

EDGEWATER

A River Runs By It

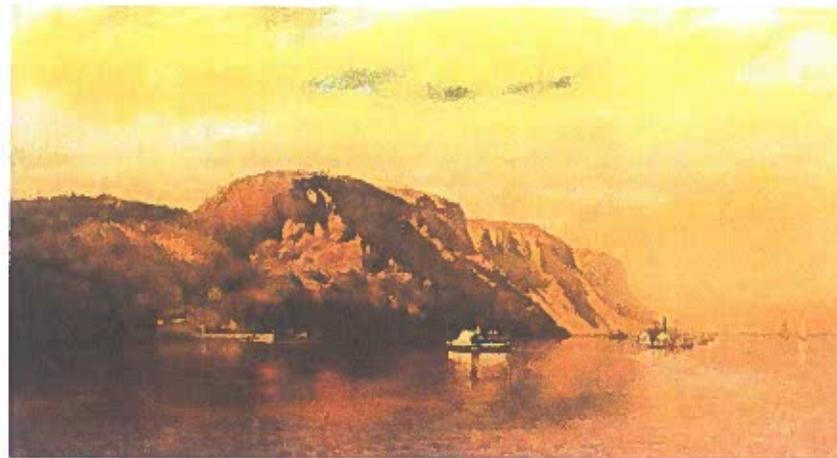
By Tim Adriance



Along the west bank of the Hudson River in the most southeast corner of Bergen County lies the long, narrow Borough of Edgewater. This town of nearly 12,500 hugs the thin shoreline between the Hudson River and the 300-foot-high cliffs of the Palisades for almost five miles. Here, the Hudson is more a tidal estuary than a flowing river (it is actually tidal all the way to Albany). Hence the river—which flows in two directions—was known by the Algonquian-speaking Native Americans as Muhheahkunnuk or Mohicanichtuck, which roughly means, “river that flows two ways.”

Here, in 1640, Dutch explorer Captain David Pieterse DeVries founded the first-known settlement in present-day Bergen County and named it “Vriessendael.” (A historic marker commemorating the settlement stands at current-day Edgewater’s Veterans Field Park.) Nine years earlier (1631), DeVries founded what is now Lewes, Delaware; his colony, named “Zwaanendael,” was destroyed within a year by local Indians who massacred the settlers and burned the buildings to the ground. Today in Lewes, a statue of DeVries stands atop the Dutch-style Zwaanendael Museum building.

At the Edgewater site, DeVries built himself a manor house and raised cattle in the small settlement. Things were fine until Dutch Governor Willem Kieft at New Amsterdam (New York City) decided to tax the local Indians for the



John George Brown (1831-1913), *On the Hudson, 1867*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. View from the Hudson River looking at the Edgewater, NJ, shoreline, with Burdett's Landing, the destination of the ferry crossing the river.

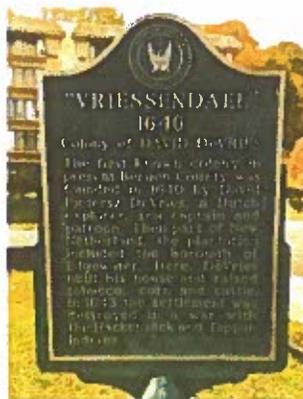
“privilege” of living in their own territory. Kieft launched an unprovoked massacre at the Indian encampment at Pavonia (Jersey City), killing 120 men, women and children. That started what became known as Kieft’s War, which was waged from central New Jersey to Connecticut until 1645.

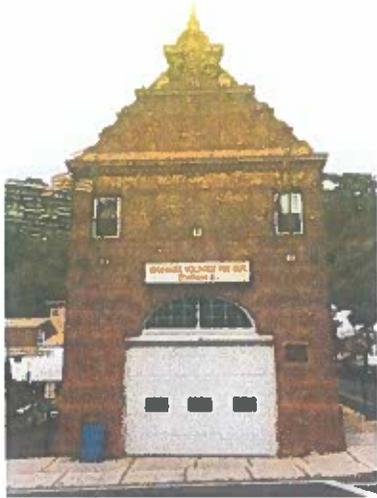
In retaliation for the massacre, the Indians immediately attacked and destroyed the little trading-post settlement of “Winkelman” (located in today’s Bogota, near where the Court Street Bridge crosses the Hackensack River). They then proceeded to Vriessendael, killing cattle, destroying crops and burning buildings. When they

came upon the manor house of DeVries, where the settlers sought refuge, an Indian spoke up in praise of DeVries and how he had treated the Indians respectfully. The attack ceased, the natives expressed regrets for the slaughtered cattle and then retreated.

