
HISTORY OF THE RAMAPO MOUNTAINS

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Ramapo State Forest

VAN SLYKE CASTLE and RAMAPO PARK

An Historical Sketch by J. H. Ward

The ruins of the house popularly known as the [Van Slyke Castle](#) stand majestically on the nose of a mountain 1,500 feet north off and 350 feet above [Ramapo Lake](#) in what is now Ramapo Mountain State Forest. The view from the grounds are magnificent. The house, the lake, and surrounding area also have interesting histories.

The retreat of the last continental glacier about 12,000 years ago left a rock basin in what is now the north part of the Ramapo Lake. This filled with water until it overflowed to the southeast at an elevation of 537 feet. When the Dutch discovered the depression, it consisted of a pond of 25 acres with marshes to the west and northeast of about twice that size. They named it after the muskrats that lived there -- Rotten Poel (Rats Pond). Unfortunately, the meaning was lost when the adjective was transliterated instead of translated into English, becoming Rotten Pond.

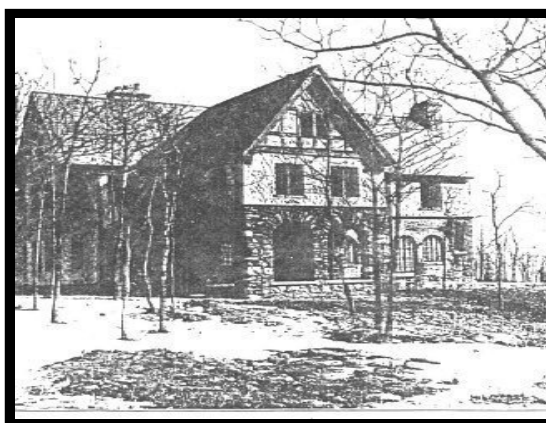
In the later part of the 19th century, Jacob Rogers, the son of the founder of the locomotive industry in Paterson, N. J., assembled a three square mile tract of land around the Pond from a dozen parcels of land. He greatly increased the size of the Pond by placing a stone dam across its outlet. Rogers died in 1901, and his will directed that the property be given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That organization leased and sold it to Howard P. Frothingham, a New York financier and avid fisherman in 1905. It was thought that he would turn it into a first rate game preserve. After changing the name of the lake to "Le Grande Lake", however, he sold two years later to Pliny Fisk, an associate. Fisk was expected to establish a community similar to Toxedo Park on the property. The realization of this scheme, however had to wait the purchase of the property a year and a half later by William Porter. He divided the land between two corporations: The Ramapo Club and Ramapo Park. The former owned the lake and a strip of land around it, and the later, the hilly woodland. This procedure would allow owners of houses on the hills to share the use of the lake. Porter built himself a house (which later came to be known as Van Sly Castle), but his death only a few years later led to the abandonment of the plan. The Club was merged into the park in 1914, and the subsequent history of the corporation is unclear.

Clifford F. MacEnvoy appears to have gained control of it in the early 1920's. He was a wealthy developer, and was a general contractor for the construction of the [Wanaque Reservoir](#). He built a house on the large mountain northeast of the lake. The state purchased what is now the Ramapo Mountain forest from his estate in 1976.

The history of Van Slyke Castle revolves largely around Ruth A. Coles and her husbands. Coles was a nurse who had the good fortune to care for Charles E. Halliwell, a

captain of industry in New York. She became his second wife in the fall of 1906. He died a year later leaving her one and a half million dollars, a large fortune in those days. in 1909, she married William Porter, a stockbroker and close friend of her former husband. At that time, Porter was building a house on Fox Mountain above Le Grande Lake, which he called "Foxcroft". Porter died in an automobile accident two years later before he could realize his development of the former Rogers' tract. In 1913, Cole married her third husband, Warren C Van Slyke, an attorney. He was an assistant to the chief of naval intelligence in World War 1, and later argued the claims resulting from the sinking of the Lusitania. They lived near Jamaica, Long Island. After Mr. Van Slyke's death in 1925, his widow lived year around at Foxcroft. She died in 1940 at the age of 63. Foxcroft was left to her family who promptly sold it. In the early 1950's it became involved in a bitter divorce and was not used. Vandals soon broke in and finally torched the mansion in 1959.

THE VAN SLYKE CASTLE - AS IT WAS



CASTLE RUINS (Van Slyke House) AS IT IS NOW





Castle Water Tower

**Wanaque Reservoir
(View from castle)**

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