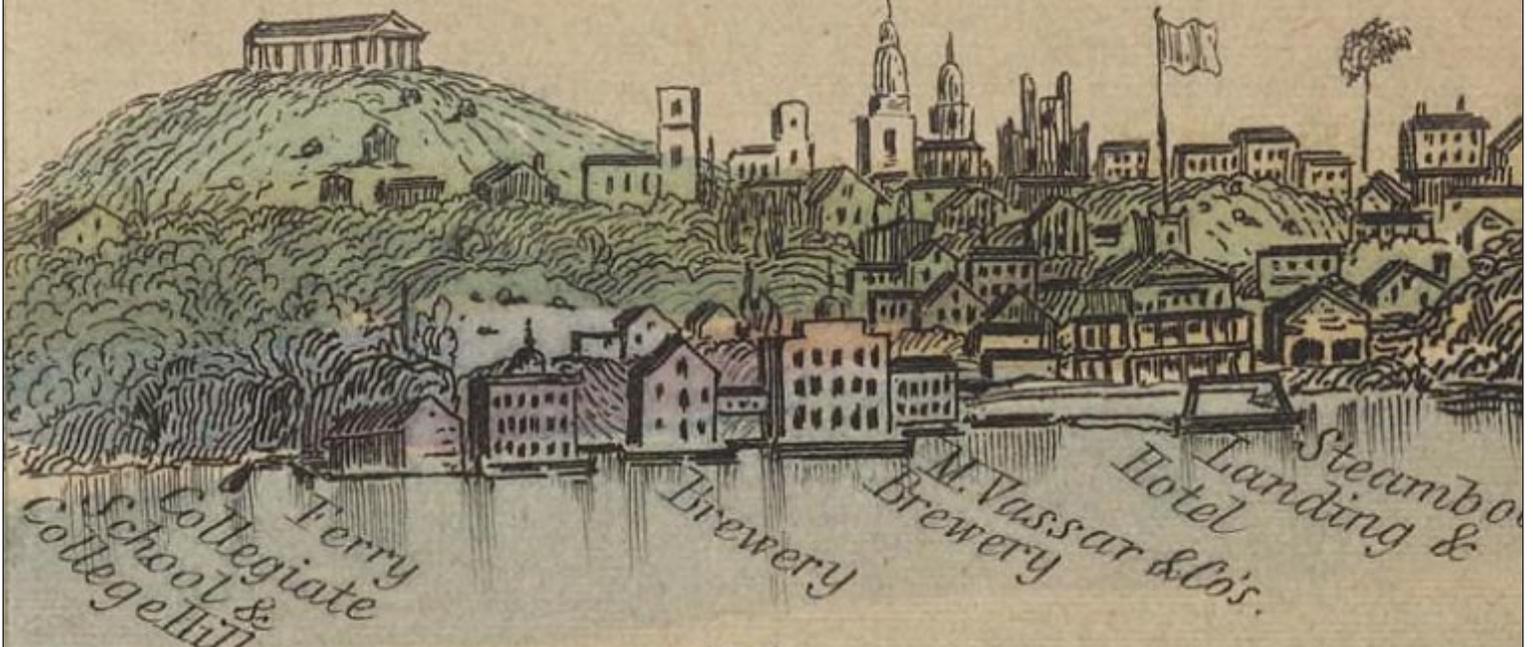


COLLEGE HILL, POUGHKEEPSIE, NY

by Vivian Yess Wadlin



Early Poughkeepsie

Looking at the postcard images throughout this issue, it is easy to understand Poughkeepsie's "Queen City" designation. In the 1800s, Poughkeepsie was a beautiful, bustling, wealth-generating place bursting with industry, culture, philanthropy, imagination, and education. The city's most significant enabler, the Hudson River, and later the railroads, brought materials, people, and investment to the area. The rails and the river then took Poughkeepsie's industrial output to the world.

In a popular tourism publication of the steamboat era, *Wade's Guide* (also source of the illustration above), the word "Poughkeepsie" translates as "Safe Harbor"* in the language of the Native Americans living there when Hudson and crew sailed passed it in 1609. The explorers may have noted the highest hill visible from the river. That gentle rise set back from the shore would become known as College Hill. It is still Poughkeepsie's geographic high point. In some ways, it was also its cultural apex.

