

THE UNDERHILL MILL ON THE CROTON

By FREDERICK A. UNDERHILL

(with notes on Croton Point)

In the early part of the nineteenth century three sons of Isaac and Sarah Field Underhill of Yorktown, to wit, Robert Underhill of Croton Point, Abraham I. Underhill of Yorktown and Joshua Underhill of New York City were the owners of a flour and grist mill near the covered Quaker Bridge on the lower Croton River. The mill was located about three quarters of a mile below the present Croton Dam. The firm name was Joshua Underhill and Company, Flour Merchants. Joshua Underhill, residing in New York, was the exchange member of the firm while Robert and Abraham Underhill attended to the milling operations. My grandfather, George Underhill, was a clerk at the mill checking the receipts of the grain and the shipment of the flour to New York. The firm did not depend on local farmers for their grain although they did some local milling. The boats bringing grain and taking out flour went up the Croton River at high tide about as far as you can see, or could see at that time, from its mouth. For some years the supplies and the products were carried by a two masted, flat bottomed periauger—as a Dutch schooner was called—of which the owner, captain, supercargo, pilot and boss stevedore was Cornelius Vanderbilt who hailed from Staten Island. This captain knew New York Harbor and the Hudson River as an open book and made himself efficient, successful and popular in this line of business and was an important factor in the success of the Underhill mill. (Wheaton J. Lane in his excellent "Commodore Vanderbilt," 1794-1877 chapters 2 and 3, describes the sixteen year old boatman's purchase of his first periauger for one hundred dollars and his methods in securing the local carrying trade.) The flour was sold as "Underhill's Croton Mills Superfine Flour." In 1841 Underhill Brothers, after a half century of operation, gave up milling. There were several reasons, one was the shortage of water for power in times of continued drought, but the final decision was for the opposite condition. In early January the First Croton Dam was carried away by a great water and ice flood, the flour mill was cleaned out by the swollen stream with other mills and nearly every farmhouse in the lower valley destroyed. (Griffin in his "Westchester and Its People, Vol. 1, pages 341-343, quotes the Hudson River Chronicle of Sing Sing of January 12, 1841. Not only did the area below the Dam suffer but also up river both the Woods and Pines bridges were destroyed. Even more serious damage was done to Croton Bay in which quantities of sand and debris were deposited closing it to use by sloops and barges.) The Underhill mill was never replaced and the

THE QUARTERLY BULLETIN

business with a "Croton Mills" trade mark was continued by George V. Hecker and Company's steam mills in New York City. Our family have used the Croton Mills family flour for more than a century and have it in our house this day and date. This information I received from my father, George W. Underhill, my grandfather, George Underhill and my great uncle, Dr. Richard T. Underhill.

In the current New York Historical Society Quarterly is a copy of Robert Havell's beautiful painting of the Hudson River from Tarrytown Heights. Accompanying the picture is an article by Harry V. Havell describing the artist and his work. "The point of land center foreground is Kingsland Point and the one back of it Croton Point." At the outer end of the latter, above the trees, attention is called to "the old time (?) Underhill Mansion." This interesting material is appreciated and suggested our publication of Mr. F. A. Underhill's reminiscences. Between the Underhill mill, near Quaker Bridge and the Underhill Mansion shown in the picture, was the long history of the family domain outlined in these notes by documents from the Westchester Historical Society Library.

Prominent among these items is the wedding certificate of the Robert Underhills with a very human comment attached thereto. "At a Monthly Meeting at Shapauqua 14th of 10th month 1784 James Cook and Zadok Birdsall report the marriage of Robert Underhill and Mary Hallock accomplished orderly at the meeting house but the entertainment at home exceeded the bounds of moderation and advice given on that account." In 1792 the brothers bought land from Pierre Van Cortlandt (Liber L page 216) and established the mill near Quaker Bridge. Nearby in the deep gorge of the lower Croton River the senior partner, Robert Underhill, built his house. "That wild home on the banks of the Croton" was described by his daughter, Esther Underhill Willets, in her Memories—manuscript of 1858—with much praise of her parents. "There were high rocky hills, deep ravines, and ledges of rock projecting over precipices that were washed at the bottom by turbid waters; and the high and long foot bridges—how they would tremble as we ran over them—and there was the little bridge over the mill race too. The older children, venturing more, were exposed to the dangers of the mills, the boats and the deep waters. Had my mother, Mary Hallock Underhill, been at all timid in her disposition she could not have lived there. Her courage was remarkable. I have no recollection of ever having seen her without presence of mind under difficulties or daunted in the face of danger. Her father (Jesse Hallock) was for a

