

Beacon Dispatch September 2005

Highland Wanderer:

Bannerman Castle Kayak Tour from the Beacon Sloop Club

The Hudson River Valley is filled with kayaking possibilities, but none quite as enticing as the hardhat tours that let you view the ruins of Bannerman Castle and walk the garden trails of Pollepel Island.

Pollepel (also known as Bannerman) Island has a storied history. It was considered haunted by Native Americans, drunken sailors were dropped off on the island to sober up, it has links to the American Revolution, and in the early 1900's it became home to Francis Bannerman's army surplus business. Bannerman Castle, which used to be the warehouse, is the most prominent structure on the island—for first-time travelers on Metro North's Hudson Line, it's a wonderful surprise—but the island is also covered with once luxuriant gardens, walking paths, and, on the south side of the island, the former Bannerman home.

Access to the island is only possible if you're taking a sanctioned hardhat tour with one of several local touring groups. <See Sidebar: How To Get Your Hardhat On> As the island is part of the New York State Department of Parks, trying to land on the island without permission will result in a swift ejection by one of the park rangers that patrol the island. While this may seem harsh for a state run park, the castle ruins are dangerous—pieces of the main building fall almost every day—plus, a portion of the tour fee goes toward the restoration of the island and the rehabilitation of its buildings.

My sanctioned tour guides for the trip are Mark Price and Eric Eckley of Hudson Valley Pack and Paddle. It was Mark who suggested Bannerman when I consulted him about a good fall kayaking trip. He told me that the ruins, the foliage, and the opportunity to spend a morning on the Hudson combine for a perfect journey, especially for a kayaking neophyte such as myself.

I arrive at the Beacon Sloop Club's boat ramp at 6:00 am on a Sunday morning. When I arrive the sun has just crept over the top of Mount Beacon and Mark and Eric are busy

prepping for our trip. There are several reasons for our early morning departure the most important of which is the tides. At this hour, on this day, the tidal Hudson River—which was known to Native Americans as Mahicanituk or continually flowing water—is pressing back out toward the ocean. Planning our trip with the tides means we'll have to work less as we journey along the Hudson. As we paddle south the tide will push us gently toward our goal and on our perfectly timed return trip the tide will help to carry us back upriver toward Beacon.

As I have no prior kayaking skills, Mark lays down the basics for me: How to enter the kayak and lock my legs in place and control my balance, how to get out in case I flip over, how to handle the paddle, and how to physically paddle my kayak; more of an abdominally driven twist of the torso than brute force bicep thrust. After about a five-minute lesson we put in and push out into the Hudson's tidal flow.

Beyond its obvious natural attributes, the beauty of the Hudson at this time of morning is two-fold. Not only is the river helping us to make our way south, but at 6:00 am on a Sunday morning, there isn't a single large boat on the river. The reason for this, Mark says, is that you can't buy beer until after noon on Sunday and pleasure-boaters consider a brew or two part of the pleasure. As a result the river is like glass. A fact that keeps me comfortable with my new found ability to keep a kayak upright and my body dry.

While Mark stays close by me as we paddle past Denning's Point, Eric keeps himself busy by cutting closer to shore and pointing out the many hidden treasures along the way. Together Mark and Eric are a kind of Hudson River play-by-play tag-team. While Mark gives me direction on how to read the river map, making sure I know how to steer clear of the shipping channel, read soundings, and how to pinpoint our location by looking for landmarks along the shore, Eric is pointing out the local color. The Blue Heron floating on a log, the fish jumping just beyond our reach, the campsites hidden nearly out of site beyond the trees, the plume of wood smoke curling up in Dutchess Junction just above Route 9D. Together they teach me how to drink in all that surrounds me, making the river an early morning classroom of practical instruction and place.

A quarter mile before we reach the island the river takes a wee bend to the east and gives us a new view of the castle perfectly centered between the shores of the Hudson Highlands and the peaks of Storm King and Breakneck Ridge. Unfortunately we don't get to enjoy the view for long because, as soon as we make that turn, we're greeted with a strong southerly wind that, if we don't paddle with a little more vigor, will keep us from reaching our goal. Furthermore, the water has suddenly gotten choppy, the waves cutting across the kayak's bow. This turbulence encourages me to keep my head down, focusing most of my concentration on paddling and staying upright until I reach the safety of the shore.