College Hill's College

Constructed there in 1835 was a classically inspired school building measuring 55' x 115', not including its covered colonnade-supported porticos. The NYS Legislature incorporated the Poughkeepsie Collegiate Institute on May 26, 1836. This school, opened by Charles Bartlett, cemented the site's name, "College Hill."

The College Hill story is well documented in newspapers, history and guidebooks. However, the most complete and recent history of College Hill is from the "Statement of Significance: Historic College Hill" by Holly Wahlburg (2016) for the Revive College Hill Park Coalition. Wahlburg details the park-site's ups and downs to the present

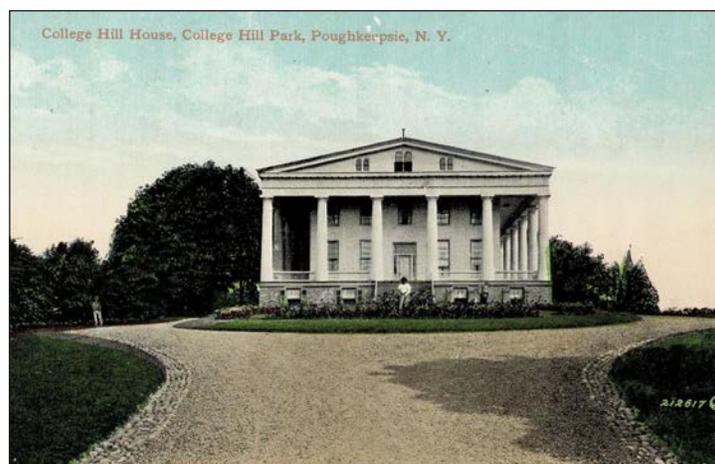
day. The article covers the early efforts of the city's philanthropists, politicians, the Improvement Party, and others devoted to making Poughkeepsie a first-class city and later, College Hill into a magnificent public park. But that is getting ahead of our story.

Bartlett's school proved quite successful, and he ran it until his death in 1857. *The Daily Press* newspaper of May 15, 1852, contained an article on Poughkeepsie's many schools and colleges, singling out Mr. Bartlett's school on College Hill as "the best of its kind in America." The report continued that after Bartlett's death, his nephew Charles Bartlett Warring, and his partner, Otis

Brisbee, former teachdeers there, conducted the College Hill school for an additional five years. Then, both men left and started separate private schools—Brisbee's in Poughkeepsie.

Riverview Military Academy

A postcard image of Brisbee's very successful Riverview Military Academy on the shore of the Hudson appears on page 4. Riverview news articles frequently discussed the school's roots at College Hill. The following is from a speech celebrating the 75th anniver-





Page 1, top: Illustration from Wade's Guide Map of the Hudson River showing the Dutchess County shore with College Hill, Clinton St., Poughkeepsie, NY, as its high point. Page 1, bottom: Original building at College Hill Park, card circa 1906

Right: Dutchess County Court House, image circa 1915. Page 2, Left: College Hill Conservatory, a greenhouse designed by Charles Mitchell with cost underwritten by W.W. Smith, at College Hill Park, erected 1904, card is circa 1910. Below, Dudley Pavilion as it appears today on College Hill.

Images are from the collection of Vivian Yess Wadlin.



sary of the River View Academy in 1911.

Former Riverview student Judge Henry A. Gildersleeve praised the school's start and practical roots as the Poughkeepsie Collegiate Institute for which the College Hill building had been erected. He said,

"Its impressive architecture and prominent location made it at once one of the most conspicuous points of interest on the Hudson River, and its progress was such that it was soon pointed out to all travelers as one of the best institutions of learning in the country."

Gildersleeve said it was at College Hill that America's first education-based gymnasium was constructed because Mr. Bartlett appreciated "the value of physical training as an asset to a boy's mental development." Unfortunately, the gym structure (a separate round building) burned in 1870. Riverview also held physical training as a high ideal, naming its gymnasium after Bartlett.

The College Hill site changed hands many times. Its owners conceived varied uses for the site's features, including, among others, a hotel, an orphanage, and a TB sanatorium. Not all came to fruition. More on this later.

Philanthropist W.W. Smith

Much changed for the hilltop site in October of 1892, when the property sold for \$11,600 to William W. Smith. Smith was a founder of Poughkeepsie's Smith Brothers' cough drop company, which began as a candy manufacturer. Eventually, the brothers also owned a popular restaurant. These sources of entrepreneurial wealth allowed Smith to donate College Hill to the city for a public park, and it remains so today.

