

Powerhouse in Wappingers Falls

by **Anna Barton**

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Tucked away inside the Village of Wappingers Falls, a hydroelectric plant has been producing renewable energy for 30 years.

Owners Sarah and Harry Bower-Terbush smile in agreement as they admit that most locals don't know the plant is there. For decades, they've been doing their job quietly but efficiently, tucked back in the Industrial Market off of Market Street.

A recent change with Central Hudson Gas and Electric Company has the Terbushes stepping forward as they can now sell energy directly to customers anywhere in the Hudson Valley. The couple owns three plants in total: one in Wappingers Falls, Walkill and Salisbury Mills.

The building was originally constructed in 1830 as part of an industrial complex known as "The Bleachery." At that time, the hydroelectric plant supported the Industrial Park it belonged to.

In 1909, mill sites up and down stream (the Wappinger Creek) were consolidated into one. The Wappingers Falls power plant became the only one in 50 square miles to provide electricity to the surrounding area.

The process begins as water flows from the Wappinger Creek into the Wappinger Lake. From there it is diverted from the dam into the "raceway or power canal." From here, the water enters the "penstock," the large pipe that residents may be familiar with at its home near the famous Wappingers Falls. Electricity is generated using the flowing water, driving a turbine that in turn powers a generator.

The plant was operated in this manner until the 1970s, when power "became cheap" and a fire partially destroyed the building, closing the business down, Sarah said.

In the late 1980s, during an energy crisis, people recognized it was vital to rebuild old hydrosites. At this time, a French company, Might Development, took over the power plant.

In 1988, a Might Development employee called Central Hudson in the U.S. and found that an engineer named Harry Terbush had constructed a hydroelectric plant in Walkill the previous year. The employee then called Harry and informed him that Harry would be operating the Wappingers Falls site, as well. Sarah Terbush laughed, "And so the next morning, he began!"

Over the years, the engineering couple became more financially invested in the property. In 2004, they were able to purchase the final equipment and receive the exemption, the federal permission to operate the hydroelectric plan, needed to run the company. The plant was theirs.

Helps customers save money, save the planet, support local business.

French turbines inside the powerhouse have been operated by the Terbush couple for 30 years.

Photos by Dave Coppola of Whitewater Imagery Inc.

A picture of the plant at night highlights the improvements the Terbushes have made to the powerhouse, including a second story view of the falls and creek.

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Harry, hailing from Yonkers, works as the mechanical engineer on site. Sarah, a Stanfordville native, originally was a Computer Science and Theater major but went back to school to become an electrical engineer. She operates the control systems on site.

"What's the first thing you want me to do?" Harry asked his wife when they finally owned the powerhouse building.

"Build a bathroom!" Sarah said. The building had gravel floors and no bathroom. Over the years, the building has become a beautiful space, proudly renovated with paint and sandblasting. In 2007, Harry added a second story for meetings and events, overlooking the creek and falls.

The staff consists only of the couple, a third employee training to become an operator, and a part-time bookkeeper.

