



The Croton “Darn”

by Ralph J. Ferrusi

When I was a little kid Pop used to take Mom, Sis, and I just about every Sunday, or so it seemed, on a “Sunday Drive”. These family drives, to nowhere in particular, were a real treat. We’d pile into the old black Plymouth four-door sedan, with the “suicide” back doors, that opened forward: if you opened them at speed (and I recall doing this just once) the wind would jerk them around and they’d slam against the side of the car, potentially yanking

you out if you didn’t let go of the handle!!! A thought, before I go on: does anybody nowadays “go for a drive” just for the pleasure of it—“Hey, let’s go out on the Turnpike for a couple of exits???”—as opposed to racing off to WalMart or Home Depot or racing off somewhere to buy something?? I don’t... Back to the Plymouth: it was very basic/bare-bones: cheap seats/interior, standard shift, roll-up windows; I don’t recall if it even had



The Croton River runs downstream to the Hudson

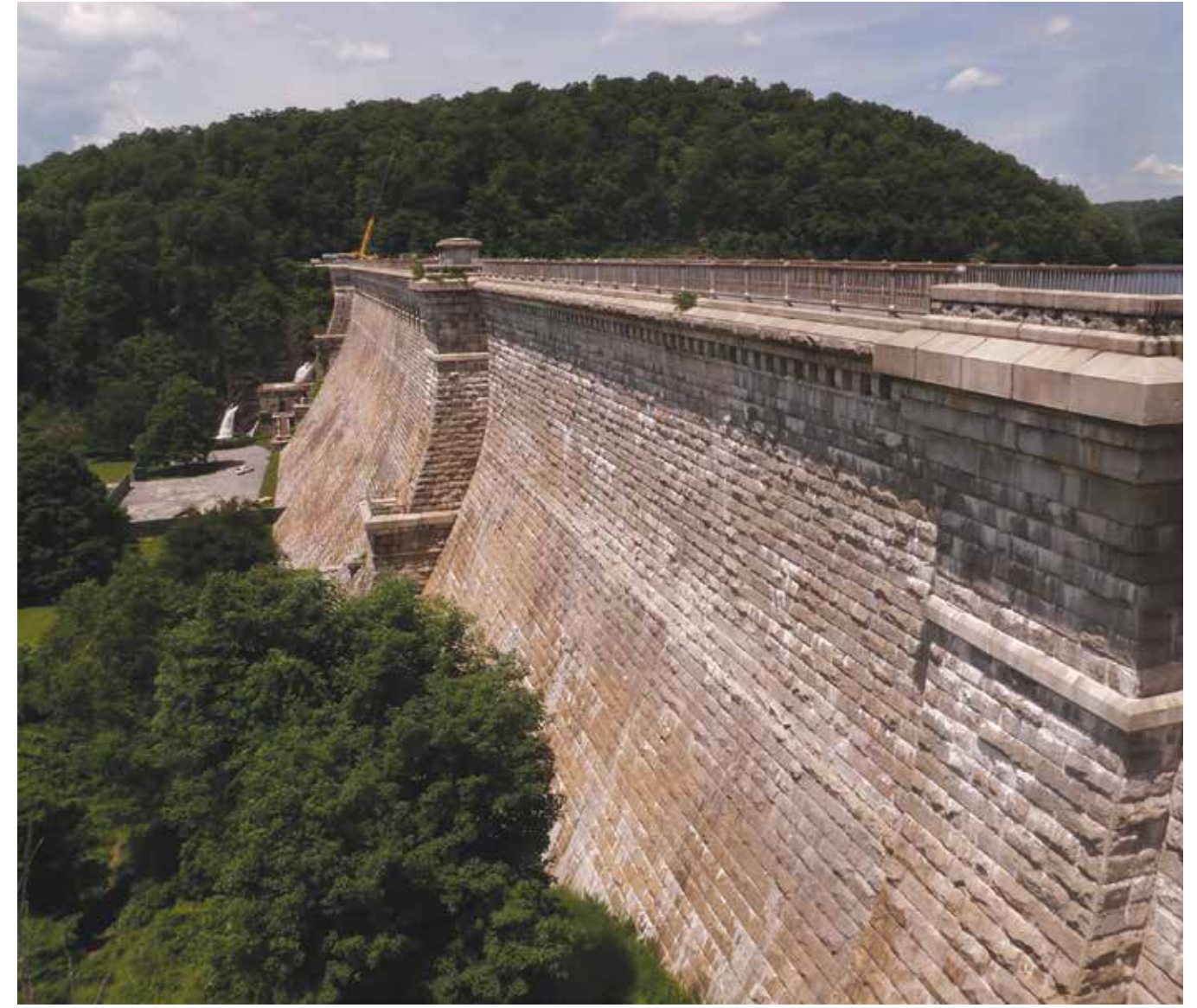
a radio. No seat belts, no air bags or shoulder straps. No power steering, power brakes, power windows, automatic transmission, GPS ,backup camera... You actually DROVE the car; felt the road.

