



We Finally Make It Out Onto Constitution Island!

by **Ralph J. Ferrusi**

I first motored past Constitution Island 'way back in my power boating days, when I was much more fascinated by the fact I was zooming over the deepest part of the Hudson, through the most notorious narrow S-turn in the river between New York Harbor and the Federal Dam in Albany—known as “World’s End”—than I was by the Warner family’s intriguing history on the island. The Dutch called this part of the Hudson “Martelaer’s Rach”: “Martyr’s Reach”, for all the boats that sank in this could-be-tricky/ treacherous bit of water.

Even back then I was always a bit spooked knowing there was over 200 feet of murky river water beneath me, and God knows what under it. Nowadays, I am still always a bit spooked ever time we canoe through this narrow, twisty section of the river between West Point and Constitution Island. Honestly, my biggest fear, particularly when heading north, with a limited view upriver, is that all of a sudden a HUGE container ship will appear right around the corner, leaving us kind of trapped between it and the western cliffs of the island without a helluva lot of wiggle room.

This may sound a bit dramatic, but we'd (literally) have to paddle for our lives to get the hell outta there before the bow waves hit the base of the cliffs and ricocheted back into the river, possibly creating some wicked turbulence that we just might not be able to deal with. I don't even want to think about being in the water, and sharing it with a monster ship. Nope...

As I've often mentioned, Constitution Marsh is one of our favorite places to paddle ("Constitution Marsh by Sea", BOATING ON THE HUDSON AND BEYOND, October 2015) and, occasionally, to walk ("Constitution Marsh by Land", BOATING ON THE HUDSON AND BEYOND, February/March 2017). But, I've always been curious about Constitution ISLAND. You just can't land on it and noodle around: it belongs to the United States Military Academy, West Point.

The island is now part of the West Point Military Academy Reservation.

But, I'd heard of The Constitution Island Association, and found out via a little bit of on-line poking around (<http://www.constitutionisland.org/>) that on certain times of year a 38-seat boat left the West Point South Dock on Wednesdays between 9:30-11:30 AM: \$10.00/Seniors \$9.00. Sometime in May/June 2017 I called 854-265-2501 and registered Kath and I for an upcoming Wednesday. But...something unexpected came up on the Big Day (ahhh, Life Gets in the Way...), and, crap, we had to cancel.

But, Whoopee Do, I learned of a "Family Day" on the Island on Saturday, September 23, 2017: I called and made reservations (again) for Kath and I. We were on our way. It was a fine, blue sky September day, and I really wasn't looking forward to the long drive to West Point, right across the river but not that easy to get to by car for us: either up to Poughkeepsie and across the Mid Hudson Bridge then down through Newburgh, or down to the Bear Mountain Bridge and then up through Cornwall. Well, it turned out we could drive over to the Cold Spring Metro North parking lot, and there would be a bus there to drive us out to the island.

Before we board the bus, let's talk a bit about Constitution Island.

Fort Constitution was built on the island in 1775, when we were fighting the Brits for our "Constitutional Rights", thus



the 1775 First Fortification ruins facing south right down the river,



Ralph with a character from the past 'Anna Warner', the younger sister, who, in 1872 published "Gardening by Myself"

"Constitution Island". Henry W. Warner, a Long Island lawyer, bought the 280-acre island and the adjacent marsh from Samuel Gouvernier in November 1836, intending to build a country estate and a resort/luxury hotel on the island, and, astonishingly, to grow rice in the marsh.

Timing is Everything: the Panic of 1837 wiped out Warner's fortune, "[reducing] the family to real poverty". After Warner's death, his two daughters, Susan—1819-1885—and Anna—1824-1915—declined "many tempting offers to sell the island for large sums of money for an amusement park"! Susan and Anna were both prolific writers: Susan became one of 19th Century America's best-selling authors, writing over 40 novels and stories between 1850 and 1855, including the first American best seller, "The Wide, Wide World". Anna wrote the arguably "most famous Christian hymn", "Jesus Loves Me". Both sisters wrote their entire lives, with "...about one hundred and six publications to their credit....".

In 1908 Anna sold the island to Mrs. Russell Sage for \$150,000.00, and Mrs. Sage presented it as a joint gift to President Theodore Roosevelt and the US government, once again saving it from commercial interests. The island is now part of the West Point Military Academy Reservation. The Warner sisters are buried side-by-side in the West Point Cemetery.

Back to the bus: it—and some very nice people—were waiting for us at the far south end of the Metro North parking lot, and we were driven along a narrow, bumpy service road paralleling the railroad tracks and right over the bridge we've canoed under a zillion

times, never knowing a road shared the railroad tracks that were right above us. It dropped us off just above Warner House—the family home from 1836 to 1915—with a spectacular view south down the river.

There were all kinds of nice family/kids things going on—miniature horses, a teddy bear parade, a small "zoo: goats, ducks, rabbits, and, a kangaroo!!!—and, all kinds of nice families and kids enjoying all the nice things. But..after all these years, I was really eager to satisfy my curiosity about the island and explore. We got a map: there were about a half-dozen trails, one leading just about to the 138-foot high point of the island: turn me loose!

But, first things first: as we walked past the house there was a woman dressed in 19th Century finery standing alongside the Memorial Garden: 'Anna Warner', the younger sister, who, in 1872 published "Gardening by Myself"! As anxious as I was to explore, how could I pass up an opportunity to actually talk to one of the Warner sisters??? I asked her what year it was, and I think she said it was 1890. I asked her about her sister Susan, and she said she had died. She asked me if I knew anything about "Cadet Eisenhower", and I told her that we were from the future, and there had been a terrible World War and Cadet Eisenhower had been a General, and that after the War he had become President of the United States. I said she must have noticed that we were dressed "a bit differently", and told her that it was 2017. She asked how we got to the island, and I said we had arrived on the island on a bus, and she surmised it must have been "steam powered". All in all, a very cool encounter.

The Hike: we headed out on the Redoubt 7 Trail, and detoured to the 1775 First Fortification ruins facing south right down the river, then passed the Parade Grounds, then missed the trail and scrambled steeply up to a broad lookout towards West Point, then to the formidable ruins of the 1778 Redoubt No. 7. We then scrambled up to the 138-foot high point of the island, then headed north through the woods, down into a saddle, and up the other side until we had a clear view north up the river. We then found our way through the woods back to the Redoubt 7 Trail to the house, saving the long Wetlands Loop Trail and the Redoubt 5 and 6 Trails for another day, hopefully on a Wednesday in the Spring or Summer of 2018.

Get in touch with Ralph at:
rjferrusi@frontiernet.net