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number of years a sea captain living on the Sound and there is no doubt that my mother inherited much of natural courage." In this valley home were born nine of their eleven children, including the two sons who were to be most closely identified with their father's work. "We children never seemed to lack for anything in play for nature kindly furnished all but our books without price. Our stately halls were roofed with green boughs and floored with large flat rocks. The water, the birds and the insects were our music. My father was careful to provide us with good books. At one time he gave us "memoirs of Pious Children," then called "Dying Sayings," containing a treasury of Heavenly instruction and bound in dark leather." Robert Underhill became a founder of Croton Meeting in 1797 and with Phebe Fields one of its first ministers.

In 1804 this substantial citizen purchased the nearby Croton Point—then known as Teller's Point—from Elijah Morgan and Robert McCord. The 250 acres tract extending southwest about two miles into the Hudson River commanded views up and down the river as well as the long line of mountains on the western bank. A greater contrast with the former home near Quaker Bridge cannot be imagined. Indian remains were on the land and the place of the 1780 successful cannonading of the Vulture—Major Andre's vessel—was proudly pointed out by men who had been in that action. Moreover the Point land was fertile and its proprietor, selling his share of the mill, became a very prosperous farmer. During the War of 1812 he planted eighty acres of watermelons in order to supply the New York market which had been cut off from its former source of supply in the south by the British patrols. Tradition tells that as many as six vessels at a time were lying off Croton Point waiting for the fruit to mature. Another of his successful ventures was the growing of castor beans. Finally toward the end of his life he became interested in viticulture setting out his first vineyard in 1827. U. P. Hedrick in his "Grapes of New York" refers to Robert Underhill and his development of the resources of Croton Point.

After their father's death this property was vested in his two sons, Dr. Richard T. Underhill and William A. Underhill. Each of these men continued the Point's development and established well known names for successful management.

The older brother had given up the practise of medicine in New York City in order to develop grape culture on his eighty five acre farm. In "The Transactions of the American Institute for the City of New York," 1847, are twelve references to Richard Underhill as an outstanding agricultural expert. The local press contained many refer-

ences to him, none more interesting than an editorial in the Westchester Herald of Sing Sing on October 23, 1849. "In the press of other matters last week, we neglected to acknowledge the receipt of a basket of the most delightful Isabella grapes from the Croton Point vineyard of Dr. R. T. Underhill, the indefatigable president of the County Agricultural Society. This favor is annually extended to us and is highly appreciated by us. Indeed, we feel it is a pleasure as well as a duty to commend the example of this enthusiastic cultivator of the soil who devotes a considerable portion of his time and fortune to the improvements of the products of agriculture. His variety of native grapes at the late fair attracted much attention. We hesitate not to say, according to our humble judgment in such matters, that his entire premises at Croton Point form altogether a model farm. We therefore commend his system, as well as his enterprising public spirit, to the imitation of our farmers in all portions of the County." Two years later the American Institute's medal is inscribed—

Awarded to
R. T. Underhill
for the best display of
Native Grapes
1851

This is a valuable exhibition piece in the Society's Library. While president of the Westchester County Agricultural Society he was invited by Judge William Jay to address the farmers of Bedford at the Court House in 1851. As a result of this enthusiastic meeting the Bedford Farmers Club, now approaching its centennial of usefulness, was established.

