

WORKHORSES of the Industrial Revolution:

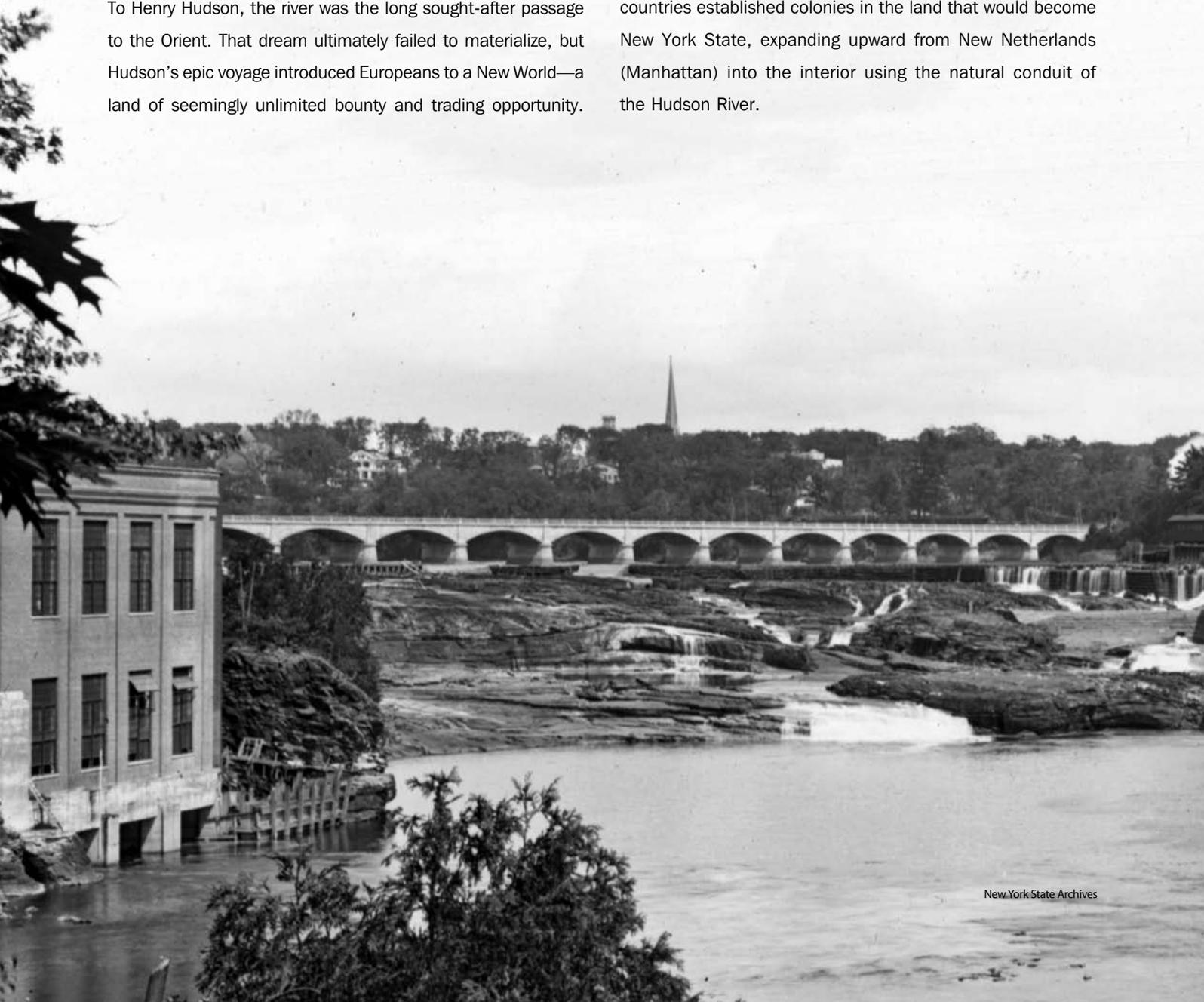
Hudson River Waterfalls

By Russell Dunn

The Hudson River has always been a river of dreams.

To Henry Hudson, the river was the long sought-after passage to the Orient. That dream ultimately failed to materialize, but Hudson's epic voyage introduced Europeans to a New World—a land of seemingly unlimited bounty and trading opportunity.

It wasn't long before Holland, England and other seafaring countries established colonies in the land that would become New York State, expanding upward from New Netherlands (Manhattan) into the interior using the natural conduit of the Hudson River.



