

November 28, 1999

Revisiting a Forgotten Fortress; Long Abandoned, an Island in the Hudson is Restored

By DAVID W. CHEN

The portcullis and drawbridge have vanished. The pith helmets and cannonballs are gone. But the crumbling Scottish castle remains, cryptically adorned by the chiseled words "Bannerman's Island Arsenal."

Ever since it was abandoned in the 1950's, this island, one of the Hudson River's most incongruous and inaccessible ruins, has fascinated history buffs. Once the private warehouse of Frank Bannerman VI, an eccentric Scottish immigrant in the military supplies business, the castle has deteriorated so badly that the island has been declared hazardous and off limits by its current owner, New York State.

But now, Pollepel Island is becoming more than just a place of mystery and memory.

In recent years, a fledgling nonprofit group, the Bannerman Castle Trust, has worked diligently to improve the island. This year, for the first time, the state parks department allocated some money to help restore it. And last summer, the group organized its premier fund-raising tour of the 6.5-acre island, which is often called Bannerman's Island.

Supporters say the momentum has been so encouraging that the island could be opened to the public within the next year or so.

The usual caveats about financing, timing and luck still apply, of course, cautioned Neil Caplan, president of the Bannerman Castle Trust. But the likelihood of unlocking a castle in the Hudson has stoked many imaginations.

"It's like a surprise to think that you could find something undiscovered in your backyard," said Nancy Arena, communications manager for the Dutchess County Tourism Promotion Agency, which regularly fields inquiries about the island.

"You spin tales in your mind about what happened over there. It gives you permission to daydream," she added.

Situated only 50 miles north of the George Washington Bridge in the town of Fishkill, Pollepel Island had a colorful history even before the Bannermans arrived at the turn of the century. American Indians believed that the island was haunted. Dutch sailors feared goblins who, legend had it, whipped up squalls, dooming many a vessel.

And the name itself is said to have two possible sources: One is a Dutch word meaning "pot ladle," referring to the drunken or boisterous sailors who were deposited on the island while their vessels cruised the Hudson, then picked up after they sobered up. The second is a girl named Polly Pell, the object of two gentlemen callers and the subject of a dramatic tale of love, honor and rescue -- on the island.

In the Revolutionary War, American colonists installed chevaux-de-frise -- a kind of underwater fence of sharpened logs -- between the island and Plum Point, on the western shore. The idea was to sink British vessels. But the British weren't fooled: no ships were sunk.

By the end of the 19th century, the uninhabited island, owned first by the Van Wycks, then by the Tafts, was used sparingly as a picnic ground and fishing spot. Then came Frank Bannerman, whose Manhattan business traded surplus military goods -- including, at one point, 90 percent of the equipment from the Spanish-American War, Mr. Caplan said. The problem was that New York City officials prohibited the storage of such combustibles. So Mr. Bannerman bought this island in 1900 to build his own warehouse-cum-billboard, visible from the trains humming along the Hudson.

Mr. Bannerman designed seven buildings for the island -- three warehouses, two workers' houses, a family residence and the signature six-story tower -- in homage to his Scottish roots, complete with turrets, crenelated towers, a drawbridge and a moat.

Mr. Bannerman even invented a family coat of arms, said his grandson Frank Bannerman VIII.

"He didn't delegate authority," said Mr. Bannerman, 84, who lives in Hartsdale. "He did it all."

The island was not immune to accidents. In 1920, a powder house explosion injured three people and catapulted a 25-foot-long piece of stone wall onto the eastern shore of the Hudson, where it landed on the railroad tracks. And once, a cannon mistakenly shot a shell over a mountain and through a barn. No animals or humans were injured.

Still, the island, equipped with amenities like telephone service and indoor plumbing, often possessed a comforting, members-only kind of rhythm, as the Bannermans used the island primarily on weekends and a small group of employees lived there full time.

Visitors would gather at a spot on the eastern shore directly across from the island, and ring a brass bell that would echo across the 1,000-foot distance. Then, the island's employees would board rowboats to pick up the visitors -- who often carried jugs of drinking water, since the river's water was not potable.

