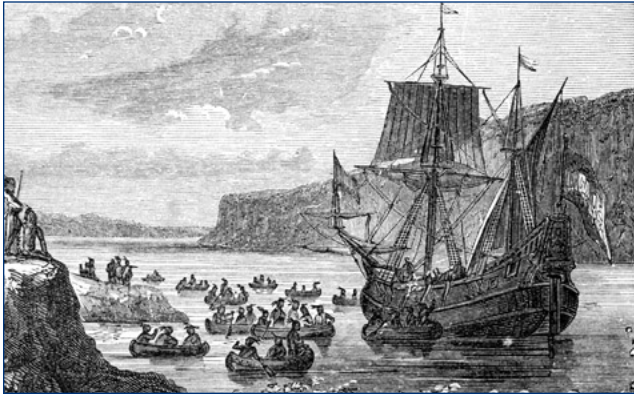


Swim for the River

A BRIEF HISTORY

Four hundred years on the river, from Henry Hudson to the Superfund Law
(U.S. History)



Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon

The Hudson River begins in the shadow of New York state's highest mountain and flows 315 miles to the sea. For half its length the Hudson is a tidal **estuary**; one of the longest in the world.

The explorer **Henry Hudson** was the first European to visit the river, in 1609. He was looking for a fabled water route to Asia through the North American continent. For thousands of years prior to Hudson's "discovery," the banks of the river had been populated by Native Americans. **Tribes** relied on the river as an abundant source of food and as an artery for canoe transportation. Native societies thrived along the banks until the mid-1700's. The Mohican tribe offered a gift of land to the first **Dutch settlers**. What we now call the Hudson River they referred to as the *Mohicanituck*, which translates as "the river that flows two ways" – describing the effect of tidal action in the estuary.

In 1635 the demand for furs, especially beaver pelts, which were used to make hats in Europe, led to the establishment of the first permanent Dutch trading post near present-day Albany. Trappers and traders were followed by farming settlers. Over time the Mohicans were persuaded to cede much of their land to the Europeans. Epidemics, a war with the Mohawks and the depletion of fur resources contributed to the decline of indigenous society, which all but disappeared by the 1800's.



Indians from Samuel Champlain's Voyages



Painting of Dutch trading post, 1615, by L.F. Tantillo

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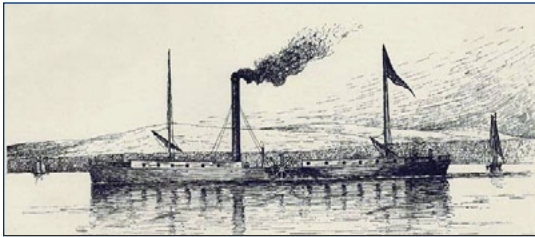
American colonists in the Revolutionary War recognized the strategic value of the Hudson and built fortifications along the river. The most famous of these is West Point, where, in 1778, General George Washington's men stretched a huge **iron chain** across the water to prevent the British fleet from occupying the Hudson River valley. Had they done so, the colonies' supply lines crossing the river would have been cut off. In 1802 West Point was converted into a military academy. It is the oldest point of continuous military occupation in the United States.



Hudson River sloop

The Hudson River was a major trade avenue. For nearly two hundred years its waters were dominated by a distinctive sailing craft known as the Hudson River sloop. These single-masted boats (usually 65 to 75 feet long) were the main method of transport on the river until the launching of the first commercially successful steamboat, the **Clermont**, by Robert Fulton in 1807.

The steamboat increased the quantity and reliability of commerce on the river. In the 1820's the completion of the **Erie Canal** made it possible to ship goods by water from New York City all the way to the Great Lakes and Canada. The Hudson became America's principal transportation artery and, at its peak, carried thousands of boats, day and night.



Robert Fulton's steamboat, the Clermont

New York's first railroad was built to augment its river and canal system by linking the navigable waters of the Hudson and Mohawk rivers. Completed in 1831, it connected Schenectady and Albany. The transportation of freight on railcars allowed steamboats to forgo the Erie Canal and save valuable time. Steam-

boats remained a common sight on the river for more than a hundred years, tapering off in the mid-1900's. Railroads continued to expand and still run along the Hudson today.

