

Hike into History 3

24 Jul, 2008 in *OaklandNJ / Odds & Ends*

Take a hike. Depending on your tone of voice it can be good advice or a condescending suggestion. In this case it is very good advice because Oakland offers its residents a great opportunity to enjoy outdoor exercise, take in some beautiful scenery, and wander down wooded paths that lead you through local, regional and world history.

The hike detailed here starts just off Skyline Drive and is approximately five miles, start to finish. It will take you up through the Ramapo Hills to great vistas where you can visit the ruins of what has been called “The Oakland Castle”, “The Van Slyke Castle” or “Foxcroft”. Click here to [go directly to the photos and details](#) of the recent hike, but it will be much more fun knowing the story behind The Castle.

Just as Harriman State Park’s history is connected to its namesake’s railroad fortunes, the story of the the Castle’s origin begin with trains. The land was originally purchased by Jacob Rogers, the son of Thomas Rogers who founded Rogers Locomotive in Paterson, NJ. Established in 1831, this company eventually built more than six thousand locomotives for railroads around the world. Jacob Rogers managed the company well into his seventies, but eventually delegated managerial responsibilities as he got older. Right before his death, in 1900, Rogers sold the company to a group of investors who were keen on keeping the company in the congested city. He died in 1901 leaving various trusts to heirs and the majority of his wealth to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

The wooded land in the Ramapo Hills was left to his two grandsons in a trust, and upon their death the land would be deeded to The Museum. Unable to pay the taxes on the property, trustees for the estate entered into an agreement for the Museum to assume responsibility of the property, estimated to be worth \$500,000. The Museum was to pay the estate \$250,000, and the trustees would be responsible for providing the annuities required by the will for \$500 to each grandson. The title to this property was added to the \$5,000,000 already left to The Museum. As to be expected, lawsuits were filed, and the \$250,000 was eventually set aside to be dispersed amongst an array of relations . The New Jersey Legislature, in a rare act of financial prudence, denied a request by The Museum to waive the five percent inheritance tax on the property in Oakland.

Having no need for the property, The Museum sold it to a New York stock broker in 1905. Howard Frothingham was looking for a nice country retreat to escape the pressures of Wall Street. He was known as a very intense worker in an industry know for A-type personalities, and his nervous scurrying through the city streets in his car coined the parochial term of going about in “Frothingham’s way”. But Frothingham sold the property in the midst of an emotional breakdown. Diagnosed as suffering from exhaustion, Frothingham that year had two male nurses assigned to watch over him at his home in New York City. The precautionary measures proved a failure as Frothingham, on a cold February day in 1907, pushed off his aides and dove head first out the two story window of his bedroom. He fractured his skull and never regained consciousness.

An few uneventful years passed as the property exchanged hands and landed in the lap of another Wall Street figure, William Porter. It is Porter who is credited with building “The Van Slyke Castle”, and perhaps he should have called it the “Porter Castle” rather than “Foxcroft”. William Porter seemed to enjoy the home he built out in the country, and in May 1911 arranged for three friends to accompany him the weekend before his wife’s return from a European vacation. Chauffeured out to the Ramapo Hills, one can assume it was a special setting to be hidden away in nature with New York City so far in the distance. Like many a “boy’s night out”, there were most likely some fine cigars and scotch consumed that fateful weekend, and William Porter did not expect that it would be his last visit.

The party of stockbrokers were due back in the office, located in the Toy Building at 200 Fifth Avenue, by 9am Monday morning, but fate intervened that morning on Haledon Road just outside of Paterson. The chauffeur was passing a horse drawn cart of stones when the animal crossed the car’s path forcing the driver off the road.

The car overturned and threw all the passengers, except Porter, out of the vehicle on to the soft ground; William Porter was pinned underneath. He remained conscious during the rescue efforts and was finally freed after a half hour's efforts. His companions quickly arranged to transport the critically injured Porter to Paterson General Hospital.

Porter's wife, Ruth Halliwell Porter, was returning to America on the Lusitania, and relatives decided that they would not wire the ship but wait for her arrival before breaking the news of the tragic accident. The accompanying menu details the gourmet meal Ruth Porter was having while her husband, unknowingly, lay near death in Paterson, NJ. The Lusitania, as students of history may know, would be hit by a German torpedo in 1915 and be a contributing factor in the United States entering WWI in 1917. But back in 1911, "The Lucy" was the queen of the ocean, and would soon be joined by The Titanic which was just being promoted at that time.

The Oakland Journal was unable to verify if Ruth Halliwell Porter was rushed to the bedside of her second husband in time to bid him bon voyage on life's greatest journey. William Porter, like Jacob Rogers, left behind approximately \$5,000,000 dollars. Porter left behind a son and daughter from a previous marriage, and his will provided a 50% share for his daughter, and 25% each for his wife and son.

Having been widowed twice, Ruth Porter hoped that the third time would be a charm, and in 1913 announced her engagement to a well known Manhattan attorney Warren Van Slyke. The couple had many good years together enjoying the high life and prestige their social standing allowed them. Van Slyke would serve as Assistant Chief of Naval Intelligence during the war, not an insignificant position when considering the menace of the German U-boats. He would later go on to represent claimants in their lawsuits against the German government in the sinking of the Lusitania. He was also a man fond of exotic travel which took him on safaris to Africa and French Indo-China. The latter trip lasted over a year and Van Slyke reported on his return, in April 1923, of meeting with an aborigine tribe with a vocabulary that consisted of just 500 words.

It was good for Van Slyke to make the trip when he did, because he too would die an untimely death. Almost two years to the day of his return from the French Indo-China safari, Warren Van Slyke died of complications from a gallstone operation at Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. Ruth Halliwell Porter Van Slyke was widowed for the third time.

Ruth Van Slyke never married again, but continued to move in her established social circles traveling to the Caribbean and Europe depending on the season, and hosting dinner parties in New York City. She died at "Foxcroft" in 1940. The property was put up for sale by her estate in 1942.

The property was owned in the 1950s by a couple in the the midst of a bitter divorce and the property was abandoned during this period. In 1959, it was burned by vandals. In 1976, the State gained control of the property in it's purchase of the Ramapo Mountain forest from the estate of Clifford F. MacEnvoy.