

Where Lovecraft Lost His Telescope: His Kingston and the Towns around It

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It is time to record the origins of my place in Lovecraft criticism, which was the Lovecraft Forum that I founded perforce thirty years ago through the efforts of a fan who appeared one day in the office of the English Department of SUNY New Paltz, saying to the Chair, "You need to have a Lovecraft Forum." "Why?" she asked mildly, and he answered that we must because Lovecraft had visited New Paltz in 1929. At this the Chair suggested that the fan should see Professor Waugh. I was only casually interested in Lovecraft at the time; but when the fan said he could provide me with his copies of *Lovecraft Studies* and *Crypt of Cthulhu* and bring such scholars as S. T. Joshi and Peter Cannon to the event, I acquiesced and have been running the Forum ever since. The few times I was gone students ran the Forum. The fan, whose name I have forgotten to my shame, has disappeared, on his way to Florida with his mother.

During the many years I lived in New Paltz and environs, I never took to heart the point of doing the Forum in that town. Later, when I moved seventeen miles north, preparing to retire to Port Ewen upon the Esopus Creek, I happened to read in Lovecraft's copious letter to Elizabeth Toldridge that besides the city Kingston he also visited the small towns of Hurley and New Paltz (*ET* 64–72), towns I am very familiar with and which Lovecraft visited at the same time as he visited Kingston. I had moved from one Lovecraft site to another; I could not escape him. So I gave up, and in this short essay I would like to outline what Kingston and those towns were like in the late 1920s when he visited them and to explore how he reacted to those towns.

Chartered in 1661, halfway up the Hudson River between

New Amsterdam and Albany, for several years Kingston grew until 1797, when it became the first capital of the new State of New York, its name acknowledging for some years its fealty to King George III. One can still see many of the old government buildings, reared in the solid rock and stone of the eighteenth century and in the ornamental brick that is now the signature of the city. It was his interest in architecture that led Lovecraft to put aside his telescope, searching out the details of the upper friezes; it was here, however, that someone stole his diary and telescope, which is now something of the true cross that we Lovecraftians still have to recover (Joshi, *I Am Providence* 731). In this city the Dutch Reformed Church and the Episcopalian Church vie for interest, but the Victorian style of the Episcopal church would not have excited Lovecraft's interest.

"Kingston itself interested me prodigiously," he wrote in a letter in May 29, 1929, "for it is a highly venerable & historic place full of reliques of the past" (*ET* 64). Let us consider this statement: "reliques of the past." Twice over he emphasizes that it is the past that he has come to admire. Thus it is "venerable," a place to be approached in adoration. Now adoration is difficult, no matter what its object may be, so we shall see that Lovecraft does adore as far as he can.

"Kingston" can then be many things to many people. Lovecraft is meticulous in describing the shape and history of the city, the history of Kingston proper and the history of Rondout and the Strand, which in Lovecraft's time had its own ferry across the Hudson to Rhinebeck. The vibrant scene of the railroad and the commercial trucking had led to the stagnant world of the Strand that Lovecraft knew. He, however, was quite fascinated by the society of the Strand, in his day "a somewhat picturesque slum" (*ET* 64). One may well think of the slums of Eastern Providence that attracted Charles Dexter Ward as a young man or "the queer dark courts on the precipitous hillside" where Professor Angell died upon being jostled by "a nautical-looking negro" (*CF* 2.22). These were slumming places that I believe sang to Lovecraft's secret sensibility.

Now things are very different along a Strand that has been quite renovated, as has the arcade in the center of the city where

people slowly built the Stockade District. A great variety of pleasure boats dock at the Strand; the restaurants are excellent, thanks to the Culinary Institute across the Hudson, and the art galleries are interesting. The Strand has become gentrified. At least, that is how it seems at first; but when you walk to the west along the shore of the Esopus, things become a bit more sleazy. Consider, in comparison to this present, what Lovecraft thought of the area some eighty years ago: "Hilly Rondout on the river has become a sort of declass  section largely given over to foreigners, from whom Kingston proper is almost wholly free" (*ET* 66).

What shall we say, then, of the foreigners in the city of Kingston and the towns of Hurley and New Paltz? The building of the Delaware and Hudson Canal in the 1820s brought a great influx of Irish, especially to the work on what became known as Rosendale Cement (Evers 220–21). Rosendale is a town that came into existence between Kingston and New Paltz; but in his description of his trip to New Paltz Lovecraft has no word to spare on Rosendale; this is a shame, since he might have found the caverns of Rosendale of some interest. From 1905 to 1915 Italians arrived to work on the Ashokan Reservoir (Evers 388); later the work in the farms became important for Jamaican labor. Finally we must mention the State Teachers College that became one of the state universities with a strong emphasis in the last twenty years on a diverse student body. Clearly Lovecraft could not see what was in front of his nose when he said that Kingston and New Paltz were free of foreigners.

