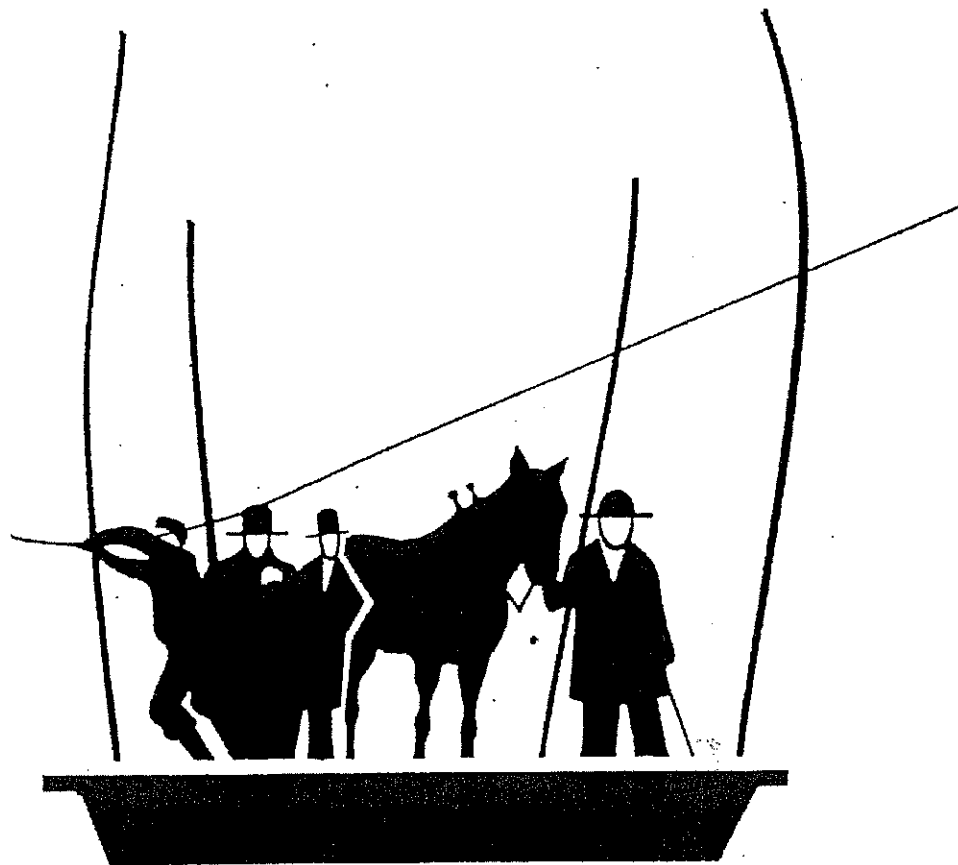


*Vischer Ferry
Nature and Historic Preserve*

Master Plan



**A Proposal To Enhance The Recreational, Historical And Natural Features Of The
Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve**

Vischer Ferry Preserve Master Plan Committee

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Drawn from:

The Town of Clifton Park's Historic Preservation Commission
The Office of Parks, Recreation & Community Affairs
The Saratoga Land Conservancy

Other Interested Parties Include:

The Audubon Society of the Capital Region
The Hudson Mohawk Bird Club
The New York State Thruway Authority

