

When Nutley Was Famous for a Hole in the Ground

FROM ARCHIE COE

IT MAY seem supercilious to say that two centuries ago Nutley was famous for a hole in the ground, but it's the truth. Miles upon miles of Little Old New York's brownstone mansions, scores of churches, forts, theatres, many old court houses and post offices came out of Nutley's hole in the ground.

First a Dutch settlement, then a corner of the British King's colony of New Jersey, Nutley's present Latin flavor dates, also to the hole in the ground. Many of the town's families of today stem from the specialists who were brought over from Italy to operate the quarries, who, tired of the loneliness of life in the immigrant barracks, saved up their money and brought their wives and children over to the New World.

As long ago as two and a half centuries, the richly tinted sandstone which lies under Nutley was being carved out of the earth. There are houses standing today here in Nutley that were built around 1700 out of beautiful stone which was local to our quarries; Kingsland House on Kingsland Road and the jewel of Dutch Colonial architecture which stands in River Road near the old Yountakah clubhouse are proof of the durability of Nutley sandstone and both were built in the 1700's.

Only in a comparatively short strip along the Passaic River was the valuable sandstone found-red where the iron predominated in the sub-soil or gray where lime abounded.

The town's first quarries were owned by John and Abraham King, who dug the sandstone near the river bank about where the Belleville line now passes. They carted their product down River Road - then called Queen's Road, to the Second River in Belleville where it was loaded on scows which were sailed around the bay to New York. Most of the stone of New York's mansions came from that quarry nearly two and a half centuries ago.

It was a century later that the Phillips quarry was opened in 1810 south of Avondale Road where Father Glotzbach Memorial Park is destined to grow. Across Avondale Road, the Passaic Quarry Company began its extraction of stone just about a century ago and in 1854 sold its property for \$130,000 to William Joyce and Son.

The King quarry was dug on the site of the old family farm which straddled a brook that ran on a line about where the boundary between Nutley and Belleville is now drawn. It was in operation long before the Revolutionary War and from it the brothers extracted the fine gray stone from which the walls of New York's old city hall were built.

During the War of Independence, Abraham King took on a contract to tan hides and make shoes for Washington's Army. It proved to be more profitable

than quarrying stone, so the King brothers broke up and while John continued to dig out sandstone Abraham expanded his shoe business in Belleville.

The Phillips quarry came into being when the Joralemon family property was divided, and the stone of which Fort Lafayette, which stood in the Narrows in New York Harbor, was built came from there. It went from hand to hand until Alexander Phillips bought it in 1846. He modernized it by adapting the new sensation, a steam engine, to a band saw and had the first steam saw for cutting stone in the whole region.

Last of the big quarries was Hoche Brothers quarry, which town boys best remembered as "Crocker's hole," a favorite swimming place. It was opened behind the Feuerbach Hotel far up Washington Avenue at the extremity of North Woods. They found a ledge of the fine grained sandstone, much darker than the stone taken nearer the river.

The stone was shipped by barge on the Passaic River, but oxen and horses were used to carry the huge blocks of untrimmed sandstone from the quarries to the docks. Those huge carts cut the roads badly and the good people of town stayed away from the quarry area as much as possible.

The Avondale section where the quarries were dug was called "Derrick Town" because a forest of derrick masts rose over the ever-deepening holes to haul out the blocks of stone. There were many accidents; cables and ropes slipped or broke and huge blocks of stone fell back on the workers underneath.

A scarcity of trained workers resulted in the quarry owners importing skilled quarrymen from Italy. Attracted by the comparative high pay, they left their families behind and came under contract to stay five years. A lonesome, homesick lot, they lived in the shanties that spread around the quarries and across Washington Avenue before that street was cut through.

Whenever one of these Italian quarrymen was killed, he was buried in a patch of green alongside the quarry and word of his demise might or might not be sent to his family when his monthly money orders stopped. When workmen were getting ready to grade for Father Glotzbach Park, the project was held up when Director of Parks and Public Property A. T. DeMuro discovered a century old map which showed a small area identified as "Italian cemetery in perpetuity." In the new park it is set aside with reverence.

For many years the quarrying was extremely profitable. Water was bothersome but the seepage was pumped out every morning before the workmen went below. As stone was removed, the holes in the ground reached a depth of 100 feet or more.

At that depth the flooding became more serious, requiring more time for pumping the quarries dry every day. It cost more, too, to extract quarried stone from the pit and in the end it was their depth which caused the quarries one after another, to be abandoned.

For many years, the water filled quarries presented quite a problem to Nutley. For town boys they were the finest of swimming holes. Many Nutley citizens are alive today who swam in "Crocker's" quarry or in the big holes on either side of Park Avenue.

"Crocker's" was a misnomer. It belonged to Hoche Brothers, but in the parlance of the town boys it became "Crocker's." It was located back of the Feuerbach Hotel in the tall brush. No boy ever bothered to put on a bathing suit. They used to undress, hang their clothes on a handy bush and, taking a long run through the bushes, dive off into space - about fifty feet of it, down to the pool of water which half-filled the quarry. Most of the time there was from 50 to 60 feet of water in the hole.

"With the Passaic River, dirty as it was, the Morris Canal and the quarries every boy in Nutley knew how to swim," Archie Coe, one of those who swam in Crocker's quarry, recalled.

"You really had to know how to swim when you dove off at 'Crocker's' hole. When you ran through the bushes and took off at the rim, you had to fall 40 or 50 feet before you hit the water. There were rocks jutting out from all sides. Then to make it even more difficult, there was a huge door off the ice box of the Feuerbach Hotel which someone threw into the quarry, as a float. We had to steer ourselves in mid-air to dodge the rocks and avoid crashing on the ice box door.

"The police never bothered us for swimming naked, but Emil Schneider, a round little Dutchman who was as big around as he was tall, did. He didn't mind it on week days, but he always had a big crowd of picnickers who came to his place on Sunday and they overflowed the bushes which he called his 'Picnic Grove.' There was some women among them, so old Schneider used to come after us with a buggy whip. He made a lot of noise and at first sight of him, dozens of naked boys would take off through the air for the water in the hole."

G. R. B. Symonds recalled one feat by Archie Coe which still stayed in his memory. Coe, Symonds remembered was delegated to dive to the bottom of the quarry-under 40 feet of water - to ascertain whether the pump was still there which had been used to pump the quarry dry every day. Coe, Symonds remembered, made it and came up with a piece of the pump in his hand.

Today there is no sign anywhere of the quarries except for the pile of rubble at the foot of Grant Avenue, along River Road. It is a man-made mountain of inferior stone and scrapings from the Joyce quarry.

The Joyce and Phillips quarries were filled up with Nutley's garbage and scraps over a period of more than ten years.

Even now, nearly a quarter of a century after the quarries were filled, the ground in them sinks as tin cans rust and the volcano of decomposed vegetable

matter within the quarries rises and falls with the seasons.

It was that seasonal bubbling of the decaying fill in the quarries that, in the end, robbed Nutley of one of its great sporting establishments, the old Velodrome and its saucer track on the site of the Joyce quarry. The sinking was so steady that the saucer track sank too, and became so rough that its hills and dales were a handicap for the bicycle racers. The track was propped against the sinking, but finally the Velodrome was abandoned and disappeared.

About all that remains in Avondale to remind modern Nutley of the era of the quarries, is St. Mary's old brownstone Church, the Gothic structure that stands on the east side of St. Mary's Place, now used for Church club meetings.

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- [Quarry](#)
- [Parks](#)
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