Logging, mining, brick making, cement manufacture, and forging were among the **early industries** that blossomed along the river. Timber and wood products had been exported from the Hudson River Valley since the 1600's, but in the 19th century the need for paper, lumber, and charcoal grew exponentially. This resulted in extensive clear-cut logging and deforestation along the Hudson's upper reaches. The impact on the local environment was catastrophic.

The Adirondack forest had acted as a natural sponge, storing rainwater and gradually releasing it into the river system. As it disappeared the river became prone to a seasonal cycle of flash floods and droughts. Often, in the summer and fall, the Hudson's water level was too low to float the barges and boats that serviced its towns. In the winter it was jammed with ice. The river as a lifeline between cities was threatened.

Meanwhile some Americans began to advocate for the preservation of scenic land for the purpose of public recreation and renewal. Writers such as **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, **Walt Whitman**, and **Henry David Thoreau** wrote



Adirondack logs



View from Fishkill to West Point, William Guy Wall, 1821–1825

about the possibility of man's spiritual renewal in contact with unspoiled natural places. Painters such as Asher Durand, Albert Bierstadt, Robert Cole, and Frederick Church embraced the luminous beauty of the Hudson River Valley and the Adirondacks. Collectively they came to be known as the **Hudson River School**, and the art they created made nature visually accessible to a receptive public.

Inspired by the romantic landscapes of the Hudson River School and the relative

comfort of steamboat and railroad travel, tourists enjoyed the scenic vistas of the **Hudson Highlands**, where the river passes through the foothills of the **Catskill Mountains**. More intrepid adventurers went farther north to the Adirondack forests even as they were being systematically destroyed by logging.

The newly popularized idea of conservation, combined with concerns about the damage to river navigation caused by forest clear-cutting, led New York state lawmakers to pass the famous "forever wild" amendment to the state constitution, creating **Adirondack Park** in 1892. It was, and remains, the largest protected park in the United States. At approximately six million acres, it has ensured the safety and rejuvenation of the upper Hudson and its surrounding area.

The lower Hudson, however, remained in jeopardy. As America's 19th century industrial revolution gathered momentum, towns that once relied on the river for commerce and transportation now turned their backs on it. Railroads and the invention of the automobile rendered river transport obsolete. Untreated sewage from rapidly growing population centers, as well as industrial effluent from mills and factories, made the **Hudson a toxic waterway**, endangering the abundant life that flourished in it. Until the 1960's there was little public or political will to stop the desecration of the river.

In 1963 the Consolidated Edison Company proposed to build the world's largest hydroelectric plant on **Storm King Mountain**

at the northern end of the Hudson Highlands region, made famous by the painters of the Hudson River School. The plan was met with strong civil resistance. The result was a seventeen-year legal battle. The proposed plan was finally withdrawn, and the case set legal precedent for what would become the **National Environmental Policy Act**.

In the 1970's the toxicity of PCBs, or **polychlorinated biphenyls**, was established. At the same time the chemical was discovered in large concentrations in Hudson River fish, ending most commercial fishing on the river. The source of the PCBs was two General Electric factories that spent more than thirty years dumping 1.3 million pounds of the



General Electric plant at Hudson Falls, N.Y.

chemical into the river. A thirty-year battle continues, in an attempt to force GE to remove the nondegradable toxic substance from the Hudson.

In 1980 Congress passed the federal *Superfund Law*, which mandated the cleanup of heavily polluted sites and made it possible to hold major industrial polluters accountable for damage to the environment. Commercial and government organizations joined the ranks of civil groups like *Riverkeeper* in their efforts to restore and maintain the Hudson and bring legal actions against scores of polluters.

Significant progress has been made, and the Hudson River is much cleaner than it was in the 1960's. However serious problems remain, and the protection of the river will require the ongoing concern and vigilance of successive generations.

The following chapters in this guide deal with past and present challenges to the Hudson River ecosystem, the work of scientists to understand it, and the efforts of activists to preserve it.



Riverkeeper patrol boat