The settler’s lives were spared, but Vriessendael was doomed. DeVries was so disgusted by the conduct of Kieft and the directors at New Amsterdam he closed up his colony and went back to Holland. Today the early Dutch roots of Edgewater (as in Lewes, Delaware) are remembered with a Dutch-style building: It’s Company 1 of the local Volunteer Fire Department (1408 River Road).

In 1653, a Manhattan merchant named Etienne Burdett established a trading post, home and ferry dock at the foot of a bluff (at the border of present-day Edgewater and Fort Lee). During the American Revolution, this northern end of Edgewater was known as Burdett’s Landing, a strategic Hudson River crossing between Fort Lee and Fort Washington (184th Street in Harlem, Manhattan). During the Battle of Harlem Heights in November 1776,





Company 1 Volunteer Fire Department.

George Washington left from the ferry landing to go to the battle, only to meet Generals Putnam and Greene coming from the other direction with the sad news of defeat. Burdett's Landing was also used as an artillery position against British ships and as a launching point for American raids.

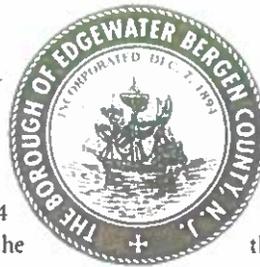
Throughout the rest of the 1700s and most of the 1800s, Edgewater was a sleepy waterside village with ferry operations, boating and shad-fishing industry. In the spring, shad fishermen would drive poles into the mud of the shallow part of the river (near today's Admiral's Walk condominium) and string nets to them. When more fish were caught

than could be sold locally or at the Fulton Fish Market, they were used as fertilizer.

The 1.6-acre Edgewater Cemetery, located at 684 River Road (just south of the Avalon at Edgewater apartments), holds the remains of 309 early inhabitants, with names like Vreeland, Burdett and Van Gelder. The earliest burial was in 1819, and the latest one took place in 1982.

What is now Edgewater was originally part of Ridgefield Township. In 1894, the Township was divided into eight boroughs, one of which was Undercliff Borough. That became the Borough of Edgewater in 1899.

River Road is the main road and the oldest—and until 1870 it was a toll road (with three gates). Very little of early Edgewater survives, but the stories live on. Mary Parish was the local teetotaling zealot who, like the very well-known Carrie Nation, shut down all the local bars. The Hudson River used to freeze solid back then, and stories

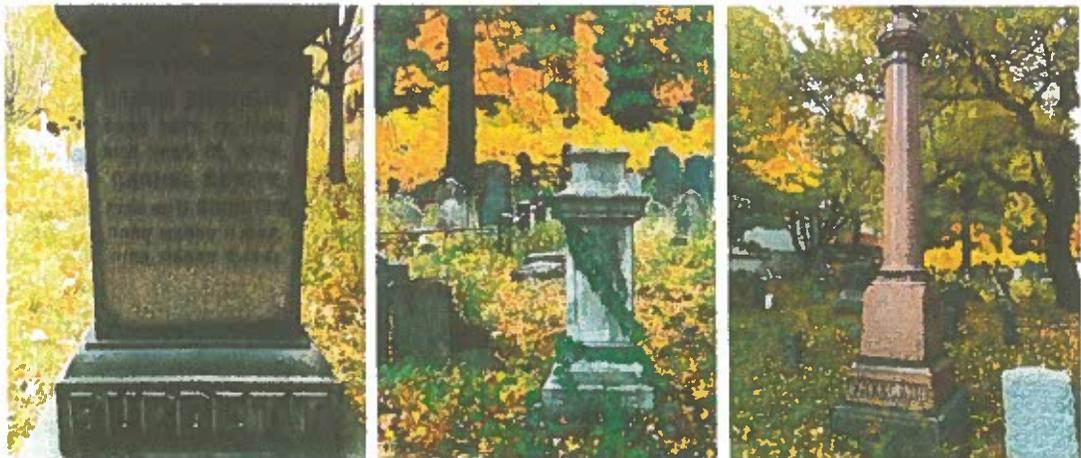


survive of bar owners who would construct shacks on sleds in order to operate the business on the state line in the middle of the river. When the liquor taxman would arrive from New

York, the shack was pushed to the Jersey side of the line. When the New Jersey taxman would show up, the shack was pushed to New York's side.