Smith's influence on Poughkeepsie was significant, though not as considerable as the beer-brewing Vassar family's. In addition to donating



land and money to support various projects (YMCA, YWCA, schools, churches, retirement homes), Smith was an avowed Temperance follower, supporting that mission. When he ran for Mayor of Poughkeepsie in 1912, his campaign logo was an illustration of the College Hill's Greek-style building. Smith received 1800 votes but lost the election. According to his obituary, which ran on page one of the *Middletown Daily Press Times* (November 18, 1913), Smith had run for Mayor of Poughkeepsie on the Prohibition and the Bull Moose party lines.

City Accepts The Gift

The city formally accepted Smith's College Hill gift in September 1896. It included two provisions: No alcohol was ever to be allowed on the property. No fee would ever be charged for public use of the park.

The site developed into much more than a passive park. It was the venue for many outdoor concerts, large group picnics, fireworks displays, area church and school outings, and lectures, including one in 1858 by Frederick Douglass. From the hilltop above the city at a time when trees were fewer and younger, the view from it was expansive. The view of it was inspiring.

To Pave or Not To Pave

That grand vista was articulated in 1916 in an article regarding the debate over the paving of

College Hill's only access road—North Clinton Street.

In the early 1900s, street paving was normally underwritten by the owners of property abutting each street. The expensive paving of North Clinton Street was debated by the Poughkeepsie city fathers as College Hill's portion of the cost would have to be paid by the property owner—the city—or, to be more precise, the taxpayers. The only argument against paving was expense. In favor, according to one newspaper was,

"Few cities in American or foreign countries have within their limits a point from which one secures a view equal in expanse and in beauty to the outlook from College Hill. The eye may sweep on a clear day from the most distant peaks of the Catskills on the north to the towering heights of the Highlands on the south and from the ranges of the Berkshires on the east to the ridges of the Shawangunks on the west. The silvery Hudson stretching out to the north and the south adds the final touch to this view of almost incomparable beauty."

Poughkeepsie Evening Enterprise,
March 9, 1916

In letters to editors of Poughkeepsie's many papers, citizens in favor used much ink to insist paving was the only thing to do. Summing up the "pro" position, not only would it make the magnificent park more accessible, but North Clinton Street was a pit- and rut-filled dirt track in need of paving to make it worthy of the status of a city like Poughkeepsie.

With the city's many popular civic and political conventions, an organization's hosts would note the must-see buildings and sites during visitor tours. These included the Dutchess County court house, the city's magnificent churches, the

Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge (after 1888), the Armory, Eastman Park, the Amerita Club and the Adriance Library. Sightseeing lists always included the gardens, buildings, and view from College Hill.

Whitetail Deer or Bison

An article in the *Poughkeepsie Evening Enterprise* (April 25, 1912), noted, "City May Buy Buffalo for College Hill." The park management had wanted whitetail deer but could not acquire the scarce attraction at the time. The buffalo (actually bison) were more available, and the park managers changed the animal enclosure to accommodate the larger and much stronger bison. (I could find no other information on bison in the park, so whether they did live there remains a question).

The Hill's management eventually found their whitetail deer, however, it took a few years. The *Poughkeepsie Evening Enterprise*, August 25, 1916, news, in a short article, said, "Five deer now inhabit the deer park at College Hill. The latest addition consists of two young animals recently born there." The park's caretaker was described as very proud of the new duo and that the fawns are among the "...finest he has ever seen." There was no mention of the fate of any bison.