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As droves of explorers and later, settlers, passed through the Hudson River Valley, the numerous tributaries along the lower Hudson River bustled with activity. Mills and factories were erected. These early industries made use of available power extracted from waterfalls and dams. From these beginnings, the age of hydropower and the Industrial Revolution was ushered into a young and growing America.

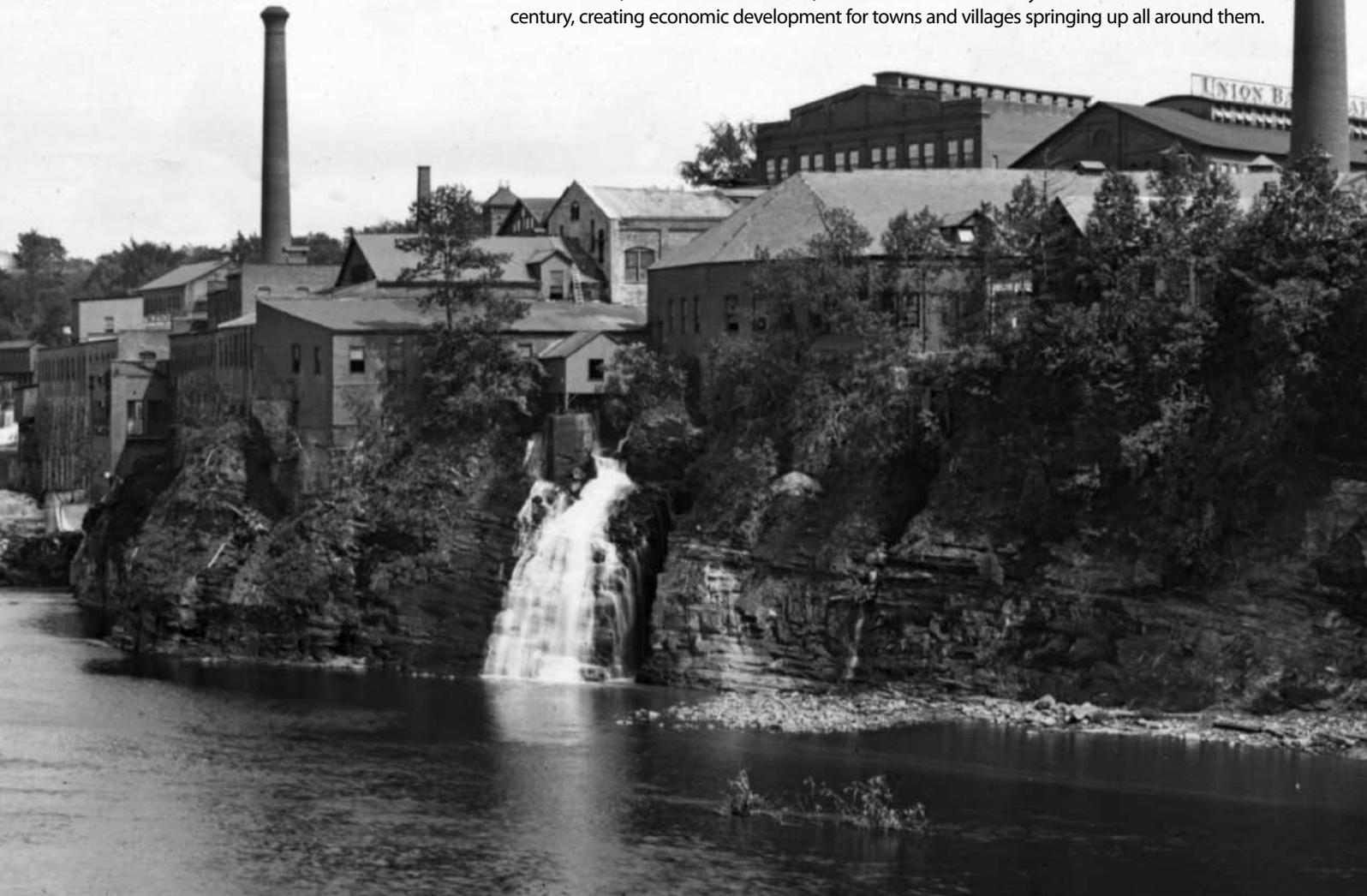
The lower Hudson—a 145-mile stretch from Albany to the Atlantic Ocean—was the conveyor belt of civilization, transporting goods and people north into the interior of New York State. Because this lower river ebbs and flows with the tides, Native Americans called it Mohicanituk, meaning the “river that flows both ways.”



New York State Archives

A rabbler at work at the puddling furnace in the Cohoes Rolling Mill.

