

Esopus Nature and Historic Places

Do you know in which town the first American saint lived? And in which town Sojourner Truth was born in and served as a slave? Do you know in which town is the only remaining wooden lighthouse on the Hudson River? And in which town is the oldest covered bridge in New York State? Do you know the only town in New York State that has an island in the Hudson River named after it? And shares the same name as an American Indian tribe as well? If you answer, “Esopus” you are right on all accounts.



This June, the fourth grade students of the Robert Graves School were treated to a presentation entitled *Special Places in Esopus – Nature and Historic Sites in Our Town*. “It is important for students to develop a sense of place and belonging in their learning,” says principal Errin Parese. Through enrichment programs like this, students become responsible citizens in their community, active in nature, and appreciate the wonders of their daily lives.”

In Esopus, nature abounds in many forms. American Indians called this area “esepeu” meaning “high banks.” Gently sloped lands with banks high above the Hudson River and a tall ridgeline offering shelter from the prevailing westerly winds create an ideal and varied agricultural environment. Wineries sell locally produced wine, and farm stands offer freshly picked fruits and vegetables, baked goods, hot cider, and local crafts. For those who prefer a step fresher, you can pick-your-own apples, pumpkins, fruits and berries.

Founded in 1811, Esopus is historically a port town. Esopus’s marine heritage is evident at the many active marinas in the hamlets of Connelly and Port Ewen, and the nearby Hudson River Maritime Museum on Rondout Creek. The Esopus Museum, housed in an 1837 church, has many artifacts and documents relating to maritime activity, as well as those reflecting our local European and American Indian history. It is one of nine sites in Esopus listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Hudson River maritime heritage is also evident in the Shrine of Our Lady of the Hudson, a bluestone statue at the Presentation Church, overlooking the river, sculpted by Thomas Penning in 1952 with funds raised by local boatmen and towing companies. For many years boatmen would blow the “Port Ewen Salute” as they passed the ‘Madonna cradling a tug boat’.

“Part of our curriculum in the fourth grade is the study of New York State history including the American War of Independence period which is taught through literacy.” says fourth grade teacher, Eileen Osborne. “We are fortunate that Esopus is rich in history so that students can visit history firsthand: the evolution from farm to factory in the industrial revolution of the 1800’s and into the 1900’s, the colonial period of the 1700’s, and even as early as Henry Hudson’s voyage of 1608 which brought a legacy of Dutch heritage to our town.”

Esopus is bordered on three sides by water: the Hudson River to the east, the Rondout Creek to the north, and the Wallkill River to the west. At Sleightsburg Park on the Rondout Creek, fishing is available as well as a public boat launch. Spanning 138 feet across the Wallkill River in Rifton is the famed Perrine’s Bridge – the oldest remaining covered wooden bridge in New York, built in 1835. Upstream from here, the gentle current of the Wallkill River offers leisurely canoeing, kayaking and

fishing. Bisecting the town is Black Creek which flows out of Chodikee Lake in New Paltz, through the Black Creek State Forest, and cascades down the ridge through the Black Creek Forest Preserve where it is a tributary to the Hudson River. Whether viewed from one of the shoreline preserves, or via the 2-mile drive along scenic River Road, or a 3-hour narrated cruise aboard the Rip Van Winkle sailing out of Rondout Creek, you will be immersed in the revitalizing atmosphere of the Hudson River.

The Esopus Meadows Lighthouse of 1871 is the last remaining wooden lighthouse on the Hudson. It is within viewing distance from the Esopus Meadows Point Preserve which offers greenway trails and an interpretive botanical trail. In the heart of the Esopus ridge is the John Burroughs Sanctuary, complete with walking trails and the National Historic Landmark “Slabsides” – a rustic cabin retreat built in 1895 where John Burroughs wrote and hosted such luminaries as Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Ford.

“One has only to sit down in the woods or the fields, or by the shore of the river or lake, and nearly everything of interest will come round to him...” wrote John Burroughs in his essay, *A Sharp Lookout*, in 1883. That was true of Esopus in the 19th century and is true in the 21st century as well. Local hiking trails ranging from Sunday strolls to rigorous hikes abound at nature preserves including the Shaupeneak Ridge recreation area featuring Louisa Pond, and the Black Creek Forest and Preserve. Here a plethora of flora and fauna await.

Esopus was home to Isabella Baumfree – the abolitionist and suffragist known as Sojourner Truth. The town center, which boasts an environmentally friendly Town Hall, is the village of Port Ewen. A small park there is dedicated to her memory. At the north end of the village with a beautiful Hudson River view, duck pond, and resident turtle is the Esopus Library, offering a variety of adult and children’s programs, lectures, and art exhibits. Heading south along Route 9W is the business district and further along are fine restaurants, family entertainment venues and affordable lodging facilities. Lining the shores of the Hudson along that route are stately religious institutions and monasteries; most with bookstores, gift shops and public tours. These religious orders I deem inadvertent conservationists: spirituality is the primary focus, but because of their location on the riverfront, Cabrini, Christian Brothers, Holy Cross, Marist, and the Bruderhof have preserved the rustic shoreline. In fact, in a solo kayak paddle I undertook last year from Albany to Manhattan, I discovered that no town south of Catskill has so preserved their riverfront in its natural state as well as Esopus – with the exception of Saugerties.

To attend this 90 minute presentation on the nature and historic sites of Esopus, register (free of charge) with the Esopus Library for the lecture at 6:30 p.m. on Wednesday, September 25. Says Esopus Library director, Kelly Tomaseski, “Skip Doyle has done an important educational and preservation service for us in the past lecturing on the Hudson River School of Art; we are pleased to host his presentation on the heritage of our Town of Esopus.”