955.

⁶⁶Unfounded reports, still to be heard, that the woods were the site of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in the 1930s and of tank exercises during World War II are based perhaps on garbled knowledge of 1930s CCC camps in what is now “Greenbrook Sanctuary” (some four miles north of Flat Rock Brook), and a World War II bomb disposal unit, also located at the Greenbrook site.

It is no surprise that adventurous kids from Englewood, Englewood Cliffs, and beyond found the woods irresistible. At the age of 80 Julia Lamb (b. 1919) remembered hiking in the woods in the early 1930s with her girl scout troop. Bill Eirmann (b. 1934), who grew up in the 1930s and 1940s on Van Nostrand Avenue, called “the Woods” a “kids’ paradise.” He remembered fishing in the brook, trapping muskrats, picking wild strawberries near the old quarry and bayberries on “the Prairie” south of newly-built Route 4.⁶⁷ Another former Englewood resident remembered seeing copperheads sunning themselves on the rocks above the quarry.⁶⁸ Occasionally, he reported, he might see horseback riders who had come in to the woods from Pagano’s Stable on Irving Avenue in Englewood Cliffs. In those relatively innocent days kids played at war, sailing model airplanes off the top of the quarry cliff.

Other old-timers remember picnics at “Flat Rock” in the 1930s. This was not the flat rocks near the dam and spillway at Macfadden’s Pond but much further downstream, south of Walton Street. Before Route 4 was built Walton was the last east-west road until you reached the old Englewood Golf Club. A little downstream from the point where Flat Rock Brook runs under Route 4, between the present tennis courts and the Rock Creek apartments, you can still see several large slabs of flat rock in the stream bed. This had been a favorite swimming and picnicking spot at least since the 1890s.⁶⁹ Eunice Aschoff, who graduated from Leonia High School in the late 1930s, remembered walking in to “Flat Rock” with her parents, and returning there with a school group in 1935. Just upstream (on the upstream side of today’s Route 4) was “Devil’s Hole,” a place deep enough to dive, if you dared.⁷⁰

These unofficial recreational uses of the Flat Rock Brook woods and their environs continued into the 1960s. Dick Button (b. 1929) skated on Coffin’s Pond, just outside the north boundary of the nature preserve, in the mid-1930s.⁷¹ In the early 1940s Levon Boyajian (b. 1929), who grew up in New York City, walked across the George Washington Bridge with his pals to spend the day camping in the woods.⁷² Richard Miller of Teaneck remembered taking a bus with his small children in the 1950s from Cliffside Park north to Coytesville, where they

⁶⁷Telephone interview, February 1999.

⁶⁸Joseph Siciliano grew up on Grant St. in the 1920s and 1930s (telephone interview, March 1999). He also attended birthday parties at the Macfadden mansion, and seventy years later was still impressed that the party favors for Bruce Macfadden’s birthdays were baseball gloves!

⁶⁹Chater mentions it in his 1962 memoir (April Rain, p. 11).

⁷⁰Letter of August 2001, and subsequent interview. A photo shows the “Girl Reserve” from Leonia High School at “Flat Rock.” Peggy Escher remembered “Flat Rock.” Bill Eirmann also remembered “Devil’s Hole,” as did Florence Suckow, who graduated from Fort Lee High School in 1934.

⁷¹According to Button’s own memoir, Dick Button on Skates (1955), p. 12.

⁷²Interview, March 6, 2002.

would walk west into “the Woods” to go blackberrying. And avid bird watcher, he used to see warblers and occasionally a great-horned owl.⁷³ Deborah King of Englewood Cliffs happily remembered playing in the woods as a child in the early 1960s, sailing balsa-wood boats on Macfadden’s Pond.⁷⁴ Fred Bacharach of Englewood used to take his kids blackberrying in the 1960s. He remembered the woods as a “wild place, swampy and overgrown.” (At that time the quarry pond, next to the present nature center building, was still a swamp.) In the winter he remembered seeing boys playing broom hockey on Macfadden’s Pond.⁷⁵ In 1963, when she was sixteen, Melody Norsgaard, who lived on South Woodland Street, ran a day-care group in the woods that she called “the Babysitting Club.”⁷⁶

