

A Winter Pilgrimage – Walking the Esopus Shoreline End-to-End.

The Esopus shoreline is graced with a litany of religious institutions which preserve the banks of the Hudson River like no other town in this historic, glacial valley. From the Mother Cabrini Home in West Park – the southernmost hamlet in Esopus – to Our Lady of the Hudson Shrine in Port Ewen, this 12 mile trek provides meditative solace and solitude. With a series of Scenic Hudson preserves slotted in between these religious



Skip Doyle – Hudson River – Esopus

properties, there are ample opportunities to venture inland through undisturbed forests. On this winter Sunday in February, with the Hudson River well frozen over after weeks of temperatures in the teens, I enjoined my long time camarado, Jack Beatin, to accompany me on this pilgrimage.

Commencing the day at Mother Cabrini chapel, the pilgrimage fittingly began with a visit to the gravesite of this first American saint canonized on July 7, 1946. The Cabrini Home founded in 1890 served as an orphanage and novitiate throughout the 1900's. Resident Sister Aloysius Slezewski explained, "While our ministries here have ceased, the gravesites of scores of nuns buried here attest to our history of service, and the modest museum next to the chapel still houses the relics of Mother Cabrini." As we left Mother Cabrini, Jack enlightened me, "Francesca Saveria Cabrini, who founded the *Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, was indeed the first American citizen to be canonized a saint. But she held dual citizenship, so she is an Italian saint, too."

The adjacent property is the *Christian Brothers*. This former novitiate also is vacant – though the cemetery at the foothill of the John Burroughs Sanctuary also attests to the many Christian Brothers who have dedicated their lives to faith and service.

Walking northward, Riverby is the shoreline home of turn-of-the-century nature writer, John Burroughs. While his father was a minister, John Burroughs found his calling in creation itself. "God is as near us as ever He was" wrote John Burroughs, "why should take our revelations at second hand?"

With the morning hours passing, we were happy to reach Holy Cross Monastery which is still an active retreat house run by *Benedictine* monks. Attending noontime vespers with the white-robed monks, our spirits were transcended by the Gregorian chant and incense. And the warmth of the monastery as well a warm welcome by the monks was a respite from the mortification of the deep snow and frigid temperature. Stopping at the bookstore and stocking up on Divine chocolate and other edibles, Brother Roy Parker informed us: “It is our mission to provide for travelers.” We left the Holy Cross Monastery renewed. Jack expressed it well, “This is a pilgrimage. We were weary; we were hungry; we did tramp in; and they were good neighbors.”

While across the river the Hyde Park shoreline is dotted with several century-old mansions, and marred with countless modern-day, would-be mansions, Esopus has only the Colonel Payne estate and its stately boathouse – now owned by Marist College. And next to it, the *Marist Brothers* retreat house, it too, with its graveyard. “It is quiet now” explained Brother Brice Byczynski, “but come summer this will be teeming with students from our many high schools attending summer programs here.”

Next on our pilgrimage was Black Creek Preserve – a Scenic Hudson park which provides trails inland from the Hudson River and along the Black Creek. For the adventuresome, the Black Creek courses up to the John Burroughs Sanctuary, site of his writing cabin Slabsides, and then south to where it is fed by Chodikee Lake.

What was a century ago the “Castle on the Rhine” *Redemptorist* seminary and adjoining cemetery, Mount Saint Alphonsus, and later a retreat house, is now a private high school called Mount Academy and a *Bruderhof* community. “It is now a more secure environment;” explained the principal, David Johnson, “not only do families live here, but it is incumbent upon us to safeguard the welfare of the students who attend school here.”



Mount Saint Alphonsus

The next Scenic Hudson shoreline property, Esopus Meadows Forest Preserve, not only has trails through the woods, but also offers a pleasant trail along the edge of the

Hudson River. This land abuts Esopus Lighthouse Park which provides views of that 1841 lighthouse – the only remaining wooden lighthouse on the Hudson River.

Remarkable about standing at the lighthouse, is that as you gaze south, the Hudson River shoreline is identical to what it was a century ago: entirely wooded except for Mount Saint Alphonsus on the western shore, and the Mills Mansion on the eastern shore. Northward, all the signs of development and overdevelopment are apparent, though



Esopus Meadows Lighthouse

heartening are the distant mountains: the Catskills – with Kaaterskill High Peak lording over the Hudson River and smaller Round Top mountain to its left. Then the deep cleft of Plattekill Clove. And to the south of that, Platte Mountain with its saddle leading to Overlook Mountain’s fire tower and then down to Woodstock.

At Esopus Lighthouse Park, I met two friendly nuns – Alice Conners and Annemarie Molloy – of the *Dominican Sisters of Sparkill* from the nearby northern town of Saugerties. Knowing that they recently donated part of their shoreline property to Scenic Hudson in order to create the Falling Waters Preserve, I exclaimed to Jack, “In Esopus the religious institutions are ‘inadvertent conservationists’; these are ‘purposeful conservationists!’” Endorsing what I meant, Sister Alice acknowledged, “This is true; in Esopus, that has not been their primary mission, but preserve the shoreline they did! We, however, have always had a trail open to the public at Falling Waters, and land preservation and the enjoyment of creation is in our heritage.”

The most recently acquired Scenic Hudson property is the Esopus Lake Preserve. Ascending the woods path from River Road, this preserve provides the finest river view in all of Esopus: being high enough to see up and down this historic river and its notable landmarks like Linwood and Wilderstein, with a perspective of the rolling hills on both sides of the river, while being close enough to the river to provide a sense of intimacy with these curvaceous waters.

Sleightsburg Park, preserved by Scenic Hudson, is the northernmost point in Esopus. Beyond is the Rondout Creek and the city of Kingston. Across the river is Rhinecliff; this day, the horn blasts of the Amtrak trains coming into station carry clearly across the ice-choked river.

Exiting the Hudson River at Freer Park, it is a short walk up the hill to the Presentation Church and the *Shrine of Our Lady of the Hudson*. This statue of the Madonna cradling a tugboat assures safe passage up the Hudson River – as we experienced today on this pilgrimage. Standing before the altar as we concluded with a prayer of thanksgiving, Jack spoke up, “I’ve been reflecting about what John Burroughs said about God being near to us and not taking revelation second hand.” He continued, “I don’t think Burroughs was saying don’t go to church. I think he was saying: after you come out of church, where are you going to go?” After a pause, Jack concluded, “Today, we went someplace.”



Shrine of Our Lady of the Hudson