As I have suggested, Kingston provided Lovecraft with a wealth of architecture. Yes, there were the gambrel roofs in which he reveled. There were the stone houses of Hurley and New Paltz, and the ancient stone buildings in Kingston that survived the fire of the Revolution. Lovecraft is happy to speak for "a Dutch diplomat, visiting the place not long ago, [who] declared that as a whole [Hurley] is more typically & historically Dutch than anything now left in Holland!" (*ET* 68). He is happy to trip off his tongue "the railway station, P. O., public library, city hall, hospital, & Y M C A" (*ET* 66).

Lovecraft has considerably more interest in the street-car line, to which he devotes two long, complex sentences, and the motor coach service, to which he devotes two more spacious sentences;

these vehicles he believes must have “all the freshness, charm, & simplicity of a small village” (*ET* 66). It is easy to see what sorts of cities and villages Lovecraft preferred. It is possible, of course, that he appreciated the street-car lines, the motor coach, and the rail line because he traveled by them.

From Kingston Lovecraft visited Hurley for a day, a pleasant backwater of Kingston that had a number of old stone houses. To call Hurley a backwater today, however, is to forget the historical turmoil that the town suffered in its early life, for it and Kingston did become a part of the Indian Wars, which Lovecraft wisely took note of: “Severe Indian warfare harassed the town throughout its early history—incidents not unprovoked by the high-handed seizure of lands & arbitrary and cruel treatment of Indians by the Dutch settlers” (*ET* 65). In 1663 the Natives burned Hurley to the ground and carried off a number of women and children. Lovecraft, we see, pays attention not only to the architecture but to the history. It was the search for those captives that brought some of the French Huguenots to the valley they named New Paltz, which as Lovecraft put it brought him on his next “sub-pilgrimage” after visiting Hurley (*ET* 68).

New Paltz founded in 1687 by French Huguenots who had arrived in the New World via the Netherlands and stayed first in Hurley. They bought the land from the Natives lawfully, “a step which would have delighted Roger Williams,” the Rhode-Islander within Lovecraft cannot help himself from remarking (*ET* 70). Once more they built the stone houses that properly fascinated Lovecraft and which lured him to the town, houses built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that were still inhabited by the original families when he arrived. The main church was the Dutch Reformed Church, which had slowly superseded the French Huguenots. By Lovecraft’s time there had been a great influx of Italian families, drawn by the cement works in the nearby town of Rosendale, a town with no architectural or historical interest for Lovecraft. Through the first half of the century many more Italians arrived to exploit the earth for the sake of vineyards and apple orchards. A Roman Catholic church had been built in the heart of New Paltz, not far from the State Teachers College, which he did notice. A small Episcopal church existed for the

sake of the Anglican managers of the cement works. It was a very quiet town, on the verge of expressing its new tensions and of discovering the treasures it possessed in the old stone houses.

Did any of this material find its place in Lovecraft's fiction? Yes, in 1924 in "The Shunned House," but before he went to Kingston, Jacques Roulet, the horrible creature of that story, comes from a family of Huguenots who have settled in the neighborhood of the French Provence. More striking are Lovecraft's references to the local geography of Kingston in "The Man of Stone" and "The Diary of Alonzo Typer," but those stories have little to do with that geography. We cannot really say that these stories were affected by their geography.

I do wonder whether Lovecraft as he inspected the region was in any way influenced by Washington Irving, whom he certainly respected, though the light tone of Irving's work was certainly not the tone that Lovecraft preferred. At the beginning of "Rip Van Winkle" the narrator describes the Catskills as "fairy mountains," with "magical hues and shapes" (4). In the postscript to the story he adds that it is "a region full of fable," appearing often in the Native mythologies (19). With very little detail Knickerbocker refers to "the haunted regions of those mountains" (627) and their "enchanted regions" (629), but clearly those mountains do not belong to the mock-heroic style of that work. The mountains in both narratives are quickly dealt with; Lovecraft in his visit to New Paltz refers to "the quiet Dutch milieu so well exploited by Washington Irving" (ET 68), but for him as for Irving the Catskills and the Shawangunk hills are marginalized, and thus he speaks Irving's language when he says "the purple mountains loom mystically" (ET 67) and then turns once more to the details of Kingston, New Paltz, and Hurley. He writes in a manner fitting to "Rip Van Winkle" when he says of Hurley that "the place is delectably slow & sleepy, with true Catskill conservatism [. . .] tenanted by the same old families who built them" (ET 67).

When in Lovecraft's sub-pilgrimage he arrives at New Paltz, he reverts to the earlier language, "in the eternal shadow of the lordly & lovely Shawangunk Hills" (ET 68), innocent of the historical change by which the Shawangunks will become popular with moneyed rock climbers, training themselves for the Himalayas. It

would not have been a change open to his sensibility. Instead, as he approaches New Paltz he rhapsodizes over “at least one old-fashioned *covered bridge*” (*ET* 69) that he sees—this, I dare say, is the bridge that is still in existence over the Wallkill, carefully preserved between Rosendale and Rifton.