The historical Society has a rare pamphlet of 1866 entitled "Croton Point Wines—the pure product of the grape." The producer was R. T. Underhill M.D. of Croton Point and his New York depot was located at #7 Clinton Hall corner of 8th Street between Broadway and 4th Avenue. "The vineyards from which these wines are produced are over 50 acres in extent upon the Croton Point peninsula surrounded by the water of the Hudson River, with the broad bay of Haverstraw above, the Croton on the east and the Tappan Zee below rendering the locality one peculiarly adapted to growing the grape in its highest perfection. The vineyards show a gentle easterly and southerly slope with a belt of woods running around the westerly sides sheltering the vines from storms and cold winds. The vineyards consist principally of Isabella, Catawba, Hartford, Prolific, Oporto, Norton's Virginia Seedling

and Clinton grapes." A recommendation from Dr. Willard Parker, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Board of Health and a member of the faculty of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, said, "I have examined the wines from the vineyard of Dr. Underhill and I am confident they are pure and can be relied on as a tonic in sickness and for table use. At this time when wine and spirits are so generally vile compounds whose use is destructive to health, Dr. Underhill confers an incalculably great favor upon the public." The New York Herald, December 29, 1863, "Dr. Underhill's exquisite native Port Wine is about the best we have ever tasted—far superior to the Cincinnati wines manufactured by the famous Longworth. . . . This pure article, after being kept in the cellar for a short time, will be equal to any wine that can be imported from the London docks." Two years later the Times commended Underhill's wines as "decidedly the best and safest beverage that ladies can offer to their callers on New Year's Day."

Of Stephen Wood Underhill, the son of William A. and Abby Wood Underhill, Dr. Hedrick has this comment, "In his boyhood he became familiar with the grape growing operations of his father and uncle and about 1860 became interested in hybridizing as a means of originating new varieties. Most of his work was done before 1870. He originated Black Defiance, Black Eagle, Croton, Irving, Senasqua and many other named and unnamed sorts. Of his varieties it may be said that they generally show too many vinifera weaknesses for profitable commercial sorts." The author of "The Grapes of New York" summed up the achievements of the Underhills by saying, "They were pioneer vineyardists in this state and were men of great enterprise and initiative contributing much to American viticulture by precept and example."

On the north side of Croton Point the younger brother, William A. Underhill, who owned 165 acres had established his brick manufacturing business about 1830. This was one of the thirty four brick yards credited to the Town of Cortlandt because of the deposit of clay along the Hudson River. Over sixty five men living in a large building on the property were employed in the Underhill yard. In order to have skilled supervision of the machinery which was becoming more and more intricate a brother-in-law, Richard D. Tallcot who had been proprietor of the Phoenix Foundry in Oswego was brought to the Point as a partner in 1849. William Underhill had married Abby Quinby Wood of Bedford and her sister, Phebe Jane Wood, was the wife of Richard Tallcot. For this machinist family tradition claims an important part in the 1865 construction of the long bridge near the Van Cortlandt Manor House to carry the Post Road over

the Croton River. The importance and extent of the partners' brick making is attested by their business cards—

Underhill & Talcott
Manufacturers of
Croton Point
FRONT BRICK
Builders are particularly referred to these brick
for their fine edge and durable qualities
Depot — Pier foot of Charlton St., N. Y.
J. G. Clark Agent

Underhill & Talcott
Manufacturers of
EXTRA LARGE BRICK
for the
CUBA TRADE
hard, smooth and strong
introduced four years at
Havana, Matanzas & Cardenas
Steam brick works at Croton Point on the Hudson
Address Croton Landing, N. Y.
W. A. Underhill R. D. Tallcot

The transportation of the product was in charge of William Underhill's son-in-law, Richard L. Walker, who had married Mary Underhill. The Walker schooners plied back and forth to New York City as well as north and south along the coast. Later other members

of the family cooperated in the business. Phebe Jane Wood Talcott took charge of the restaurant for the brick yard employees and her report of their capacity for food ranks her as a provider par excellence. In like manner Elizabeth Wales Underhill, the wife of Stephen Wood Underhill, kept the books of the concern. In the Westchester Historical Quarterly, volume 16, page 59, (July 1940) is this significant statement by Alvin Higgins, "In its day Croton Point had been a principality all its own, with 75 acres devoted to luscious grapes, and in addition, large apple orchards and hot houses for the cultivation of roses. The manufacture of brick there began over one hundred years ago and for more than fifty years enameled bricks for tiling and wainscoating made on Croton Point were in great demand."