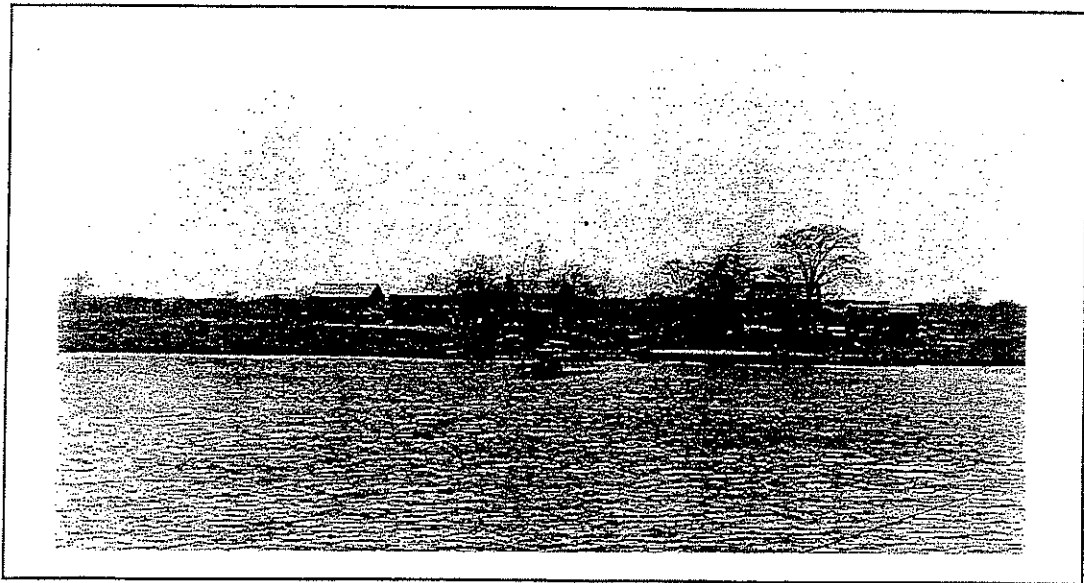
Revision 1 11/6/96

2.0 History of the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve

In the fall of 1977, the New York State Department of Transportation and the Town of Clifton Park embarked on a unique partnership. Through this cooperative venture, over 450 acres of historically and ecologically significant land adjacent to the Mohawk River, much of it within the Vischer Ferry Historic District, was established as the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve. The Preserve has three areas of interest: a wetland ecosystem, the remains of the Erie Canal, and the site of the Town's first settlement. The Town of Clifton Park has been managing and maintaining the Preserve since 1977. In 1991, the New York State Thruway Authority became owner of the current area of the Preserve and surrounding lands.

2.1 *Early Human Presence*

The land that now comprises the Preserve was farmed by the Mohawk Indians prior to the first white settlers' arrival. They called the area "Canastigione," meaning "corn flats". By 1672, Clifton Park's first white settlers arrived from Niskayuna, Schenectady, and Albany, and established a settlement on the Mohawk that became known as "Fort's Ferry." This area was part of the Canastigione Land Patent of 1708, granted to land speculators by Queen Anne of England.



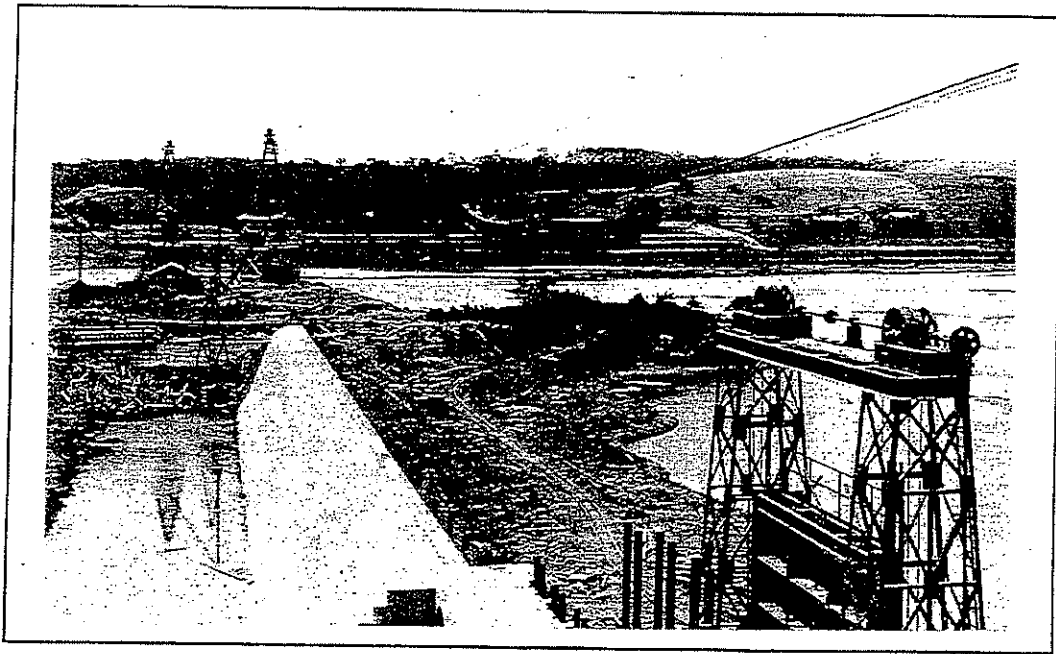
Ferry Scow at Fort's Ferry c. 1905

In 1822 local residents were employed in digging "Clinton's Ditch", the Erie Canal, through this area. They were paid based on the number of cubic yards of earth removed. The Erie Canal officially opened from Albany to Buffalo in 1825, and was so successful that it had to be enlarged ten years later. A Canal-side settlement, Clute's Dry Dock, grew up in the eastern section of the Preserve, while in the western section Double Lock 19 and its support buildings were established.

In 1907, the Mohawk River was dammed to create the locks of the Barge Canal. This made the Mohawk River navigable, but raised the water level to such an extent that annual spring floods occurred in the area of the Preserve. The settlements at Fort's Ferry and Clute's Dry Dock were abandoned at this time, and what was once farmland became marsh. When the Barge Canal officially opened in 1917, the old Erie Canal was abandoned.

2.2 Dams and Dikes

After 1907, spring ice flows from the Mohawk River inundated portions of Vischer Ferry. This annual flooding created and sustained the wetlands that make up the Preserve today. The flood waters deposited nutrient-rich silt on the land bordering the river, enriching some of the best farmland in the region. The wetlands along the riverbank were ponds and thriving cattail marshes that teemed with wildlife.



Lock 7 Dam c. 1910

➔ In 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps built the first earthen dike and spillway system at the Preserve. The intent was to control water levels in the ponds between the Canal and the river to improve duck nesting. Within a few years, the dike was washed away by spring floods.