New Paltz seems to have been everything he expected, very like Hurley but not slumbering. He especially appreciates the large stone house that is now the museum of the town: “under the immense sloping roof [. . .] a fine type of early colonial construction under Dutch influence, (though Frenchmen built it) & I examined it with the utmost thoroughness & interest” (*ET* 69), as I am sure he did. It is possible that at the end of this tour of Hurley and New Paltz he may have returned to the Strand by way of the bridge that had been built in 1922, but he never gave a clue that he had. Port Ewen, which had been founded in 1851 by the Pennsylvania Coal Company across from the Strand (www.nynjbotany.org/whudson/esopustown), never achieved a reputation of wonder or of true sleaze such as the Strand often did.

At the end of his stay in the upper Hudson valley Lovecraft turned his attention to the loss of French, which was the tongue of the French Huguenots, and Dutch: “Every effort was made to preserve the traditional piety & French ways of the forefathers, yet in the course of time the influence of the surrounding Dutch population could not help being felt [. . .] time took its revenge upon the once conquering Dutch language by pressing it to extinction as French had formerly been pressed—the latest conqueror being the all-engulfing English” (*ET* 70–71). This “engulfing” could not have been moral. It is upon this “pathos of the linguistic change” that Lovecraft concludes his meditation.

The physical evidence of this “engulfing” for Lovecraft can be seen in the fire that the British brought to Hurley; first it was a fire that the Natives brought, but now it was a war once more, “setting fire to all the edifices save those belonging to loyal subjects of our rightful sovereign” (*ET* 65). The sense of irony is alive here as Lovecraft suggests that “the political loyalty of the owner [was] the most probable” reason why the Van Steenbough house where the State Senate met was not burned (*ET* 65).

We should not be surprised that Lovecraft does miss some as-

pects of the city. Of great interest to him is the story of Aaron Burr, who in the Bogardus Tavern discovered the chalk drawings of a young boy upon a stable door and resolved to send the young man, John Vanderlyn, to Europe for artistic training (*ET* 66). We must keep in mind that this young man's first work of some strength some years later was the nude of Ariadne, a work that was not well received by his native city. This story, as Lovecraft tells it, is all about the perspicacity of Burr; but we have to bring to Lovecraft's account the more salient aspects of the Burr story, his duel with Alexander Hamilton in which Hamilton died and Burr's career was ruined. He was thereafter a man without a country, a fate that reminds us of Edward Everett Hale's poignant novella. The center of that work lies in the young man Philip Nolan's curse: "Damn the United States! I wish I may never hear of the United States again!" (Hale 23). As Lovecraftians we believe we have heard this story once before, not from the pen of Lovecraft but upon the lips of the Outsider. "I did not shriek, but all the fiendish ghouls that ride the night-wind shrieked for me, as in that same second there crashed down upon my mind a single and fleeting avalanche of soul-annihilating memory" (*CF* 1.271–72). This story is not a jest; it is deadly serious.

There is, however, another aspect of this city and its parasite towns that is ignored by Lovecraft, an aspect of the world that he either ignored or simply never heard of despite its powerful place in our world, at first after the Civil War and today in our multicultural world. This is the place of Sojourner Truth. Isabella was her slave name when she was born in 1797 in a rural cellar in Rifton; her house was sold for \$100 in 1806 (nynjbota.ny.org/whudson/esopustown/), and she achieved her freedom with great difficulty in 1828 (Evers 186). During this time her only language was Low Dutch, i.e., Deutsch; shedding that language was her first step to freedom (Washington 18, 20). In time she became a powerful orator; but her freedom meant for her the freedom of all Americans, including the freedom of all women (Evers 186); thus she was more than an abolitionist before the Civil War. This demand for freedom in all its forms is one reason she remains a powerful figure for so many people. When a new library was built for New Paltz University, it was named in her honor, large

photographs of her implacable, gnarly figure sitting above several of the staircases. She was illiterate, so we must learn that the letter is not the key to truth.

Lovecraft does not seem to be aware of this woman who looms above us like a fertile crack of doom. But despite this failure of imagination, two sculptures are now assumed by the two figures, the white man and the black woman, the conservative man and the progressive woman, the careful man and the outspoken woman. His statue stands firmly in place, the adult male in Providence, Rhode Island; and her statue stands as an adult in Northampton and as a young child in Port Ewen, just across the Esopus Creek from the Strand. He is gaunt, and she has been whipped. He of course does not mention her presence at all in his steps across the Rondout, for he did not believe in the freedom of the black existence; but as his own death marched upon him, the life of Sojourner Truth increased. The first plaque in her honor in Kingston was raised in 1883, before Lovecraft was born; the first in his honor was raised at the John Hay Library in 1990. We do imagine that neither would have appreciated the other, but I believe there is something of the child in both of them, and we are called upon to listen to the dark place in both.

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