After the Plymouth came a spiffy, elegant, light blue 1949 Dodge four door: it had wide whitewall tires, and, as I recall, even had some kind of “semi-automatic” transmission. It was smooth, and, for us, quite luxurious.

Back to our Sunday rides: often, we went “around the Point”: down Tate Avenue, right on Kings Ferry Road, past Lake Mehaugh, then maybe left past the Seaplane Base to the Steamboat Dock, or up 6th Street and down to the Ferry Slip. Then up Broadway, past the Quarry and the Cemetery and the entrance to Indian Point Park (What a place, then!!!). Then down “Indian Point Road” (Bleakley Avenue) past Johnny Rit’s and the “Clayhole”, out to Route 9, then into Buchanan and around the Circle, then home. Those Were The Days... Sometimes a real treat would be down Route 9 and

over to the Croton Dam. Mom couldn’t resist little jokes and plays on words, and she would always say we had to call it the Croton “Darn”. Many years later I would often pick up Mom and Pop at the Montrose VA for Friday rides in my flashy red BMW 328ci convertible (a far far cry from the black 1937 Plymouth: times had a’changed) down to the “Darn”.

About the “Darn”. First off, it is very likely that it is not apparent to the casual observer that there are two Croton Dams: a “New” dam and an “Old” dam. In a nutshell, the “Old” Croton Dam is currently 34 feet underwater in the reservoir four miles upstream of the “New” dam. It was built, mostly by Irish immigrants, between the Spring of 1837 and October 14, 1882. It was/is 57 feet high, 670 feet across, and 40 feet thick. New York City’s “astronomical growth and, skyrocketing demand for water” soon made it obsolete. The “New” imposing 2,188 feet long, 297 feet high dam was built



between September 16, 1892 and July 1, 1907, mostly by Italian immigrants.

Here's a bit more of their long, complicated history, with a lot of help from Mary Josephine D'Alvia's 1976 very comprehensive **"THE HISTORY of the NEW CROTON DAM"**:

From The Preface:

"For the past three centuries, the calumnious rise of population, the senseless waste of whatever water they did have, the droughts...and sickness epidemics created imminent water emergencies. Water, it was discovered, was not as free as air, and didn't come cheap."

The Old Croton Aqueduct and Dam

In 1832 the population of New York City—and the demand for fresh, clean water—had skyrocketed, and the Colonel DeWitt Clinton Jr. Report concluded it would be possible to deliver "country" water from the

Croton River to Manhattan Island, 32 miles away at a cost of a mere \$2,500,000.00. Construction of an aqueduct and a dam began in 1837. About 4,000 Irish immigrants, who had worked "sunup to sundown" in Ireland for ten cents a day, arrived in Croton to build them. They were paid 75 cents for a ten-hour day. Then, on January 5, 1841 a terrible blizzard, followed by three days of "incessant" rain, caused the then-60-foot-high dam to break, sending a horrendous, roaring 50-foot wall of water downstream.

Amazingly, the dam was rebuilt, and on June 27, 1842 Croton River water was sent through the aqueduct to Manhattan. But...by 1880 there were 1,000,000 people in New York City, "acting as if there was an inexhaustible supply of water", and, what we now think of as the "Old" Croton Aqueduct was leaking: BADLY.

The New Croton Aqueduct and Dam

So, in 1885 work was begun on the "New" Croton Aqueduct. Then, along came The March 12th Blizzard

of '88, crippling not only the City, but the whole Croton Valley—there were 15 FOOT snowdrifts—and it was bitter cold for weeks. Back to the drawing board, again. After many many trials and tribulations, the new aqueduct was finally put in service in 1890.

In 1891 the powers that be began acquiring the 7,000 acres of land they deemed necessary for the reservoir behind a new dam. 400 farms and four towns—houses, barns, stores, churches, schools, grist/flour/saw mills—were condemned. Buildings were torn down, burned, or destroyed. 32 miles of roads were torn up, and 24 miles of railroad tracks were submerged. It took five years to relocate eight cemeteries. All the while there were many many protests, lawsuits, convictions and many very unhappy citizens.

In the late 1800's most of the 4,000 Irishmen who had built the original dam were over 70 years old, so... along came the Italians, principally stone masons from Southern Italy: Calabria, Bari, Potenza, Cantanzaro, Napoli, Trieste. They excavated 2,000,000 CUBIC

YARDS of earth and rock, and built a magnificent 2,188 feet long, 297 feet high, 266 feet wide at the base dam that goes underground 130 feet and consists of 850,000 cubic yards of masonry, and, over a 14 year period they endured revolutions, wars, typhoid epidemics, yellow fever, cholera, fires, droughts and water famines, blizzards, political scandals, strikes, leaks, murders, accidents, robberies, highwaymen, and, the Mafia.

On December 15, 1906 the last stone was laid on the New Croton Dam that holds back an astounding 32,000,000,000 (that's 32 BILLION) gallons of Croton River drinking water for New York City's current 8.55 million citizens.

Who, hopefully, are not treating it as if it's "inexhaustible". Yeah, right.....

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