The early 1960s ere perhaps the last era (prior to the founding of the nature center) when the woods could still be imagined as a kids’ paradise. But already by the early 1950s there were new indications that they might be subject to real estate development. In 1952 the Allison Trustees, who had done nothing to improve or even maintain the “Allison Woods” between Macfadden’s Pond and the quarry, concluded that the projected benefits of constructing a natural parkland would not justify the anticipated expenditure of \$500,000 to \$1 million. Therefore, on June 30, 1952, they contracted with a local real estate company to sell Allison Woods for real estate development.⁷⁷ But the city of Englewood challenged the sale, and in April 1953 the courts blocked it. Three years later the trustees returned to court to test the injunction against the sale, arguing that they should be permitted to devote proceeds of the sale of the woods to the purchase of parcels of land along the new Palisades Interstate Parkway for small recreational areas. The judge continued the injunction, and in 1957 his decision was confirmed on appeal. Reminded of their responsibility to “maintain,” “develop,” and “preserve” the land – terms that were never precisely defined in the trust document or court rulings, the trustees now chose to establish a picnic and recreation area on the wetlands adjacent to Jones Road and to lay out a trail along the brook.

Shortly after 1957 families from Englewood and nearby towns began using the picnic grounds, and some more adventurous picnickers walked up into the woods for hiking, bird watching, or nature photography. The trustees also made arrangements with local Boy Scout troops to permit regular overnight camping on the ridgetop. In 1962 the water company put in a water line and a hydrant.⁷⁸ The Scouts set up a semi-permanent campsite, complete with concrete

⁷³Letter of March 10, 1999.

⁷⁴Telephone interview, February 1999.

⁷⁵Telephone interview, Sept. 27, 1999.

⁷⁶Telephone interview, Sept. 8, 1999.

⁷⁷I have told the Allison Woods story in more detail in “The History of Allison Woods Park.”

⁷⁸A 1959 survey of the “Englewood Boy Scout Camp Ground” in the Allison Trust filees at Flat Rock Brook shows plans for the water line. By the late 1960s the water line leaked, water bills were not paid, and in February 1970 water was shut off.

foundations for toilets and showers.⁷⁹ For their campfires the Scouts gathered dead wood and cut down significant numbers of small trees; these activities imposed strain on the thin, dry ridgetop soil. Grass fires erupted every few years. In the mid-1960s the trustees gave permission to another local group to use Allison Woods Park. The Englewood Amateur Radio Association held annual field day exercises during a late June weekend. Like the Scouts, the ham radio operators brought cars and trucks into the woods, imposing additional strain. In the late 1960s the Scouts stopped coming, but the hams continued to use the property until 1974.⁸⁰

By the later 1960s the woods, like the country as a whole, began to seem a darker place. Increased use, along with some new abuses, were taking their toll. Walkers on the trail occasionally stumbled over construction trash illegally dumped by contractors building new houses along Summit Street. Kids scrawled graffiti on the rock walls of the quarry, pushed derelict cars off the clifftop (driven onto the site from above, via Summit St.), and sold drugs in the shadows of the picnic grounds. Needles were found in the bathroom. The quarry, which had long attracted gun enthusiasts, began to seem dangerous. Some hikers felt threatened when they saw rifles being assembled for target practice.⁸¹ On at least one occasion kids with guns shot and killed a dog.⁸² In the mid-1960s young men in camouflage uniforms were seen playing “war games.”⁸³ According to another report, groups of Santeria worshipers from New York practiced ritual animal sacrifices.⁸⁴ A homeless man regularly slept in the woods.⁸⁵

Founding the Nature Center

It was in the troubled late 1960s that efforts were begun that led ultimately to the founding of Flat Rock Brook Nature Center in 1975. The story has often been told, but it bears repeating in outline form. Campbell Norsgaard, an eminent nature photographer who lived on South Woodland Street, deploring the abuse of the woods and fearing that they would be ruined, began to bring the problem to the attention of local residents. Passage in 1964 of a state “Green Acres” bond issue for the purpose of acquiring and preserving undeveloped land, raised hopes

⁷⁹A collection of artifacts found at Flat Rock Brook includes a number of fragments of camping equipment.