The waterfalls, like Hudson Falls below, became centers of industry in the end of the nineteenth century, creating economic development for towns and villages springing up all around them.



The Upper Hudson, however, is not at all like its lower counterpart. From Hudson Falls to Hadley, the river is characterized by a series of substantial waterfalls; cascades that were at one time impediments to some, and opportunities to others. These falls were placed under the yoke of early industry, turning waterwheels for factories and mills to drive triphammers, vertical saws, buzz-saws, grinders, bellows, and many other types of machinery. Later, dams were built to augment the hydropower potential of the upper Hudson River. These waterfalls and dams were the workhorses of the

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Industrial Revolution until the late 1800s, when other practical and reliable sources of energy became widely available.

Conversely, it was the absence of waterfalls on the lower Hudson River that ensured that the upper Hudson River and the numerous tributaries along the river's length became industrialized. Had there been a major waterfall on the lower Hudson River between the Palisades and Albany—a waterfall as insurmountable as seventy-foot-high Cohoes Falls on the Mohawk River's eastern terminus—then

industrial development of the vast interior of New York State would have been delayed by decades or even centuries. Large ships would not have been able to get past such a barrier to travel between Albany and the Atlantic Ocean. It wasn't until 1825 that Cohoes Falls was bypassed by the Erie Canal, finally allowing the transport of goods between the Mohawk and the Hudson without having to go over land.

The first major waterfall encountered on the upper Hudson River is Bakers Falls at Hudson Falls. There is irony in the name—one might think that the first

waterfall on the Hudson River would be called Hudson Falls, as is the town immediately adjacent. Bakers Falls is a large, sixty-eight-foot-high waterfall that prevented even the smallest vessels from progressing any further north up the Hudson River. The waterfall was named after Albert Baker, who established the first mill in the area in 1765. Bakers Falls has since been heavily industrialized and is now topped by a bow-shaped dam that extends more than 1,000 feet across the river. The village has established a viewing area near

the top of the waterfall and access to the river below the falls.

Heading upstream from Bakers Falls, going at first north and then bearing west, one soon arrives at the most famous waterfall on the Hudson River—Glens Falls. This waterfall was industrialized as early as 1763. It was named after John Glen Jr., who established a mill by the falls. Later, the waterfall was immortalized by James Fenimore Cooper in his classic eighteenth-century tale, *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Glens Falls consists of nearly forty feet of drops and plunges. Like Bakers Falls, it was sufficiently imposing to halt any vessel

trying to make its way upriver. A viewing area has been created so that tourists can look at the waterfall (and Cooper's Cave) from near its base.

From Glens Falls, now going west, progress up the river is impeded by several large dams, including the one at Spier Falls (which is really little more than a massive dam constructed on top of a tiny cascade.) But there are more waterfalls beyond these barriers.

Further west is Palmer Falls, a seventy-foot-high cascade that until recently



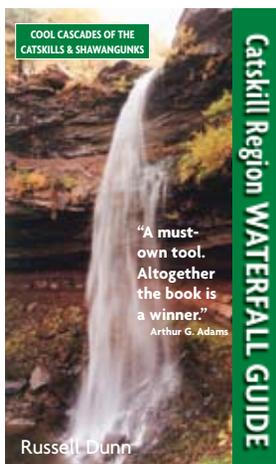
was used for power generation by International Paper Company's plant at Corinth. Palmer Falls' industrial history goes back to 1804, when Ira Haskins erected a sawmill near the falls.

Just around the corner from Palmer Falls, past a turn in the river called Big Bend, is Curtis Falls, which is part dam and part waterfall. The fall was named after Warren Curtis Jr., who founded the Corinth Electric Light Company.

Finally, after proceeding another six to seven miles upstream, we arrive at the Hudson River's most picturesque and photographed waterfall—twelve-foot-high Rockwell Falls. It was named after Jeremy Rockwell who erected a sawmill at the fall in the 1700s. Rockwell Falls can be safely viewed from the Bridge of Hope which spans the Hudson River between Hadley and Lake Luzerne.

These five prominent waterfalls on the upper Hudson River were power sources used by a number of major industries over several centuries. Entire villages, towns, and cities formed around them, creating the northern Hudson River and cityscape with which we are familiar. It is waterfalls like these that have made present New York State what it looks like today.

Licensed guide **Russell Dunn** is author of five books on New York waterfalls, including *Catskill Region Waterfall Guide: Cool Cascades of the Catskills and Shawangunks*. (Black Dome Press, 2004).



Postcards of Hudson River waterfalls (like those shown here) were popular "souvenir card" collectibles among New York residents and visitors during the early twentieth century.