There were two large houses on the Point. On the north side stood the delightful old homestead of Robert and Mary Underhill which in its original form probably antedated their acquisition of the land. This residence, duly reconstructed, became the home of William and Abby Underhill and their five children. It was always known as "The Homestead." Richard Underhill, a bachelor, chose an elevated position near the western extremity of the Point for the erection of his Italian Villa in 1846. This is the mansion depicted in the Havell painting already mentioned in these notes. Ashlar marble quarried at Sing Sing and cut by prison labor formed the basement while the upper portion was stuccoed brick. Over the front door was a tower room enjoying extensive views up and down the river. It was another large and commodious house given to hospitality and one of the show places of the county. Visitors from far and near were attracted to the Point houses as traditions and letters bear ample testimony. Among the many assets of the place were shad fishing and crabbing, duck shooting and hunting, boating and skating, together with the wonderful gardens and orchards and all permeated with the most cordial atmosphere. Recently a relative of the Underhills who had often been their guest was asked what Croton Point was like and his prompt reply was the all embracing word, "Heaven."

In the early seventies by a strange fatality both the Underhill brothers died within a few months of each other. Richard left no will and the court appointed Henry Wood of Bedford, another brother-in-law, as the Administrator. His records are in our Historical Society Library. Thirty thousand gallons of wine, the vineyards, the wine presses and the villa were offered for sale. "This is beyond question the finest property in the United States for a gentleman's residence" read the notice of the auction. The brick yards, reported to be worth

over one hundred thousand dollars, were continued by Richard Tallcot until his death in 1880. A decade and a half later - just over a century after Robert Underhill had acquired his interest in the Quaker Bridge mill - the family sold all their property on Croton Point. Then in the words of Mr. Higgins, "Croton Point was anybody's stepchild and during the First World War came perilously near becoming the site of enormous war plants. Finally the County rescued it." In 1924 the entire area with its four miles of shore frontage including Croton Beach, together with its wooded plateaus and level meadows, was acquired by the Park Commission and developed into one of the most attractive and popular play grounds for the people of Westchester County.

With Frederick Underhill's interesting reminiscences these brief notes form a family saga of three generations worthy of a skilled novelist. Robert Underhill, the successful grist mill operator, was enabled to purchase Croton Point and to start its agricultural development. Of the next generation Richard and William Underhill amplified their father's ambition and work not only making the property pre-eminent for its wine and brick, but also attaining a most gracious and hospitable family life. Then within the lifetime of Robert's grandson, Stephen Wood Underhill, came inevitable changes through the exhaustion of the clay deposits and the availability of grapes from other and more favored sections of the nation. Although these drastic conditions ended the Underhill family empire on Croton Point yet they opened the way for the beautiful river peninsula to become public property open to the enjoyment of all the people.

Chart showing relationships

Isaac Underhill, 1726-1814, married 1756 Sarah Field

1. Robert Underhill, 1761-1827, m 1784 Mary Hallock
 - (1) George Underhill, 1795-1868, m 1822 Sally Ann Waring
George Washington Underhill, 1823-1899, m 1854 Mary M. Haight
Frederick A. Underhill, 1856-1938, m 1876 Annie Dawson
m 1906 Frances Barrett
 - (2) Esther T. Underhill, 1797-1879, m 1824 Jacob S. Willets
 - (3) Richard T. Underhill, 1803-1871, unmarried
 - (4) William A. Underhill, 1804-1873, m 1833 Abby Quinby Wood and her sister Phebe Jane Wood m 1848 Richard D. Talcott 1827-1880
Stephen Wood Underhill, 1837-1925, m 1868 Elizabeth Lyon Wales
Mary Underhill, 1842-1889, m 1863 Richard L. Walker, 1837-1905
 - (5) Mary Jane Underhill, 1810-1871, m 1835 Henry Wood, 1815-1903
2. Abraham I. Underhill, 1763-1841, m 1805 Rebecca Field
3. Joshua Underhill, 1765-1839, m 1787 Mary Sutton