Edgewater's more famous residents back in the late-19th/early-20th centuries included Captain Charles W. Charles, an army veteran who was with General Custer during the American Indian Wars. After surviving those engagements, Charles entered into another—with Go-Wan-Go (which means, "I fear no one"), the pretty daughter of Chief Mohawk. Fortunately for Charles, this engagement was far more pleasant than those with other Indians, and the couple lived happily in Edgewater for 27 years. They were popular for their western attire and flamboyance (both are buried at the Edgewater Cemetery).

Tombstones from the Edgewater Cemetery.



Some of Edgewater's early industries included the Russell Road Company, which honed the cobblestones for roads like Broadway in New York City. And Steinway Pianos, according to Borough records, got its start in Edgewater. (In its advertising, the company claims New York roots.)

After the Civil War, Edgewater became a popular summer vacation spot. The many hotels, both large and small, catered to the rich as well as those of modest means—and even the well known. Boss Tweed was a frequent visitor. And Enrico Caruso spent what he considered his happiest times in the “Hills of Edgewater.”

One large hotel actually spanned the Bergen and Hudson county lines. Another called “Clahan’s General Store, Hotel and Burlesque Theater” had a notorious reputation. The locals were said to tolerate the seamier elements from New York City because they brought money to the town. (There’s no record as to whether Clahan’s was a house of negotiable affection.) In the 1920s, Edgewater became known as “New Jersey’s Barbary Coast” because of the many bootleggers who operated there.

One former recreational area became permanent: The Edgewater Colony. This 26-acre site is located where Burdett’s Landing once stood. The “colony” began as a cooperative campground where members pitched tents in the woods to escape the summer heat in New York City. Soon, the tents gave way to tiny cottages. Small rents were paid to the family owning the land.

In 1948, the family sold the land to The Edgewater Colony Incorporated, which originally had 94 shareholders.



The Corn Products Refining Company, 1910



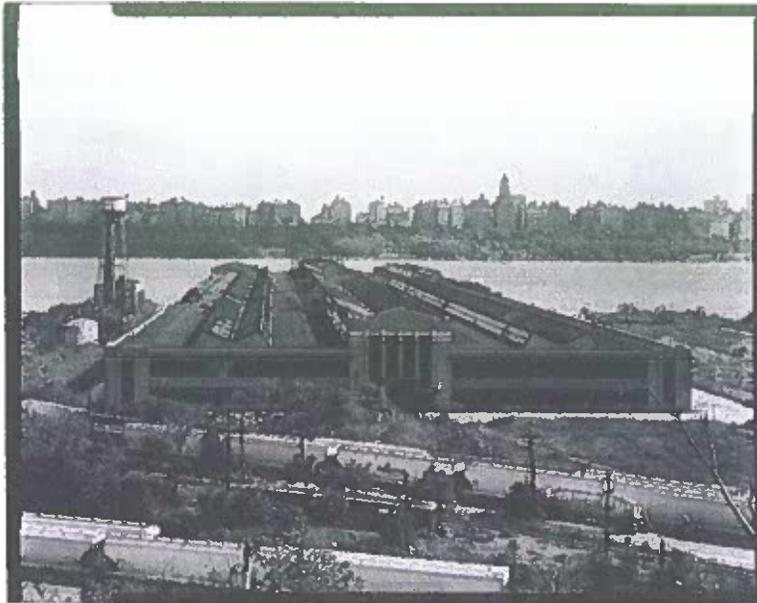
The Binghamton ferryboat operated from 1905 to 1967, transporting passengers across the Hudson River. A few years after its retirement, it was permanently docked and enjoyed a brief history as a restaurant. It closed for good in 2007 and is now scheduled for demolition in early 2017.

One silly rumor was that a colony of midgets lived there since the houses were so small. Many of the bungalows have since been replaced by million-dollar homes; most are still small, and all are crammed onto tight lots with narrow lanes. Talk show host Geraldo Rivera owns two houses there.

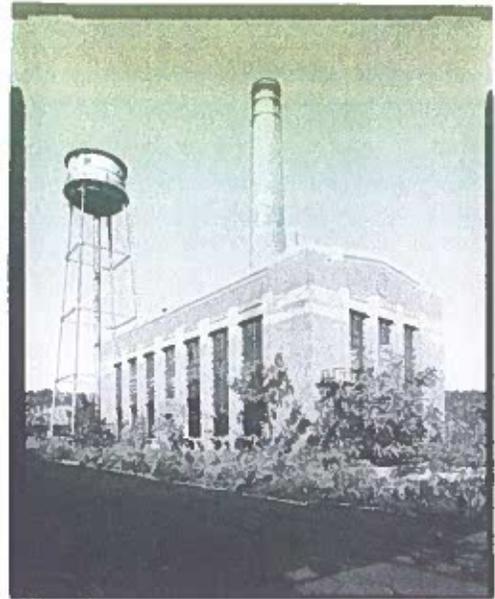
Prior to 1920, when Fort Lee was the capital of the movie industry (before it moved west to Hollywood), Edgewater also served as the location for many early motion pictures. It was common to see D.W. Griffith shooting westerns along the local streets. When thousands

of extras were involved, the economy flourished. The movie industry came back to Edgewater in 1997, when it was used as a filming location for the feature film, *Cop Land*, starring Sylvester Stallone, Robert De Niro, Harvey Keitel and Ray Liotta.