After Frank Bannerman VI died in 1918, two of his sons, Frank VII and David, took over the business, which also published a well-regarded military supplies catalog. In 1959, the family moved the business from Manhattan to Long Island, and emptied the island of its remaining supplies. In 1967, the family sold the island to New York State, and by 1969, when a suspicious fire gutted many of the buildings, Mr. Bannerman's island had fallen into desuetude.

The castle is visible from West Point, about four miles to the south. But to many drivers, train passengers and boaters, the castle may resemble something mistakenly plucked from Robert the Bruce's Scotland. The Dutchess County Tourism Promotion Agency fields more phone calls about Bannerman's Island than about any other place.

"Because it's sort of unexpected," Ms. Arena said, "people ask, 'What is that?' 'Did I really see it?' 'Was it a movie set?' 'Are there romantic or tragic stories behind it?' " (According to Mr. Caplan, the castle did appear in "North by Northwest.")

On a recent tour of the island, Jim Logan and Thom Johnson, two members of the Bannerman Castle Trust, noted how Mr. Bannerman had used recycled bedsprings, bamboo spears and bayonets as building materials. The tower, they explained, was actually designed to create an optical illusion, with top floors wider than the lower ones to make the building look imposing. And none of the buildings contained right

angles.

Unfortunately, vandals have sullied the place in recent years, security cameras and No Trespassing signs notwithstanding. There is fresh graffiti, done in tribute to Limp Bizkit, Kid Rock and teenage romance. Nature has asserted itself, too, as evidenced by the spread of poison ivy and sumac.

Even so, more has been done to nurse the island in the last few years than was done during the preceding 40, thanks largely to the Bannerman Castle Trust, which was established six years ago, and the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Led by Mr. Caplan, whose interest was piqued by a book mentioning the island, the Bannerman Castle Trust has removed garbage from the island and cleared most of the trails. The group has published newsletters and pamphlets, including a new collection of Bannerman family recipes and first-person tales. And it has sold paintings of the island done by artists like Jane Bannerman, widow of Charles Bannerman, a cousin of Frank the VIII.

So far, the group has raised about \$80,000. And the state parks department provided a \$200,000 grant this year. (But more is still needed, beseeched Mr. Caplan, who is the artistic director of the Cunneen-Hackett Cultural Center in Poughkeepsie.)

"It's certainly a diamond in the rough, and it should be the jewel of the Hudson," said Mr. Caplan, whose house in Beacon resembles a Bannerman museum-in-waiting, crammed with canteens, pith helmets and ephemera. "It's a rare piece of history."

The top priorities are ensuring safe access to the island, stabilizing the buildings and rebuilding the small, three-bedroom family residence. Next year, Mr. Caplan hopes to organize more fund-raising tours, while Mr. Johnson, an art and photography teacher, would like to lead some student field trips. And perhaps by the end of next year, there will be some regular, limited-access tours for the public.

"This is a project that we're going to plug away at, and we're excited about it," said Bernadette Castro, the state parks commissioner. "This is truly possibly one of the greatest destinations."

The changes have astonished Frank Bannerman VIII, a lifelong bachelor who owns the last Roman numeral in the family tree. He served in World War II; became a salesman at the Wood Shed, a furniture store in Hartsdale; and thought less and less about the castle.

Two years ago, Mr. Bannerman visited the island for the first time since 1937. "I knew that there had been fires, and it was a shambles, but I had no idea it would be as bad as it was," he said.

But since then, he has been impressed by the progress, and looks forward to the day when the public can enjoy what used to be the most private and magical of worlds.

"When anyone in the family said 'the island,' they weren't talking about Long Island," Mr. Bannerman recalled fondly. "You kind of felt you had something that no one else had. You respected it for being unusual."

Photos: Frank Bannerman VIII, 84, owns the last Roman numeral in the family tree.; Frank Bannerman VI, a turn-of-the-century Scottish immigrant, built this castle on an island in the Hudson River as a warehouse for his military supplies business. (Photographs by James Estrin/The New York Times)(pg. 45); The Bannerman Castle Trust has worked to restore Pollepel Island over the past few years. (James Estrin/The New York Times)(pg. 52) Map of the Hudson River shows location of Pollepel Island: Pollepel Island was once believed to be inhabited by goblins. (pg. 52)