⁸⁰After strong complaints from Flat Rock Brook and from the Englewood Environmental Commission, the Allison trustees in May 1975 refused requests from “Englewood Civil Defense” to continue using Allison Woods Park for their exercises.

⁸¹The collection of artifacts found at Flat Rock Brook also includes numerous shell casings.

⁸²Source: Gerard McDermott (b. 1945), who served as an Englewood Cliffs police officer for 27 years (telephone interview, February 1999).

⁸³Source: Fred Bacharach (telephone interview, Sept. 27, 1999).

⁸⁴Source: Gerard McDermott.

⁸⁵Source: Gloria Boyajian (interview March 6, 2002).

that public money might be found to buy the woods. In 1966 a group that called itself “Green Land for Englewood” formed to lobby the city to apply for “Green Acres” funds – which required that the applicant commit to spend ⁸⁶local tax dollars on the project too. The city council agreed to apply for funds and in 1968 proposed a local bond issue for land acquisition. In part due to strong support from the League of Women Voters, and despite some local opposition, voters approved the bond issue, and the city began the laborious process of appraising and buying (and in some cases condemning) property, including two lots that once belonged to Bernarr Macfadden. The last pieces were not acquired until 1976. Much of the property had suffered heavy abuse over the years. Most spectacular, perhaps, were the rusted hulks of cars half-buried at the foot of the quarry cliffs. Equally wounding was the raw state of the North Meadow, where top soil and brookside gravel had been scraped off the land as late as the 1960s, probably by unscrupulous contractors. Photographs from 1972 show that the streets Paterno had bulldozed through the woods were in some cases still passable dirt roads, in other cases grown over with shoulder-high brush.⁸⁷

By 1969 enough property had been acquired that the city established a Conservation Commission to manage the land and recommend plans for repair of environmental degradation, maintenance, and eventual public use. Local resident Priscilla McKenna was appointed its first chair. Renamed the Environmental Commission, the group built support for further land acquisition and coordinated land management, but it concluded that long-term management would best be accomplished by a nongovernmental body, immune from year-to-year political pressure. It encouraged the formation of the nonprofit Englewood Nature Association, which was duly organized and held its first meeting in March 1973. This group elected officers and established plans for maintaining the land as a nature preserve and presenting environmental education programs, especially for school children. The acquired property, now owned by the City of Englewood, was leased to the Association for \$1 a year for a period of twenty-five years.⁸⁸ To emphasize that it sought to serve more than the residents of Englewood, the Association in 1974 renamed itself the Flat Rock Brook Nature Association.

The struggle to save the land was not over. In 1975 the Allison Woods trustees again sought approval from the courts to sell their portion of the woods for commercial development. In anticipation of approval, they invited developers to submit proposals, one of which called for the construction of a “major tennis center” on fifteen acres.⁸⁹ After a strenuous legal battle, the

⁸⁶Its founding members included Lorraine Cohen, Julia Lamb, and Priscilla McKenna. Its chair was Alan Farnsworth. Reading through the files preserved in the McKenna Papers at Flat Rock Brook is a reminder of the extraordinary patience, persistence, and determination required to save the woods.

⁸⁷Photographs, taken as part of the land appraisals in 1972, are available in the McKenna Papers.

⁸⁸In 1998 the lease was renewed for an additional twenty-five years, and will have to be renegotiated in 2023.

⁸⁹A June 1975 letter in the Allison Trust files at Flat Rock Brook presents the proposal in some detail.

trustees' petition to the court was rejected. Finally, in 1988, the Flat Rock Brook Nature Association was named successor trustee, and the one hundred twenty five acres on the Flat Rock Brook watershed were at last united under single management.

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