Throughout most of the 20th century, Edgewater was an industrial town. The railroads and heavy industry controlled the waterfront; by 1940, 10,000 people worked in Edgewater. The borough was once home to some of the earliest chemical operations in New Jersey. The Weeks Oil Company, a processor



The Ford Motor Company, Edgewater assembly plant, River Road.



Boiler house and water tank: Ford Motor Company, Edgewater assembly plant.

of oils and fats both edible and inedible, was the first company of its kind; among those that came later was the Valvoline Oil Company, which moved to Edgewater in 1881.

The National Sugar Company was based in the borough ("Jack Frost Sugars" was its product), and for years a large, illuminated sign atop the Edgewater plant was a landmark on the Hudson River. Lever Brothers Co. began production here in 1932 and "cleaned up" with its product Dove Soap, the first soap not made with animal fat.

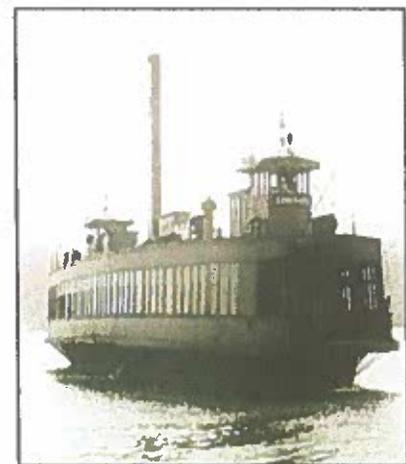
The Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) moved here in 1916; by 1940, the factory's total area exceeded one million square feet. Mess kits for World War II and Wearever cookware were made here. ALCOA closed its plant in 1965. The Ford Motor Company opened an assembly plant here in 1929, and in 1951 more than 91,000 cars were made in Edgewater. The Ford plant moved to Mahwah in 1955.

Labor disputes and strikes in various industries were common in the early 1900s, and some were violent. A 1912 strike at the Susquehanna Railroad coal yards in Edgewater began when workers demanded 25 cents (instead of 22 cents) an hour. The strike turned into a riot. Police officer Thomas Farrington ordered the strikers out of the coal yard and was shot in the head but survived. The strikers took action when they saw a barge full of strikebreakers arrive at the coal pier, storming into the coal yards and firing at police who were on guard. Capt. Andrew J. Craw and Detective Clarence Mallory of the railroad police were killed. Ten workers went on trial in 1913, and five were convicted and sent to prison for up to 30 years.