➔ In 1952, the New York State Department of Conservation developed a revenue program based on duck hunting for the Preserve; however, the Department's plan for deriving revenues from duck hunting on the Preserve backfired when the ducks vacated the site when the shooting started. By the second day of the hunting season, the ducks were safely dabbling or diving in nearby Stony Creek Reservoir where hunting is prohibited. There have been observations that this is still the case today.

Another attempt to control the water level in the ponds was made in 1962 with the construction of a second spillway. However, this attempt was not entirely successful.

When the last generation of dikes was built in the early 1960's, sediment was scooped out of the ponds and they were flooded to a depth of six to eight feet. Periodic dredging helped to maintain this depth; however, drainage of the area had always been poor and, due to the dams, the impact of annual spring floods were much more severe. Vegetation that could survive the temporary spring flooding was now permanently inundated. Jagged skeletons of drowned trees are visible around the Preserve. Most of the trees, however, and all shrubby and herbaceous vegetation were completely submerged, forming a thick layer of decomposing material at the bottom of the ponds. Coupled with further mishaps, this changed the environment of the Preserve drastically.

While the dikes could not prevent the spring floods from raising the water to abnormally high levels, the dams kept most of the river-borne silt out of the ponds, and for many years silt accumulated behind the dam. In 1964, the ferocity of the spring floods broke through the dike and millions of cubic yards of silt were deposited in the ponds. A veritable tidal wave of silt transformed the wetland in the space of a few hours. When it was over and the sediment had settled, the inland ponds contained a mere two feet of water, the ponds near the Mohawk River had only four feet of water, and silt blanketed much of the surrounding marshland.

2.3 The Present Condition

The stage was set for the ecological changes that are evident today. Shallower water levels allowed invading purple loosestrife, pondweed, and water-chestnut to overrun the ponds. The deposition of such vast quantities of silt raised many of the higher areas sufficiently above the flood-line to allow upland vegetation from drier habitats to move in.

In the 1970's, the Department of Environmental Conservation decided not to disturb the Preserve areas. The fields where corn was previously planted as food for wildlife, were abandoned, as were fields that had been mowed to provide habitat for birds. These fields are now overgrown with plants representative of various stages of ecological succession. With these changes, previous populations of some species of birds and mammals decreased, while other species moved in to take advantage of the drier, muddier habitats.

2.4 Previous Work Done By the Vischer Ferry Association

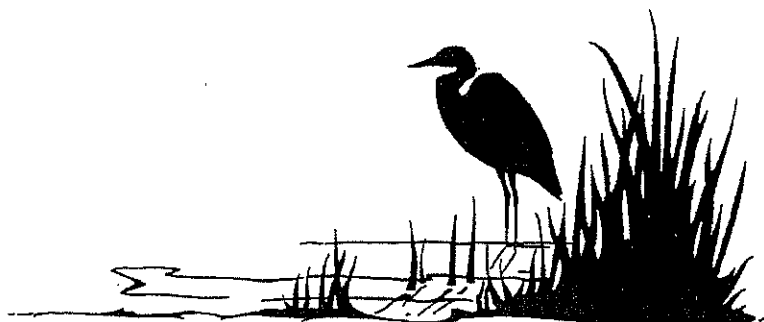
During the summer of 1975, a consulting firm made studies of the recreational needs of Clifton Park under a contract with the Town of Clifton Park, Office of Parks, Recreation and Community Affairs. In the 1975 report, there was a discussion of the Vischer Ferry Game Management Area, which was located between the Mohawk River and Erie Canal, and which was under the control of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The Town did not proceed on the basis of recommendations made by the consulting firm. The Vischer Ferry Association (VFA), because of its interest in and proximity to the area, offered to assist the Town in acquiring a lease on the land and

developing a proposed recreational land-use plan that expanded the Preserve modestly, taking care to prevent overuse or use with an adverse impact that could damage the features being used. In a letter from Supervisor McCloskey, dated February 9, 1976, the Town accepted the VFA offer.

3.0 Plan Enhancements

The overall goal of the Master Plan is to enhance the recreational, historic and ecological features of the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve. Recommendations have been developed for five areas in order to achieve this overall goal:

- Recreational
- Historic
- Ecological
- Educational
- Funding



Suggested actions have been classified as:

- S - short term (occurring over 12-18 months)
- M - medium term (occurring over 2-4 years)
- L - long term (occurring over 5-6 years)
- O - ongoing

3.1 *Recreational Opportunities*

The goals for enhancing the recreational features of the Vischer Ferry Nature and Historic Preserve are:

- Create, improve and maintain the Preserve's trails and other areas for visitors;
- Extend the boundaries of the Preserve to incorporate adjacent important features;
- Provide safe, pleasant opportunities for canoeing along the Canal and Mohawk River.

3.1.1 *Create, Improve, and Maintain the Preserve Trails and Other Areas for Visitors.*

The 450-acre Preserve contains many trails for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing. The Preserve has many features that are visitor attractions, including the wildlife (especially avifauna) and the historic sites along the Canal and the Preserve. Our intent is to further open up existing trails and to make these trails accessible (where possible) to the physically disadvantaged.