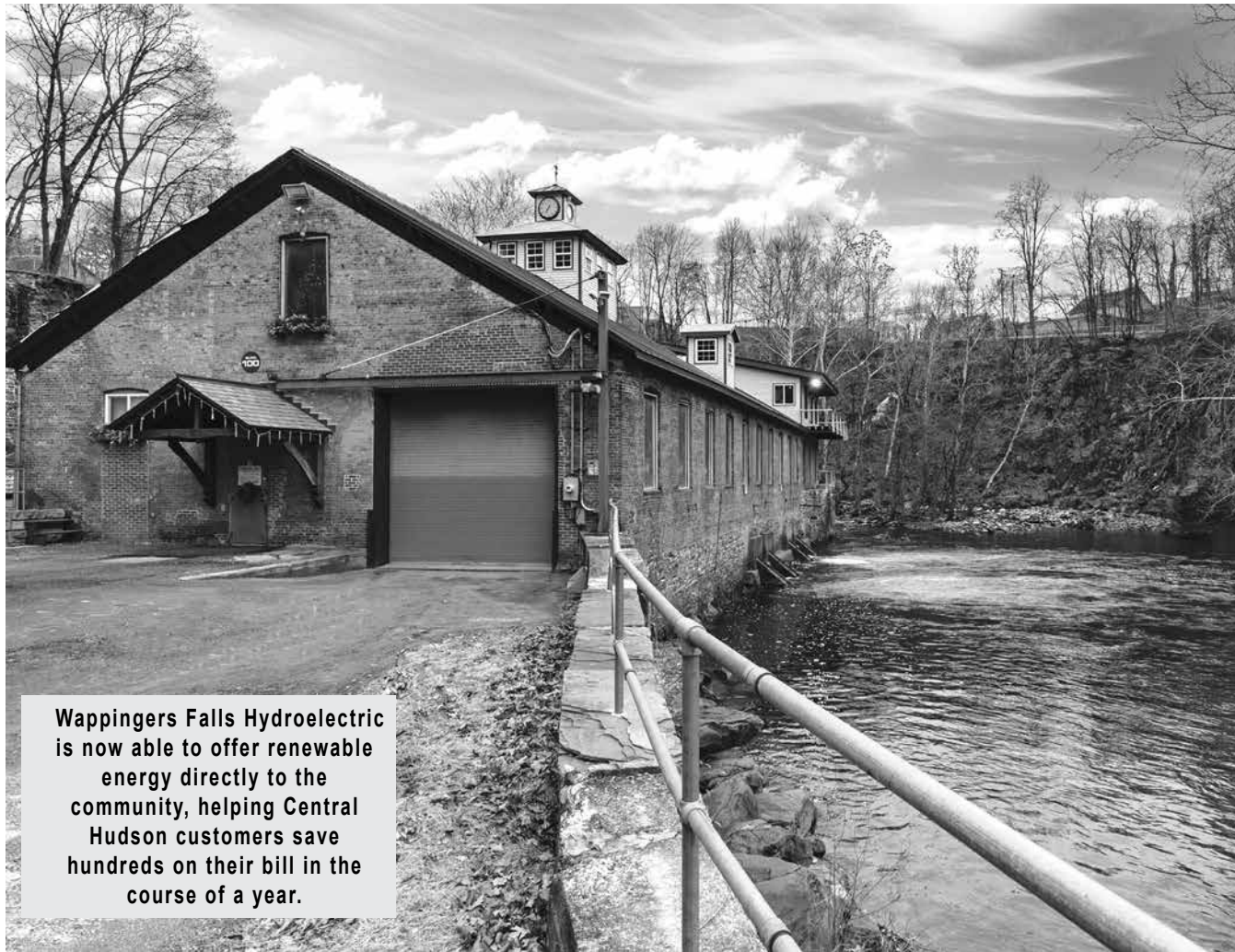
Wappingers Falls Hydroelectric is at least five times larger than their other plants, said Sarah. The Wappingers Falls plant produces 10-million kilowatt-hours per year.

Before becoming a hydroelectric plant, the Walkill Site was once used to provide mechanical energy for the Walkill Felt Hat Factory.

Salisbury Mills was acquired as a trade for doing work on a plant that needed many repairs. Salisbury Mills is the smallest site of the three that comprise Natural Power Group Inc.

Since 1988, Wappingers Falls Hydroelectric was under contract to sell their power to Central Hudson, and Central Hudson would then distribute it.

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Wappingers Falls Hydroelectric is now able to offer renewable energy directly to the community, helping Central Hudson customers save hundreds on their bill in the course of a year.

When the 30 year contract with Central Hudson ended recently, the Terbushes were informed that New York Public Service Commission had changed its regulations and now WF Hydroelectric could sell directly to customers. The Walkill site is also enrolled in this manner.

How does it work? The customer will not be changing utilities; Central Hudson will still be their provider.

Wappingers Falls Hydroelectric will review the customer's Central Hudson bill to calculate their consumption over the last two years. That consumption is then matched to a percentage of the plant's production and sold to the customer. This will appear on the Central Hudson bill as a credit for "Community Distributed Generation" (CDG).

The customer will then receive a bill from the plant that will list the credit received on the Central Hudson Bill, a percentage discount (10 percent) and the amount due.

"We guarantee they'll save money," Sarah said of future customers. The average household will save 7-10 percent on its entire Central Hudson bill over the course of a year, she said.

The customer is guaranteed to never lose money throughout this process. In the event of a drought, the customer can use "banked credits" that have been previously stored.

"When there is ample water, you may get more credit than you can use and it will carry over into the next month," their website states.

Customers are asked to stay with WF Hydroelectric for a year to try and match consumption with production. There are no initial fees, cancellation fees, or maintenance charges.

Sarah and Harry agree that the benefits for the customer-and the environment-go without saying.

"It's definitely better for the customer. You get real savings," said Harry. The only downside for the customer is the inconvenience of writing a second check.

By supporting the business, residents can support local, zero carbon energy and help the environment. "We're trying to keep the planet alive," said Sarah.

The Salisbury Mills site is still under contract with Central Hudson at this point.

More information and answers to questions regarding the change can be found at www.wappingersfallhydroelectric.com or www.naturalpowergroupinc.com.