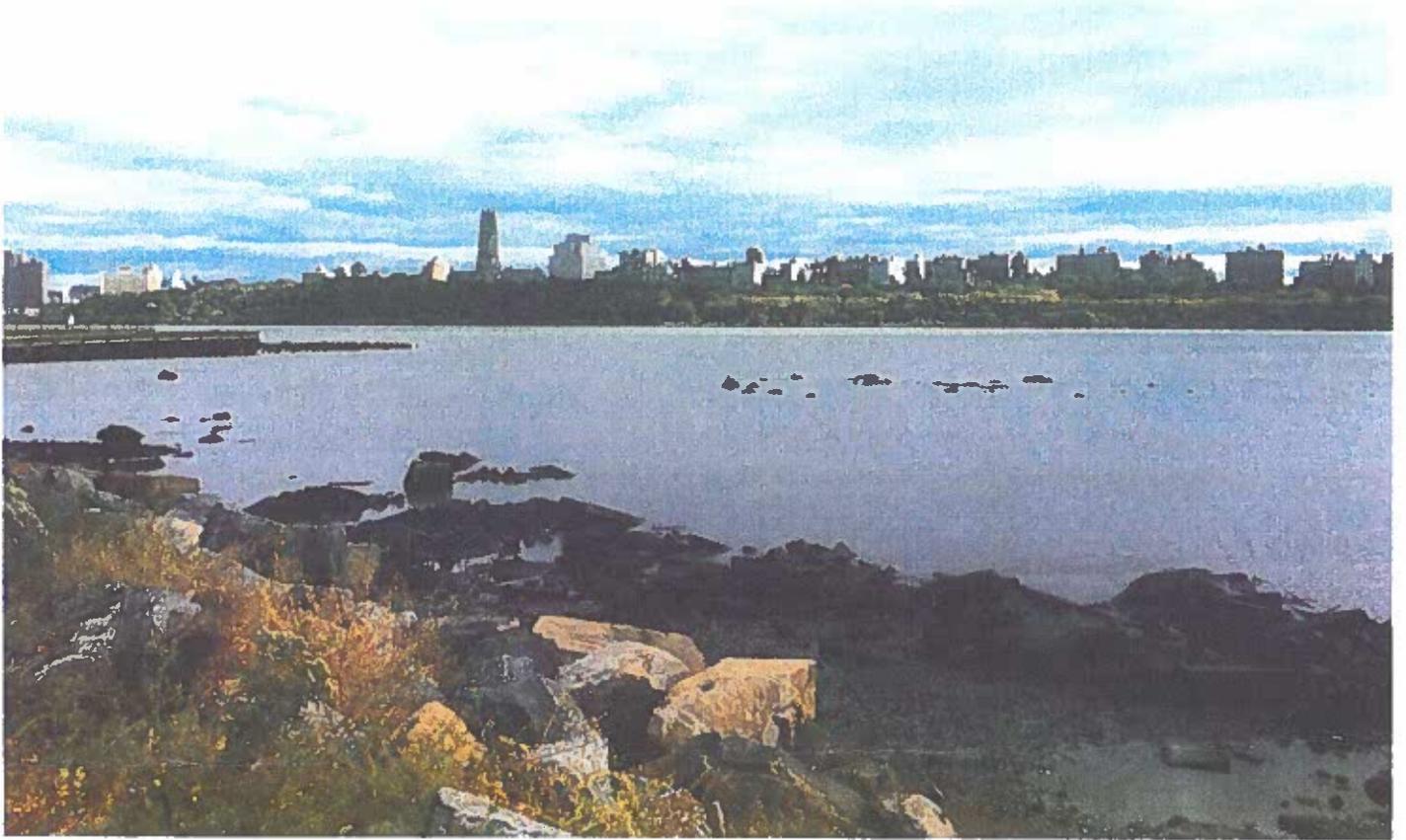
Edgewater was home to Manhattan's 130th Street Ferry, which ceased operations in 1950. By the mid-1970s, most heavy industry in Edgewater had closed down. They left behind huge deteriorating

factories that haunted borough officials, who tried to compensate for the millions in lost taxes. Edgewater, it seemed, was destined for obscurity.

By 1983, the opening of a pharmacy in Edgewater was considered a cause for celebration. With a population of 4,600,



The Public Service-operated Edgewater, running from Edgewater Ferry Terminal to Manhattan in 1941.



The view of upper Manhattan from the shores of Edgewater, with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in the distance.

there was no doctor, no supermarket, no place to buy a pair of socks; if you needed a bottle of aspirin, you had to leave town. The new drugstore was not in some old building, but rather the ground floor of Admiral's Walk, an expensive condominium project that was seen as the symbol of a coming revitalization.

The development surge that started in the early 1980s has almost tripled the borough's population and has radically changed its former industrial atmosphere into a sophisticated, modern community with an international, cosmopolitan population. Today more than 43 percent of Edgewater's residents were born in Asia. City-data.com ranks Edgewater at number three nationally on its list of "Top 101 cities with the most residents born in Japan" and

number seven on its list of "Top 101 cities with the most residents born in Korea." A number of well-known people have connections to Edgewater: Actor/rapper Ice-T and his wife, actress/model Coco Austin, have a house in Edgewater, and Barbara Corcoran of ABC's *Shark Tank* was born here.

Numerous condominium and apartment complexes have been built in Edgewater, with others planned and under construction. The most grandiose is "The Alexander," built on the former site of an Archer Daniels Midland factory that produced flax oil. The recently completed building contains 300 luxury apartments with monthly rents ranging from \$2,500 to \$12,000. Edgewater now has five main shopping areas, with more than 50 national-brand businesses. There are nearly 70 restau-

rants and other food establishments in the borough.

The river that "flows two ways" along Edgewater runs by what is now described as Bergen County's "Gold Coast." If Captain David Pietersz DeVries hadn't given up on the area, his descendants might have made a killing in the real estate market. ☞



A thriving community of brand-name stores, restaurants and a host of apartment buildings and condominiums.