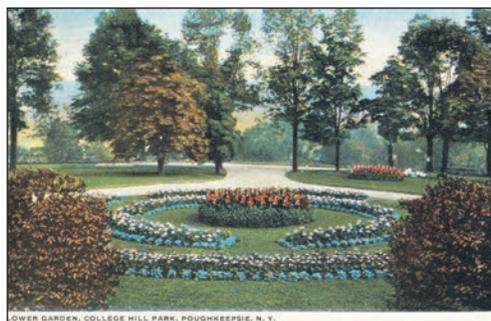
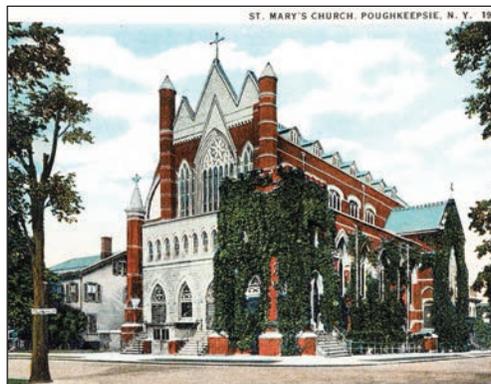
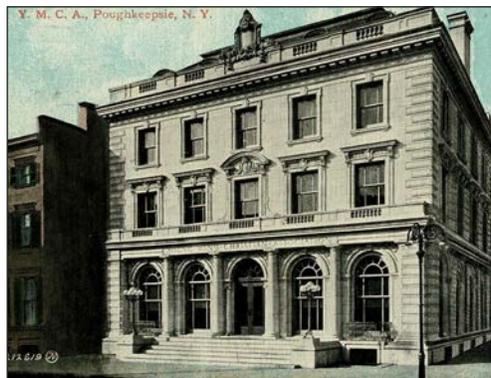
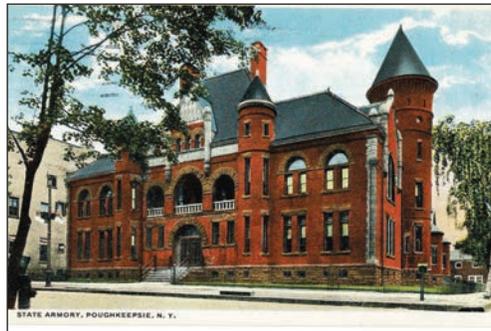
The Gate That Never Was

In April 1909, a design by Architect Percival Lloyd was accepted by the city of Poughkeepsie for the W.W. Smith Memorial Gates at the Clinton Street entrance to the park. Smith (1830-1913) was still alive at the time.

The cost of the gate was to be underwritten by the grateful people of Poughkeepsie. Almost every week an article ran in one or more of the city's newspapers detailing a donation of note. Lloyd would have \$10,000 with which to work. As the designer, he would receive 5% (\$500).

Despite all the newspaper reports of donations, the \$10,000 failed to materialize. Finally, in a *Poughkeepsie Eagle* news article of November 25, 1913, the designer agreed to accept a little over \$300 for his design work.

Although no gate would honor Smith, a monument by renown sculptor John Ettl (1873-1940), including a bust of Smith, also by Ettl, was erected. It graces the west side of the current building.



TB Camp Proposed at College Hill Page 3

In 1909, a \$50,000 lawsuit against the city sought to stop the placement of a tuberculosis camp at College Hill near Morgan Lake. At the time, the lake was used for ice cutting, and the business owners alleged the water could be contaminated by the camp, though the clinic would have been more than 600 feet from the lake. Bill Jeffway, Dutchess County Historian, said the TB camp was at College Hill for just one summer and then established elsewhere in Dutchess County.

Other College Hill's "Highlights"

After the Bartlett school closed, the new owner opened a hotel. It was unsuccessful. Next, the hill was purchased by John Guy Vassar to be an orphanage. Vassar died before it was established. From 1971-1980, College Hill had a ski center with a tow rope.

Today, among the park's notable features is the Lown Rock Garden. It was originally designed by Clarence Lown (1851-1931), who is considered the father of rock gardening in the US. Lown often collected plant specimens with his Ulster County friend, John Burroughs, in New York's mountains. The garden is under restoration, and you are invited to help in the Spring.

Another attraction is the College Hill golf course. According to Wahlberg, the course was designed pro bono by Horatio Nelson (the other one). The 30-acre course was built during the depression with additional land purchased using a donation from former Poughkeepsie mayor Daniel Wilbur.

College Hill's group of cheerleaders/workers is the Revive College Hill Park Coalition (RCHPC). The Lown Garden is a special project of theirs. Visit their website to find Holly Wahlburg's article on the Hill's history and learn how to help the organization further its mission.

www.rchpc.org/about

*The translation "Poughkeepsie" is contradicted by Wikipedia, which notes it means "the reed-covered lodge by the little-water place" —language of the Eastern Algonquian Munsee-speaking Native Americans.

Images top to bottom: Otis Brisbee's Riverview Military Academy (1867-1921) was located at what is now Lincoln Park in Poughkeepsie. Image from Library of Congress. New York State Armory. YWCA building. St. Mary's Church, Poughkeepsie. The Gardens at College Hill. Except the top, all are postcards from early 1900.