Actually, "shore" and "safety" are two words that don't belong together here because what surrounds the island, especially near the eastern side, is piles and piles of submerged debris. Large wooden beams, metal spikes, essentially a maze of the intentionally sunken Civil War era garbage that Frances Bannerman put around the island to act as breakwaters. As we draw closer to the island, being careful to avoid the dangers just beneath the surface, Mark points to a section of the Castle's concrete foundation making sure I see what's been used to support the foundation instead of steel reinforcement bar: an ancient cot. Beyond the elements, Mark says, this cot is one of the primary reasons for the Castle's present condition. It's been built, from top to bottom, with the materials that Frances Bannerman had in abundance: Army surplus garbage. Where concrete needed reinforcement he threw in cots and cannonballs or any other material he could find. None of which could reasonably be expected to support a building of this stature.

We finally make our landing at Wee Bay, a small cove which lies below the main house on the south side of the island and which has a perfect view of the Hudson facing south toward Cold Spring. As will pull to shore Eric points out the many small blue crabs that are hiding around the edges of the bay. (On our return trip, as we take a little detour up Fishkill Creek, we'll see several people crabbing off Tioranda Bridge.) Before we head up into the main part of the island we sit, have a drink of water, and eat some well earned and much needed breakfast. Even though I've eaten a pretty decent meal earlier

in the morning, the energy I've exerted paddling down the river has me feeling as if I've eaten nothing at all.

Once our snack is complete we head up one of the many trails that cover the island. Back when Pollepel was inhabited these trails were well-groomed and connected a series of secret gardens together. For the most part these gardens are completely overgrown, but through the efforts of the Bannerman Castle Trust and volunteers from local garden clubs, several have been pruned back and it's possible to see what once must have been a glorious retreat. Each of the trails is marked, either with lettering stamped in the concrete pathways or with names and directional markers on brick pillars.

In a matter of minutes we're standing on the veranda of the Bannerman's island homestead. While an article on the Bannerman Castle Trust's web site (www.bannermancastle.org) refers to the former house as a "simple residence" it's quite clear that it was anything but. Like Wee Bay just below, the house has a commanding view of the Hudson and it is situated in such a way that you would never know there was a large warehouse on the other side of the island. While much of the building has been defaced by time or vandals—family crests which used to adorn the outside of the building, have been ripped from the walls and there is graffiti spray painted everywhere—it's clear that it was once amazingly beautiful. And, according to Mark, it's likely that this is the only building it will be possible to be save.

This becomes abundantly clear when we arrive at Bannerman's Castle a few moments later. While still beautiful, the structure is really nothing more than a hollow shell. Even standing at a safe distance you can see from the basement of the building all the way through the roof. To punctuate the point, Mark shows me a section of roof below the main structure that has collapsed since his last trip to the island. He also points out one of the Castle's more interesting features: It's built like something you'd expect to see on a Hollywood movie set. On the western side, the side that is still seen by the traffic traveling up and down the Hudson, the Castle looks powerful and imposing. The turrets look solid and well built. But as your eye travels along the building from west to east, the structure becomes less and less substantial. Turrets with hundreds of decorative bricks

on the west side have twins with less than half that many bricks on the east side. In other words, Bannerman's Castle was built to look brilliant from the river with little care given to what it looked like from the land on the eastern shore.

After about half an hour of walking on the outskirts of the ruins and taking pictures we make our way back around the rest of the island. While we can see several other pathways drifting off into the brush, they're all blocked off to us, either by the brush itself or by some manmade barricade. The only path left leads us past the new stairway and the dock built for access to the island by larger boats, then once more past the old Bannerman homestead, where we again drink in the river view. We then walk back down the Wee Bay steps and to our waiting kayaks. We load our boats and push once more into the Hudson, its tides now pressing to the north. We paddle past a crumbling turret, half-submerged in the flow just outside the shipping channel, and take one last look at the Castle's more substantial side. Then, with the wind now at our backs, we say goodbye.

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Sidebar: How To Get Your Hardhat On

Ready to take the trip? Put a call in to the tour companies listed below. It's also possible to rent a kayak and take a trip around the island on your own. But remember, you must be part of a sanctioned tour to land on the island.

Hudson Valley Pack and Paddle

45 Beekman Street

Beacon, NY 12508

845-831-1300

www.hvpackandpaddle.com

\$100

Hudson Valley Outfitters

63 Main Street

Cold Spring, NY 10516

845-265-0221

866-865-2925

www.hudsonvalleyoutfitters.com

\$100-120

Bannerman Castle Trust

845-831-1001

www.bannermancastle.org

For tours in conjunction with Hudson River Adventures call 845-220-2120

\$40-50 (These are not kayak tours.)

Sidebar: Bannerman Kayak Hardhat Tour from Beacon

Difficulty Rating: Moderate, No kayaking experience necessary for guided tour.

Approximate Distance: 8 Miles

Type of trip: Kayak loop

Suitable for ages 10+

Fee: Varies