

*This document is an extract from "Hudson Valley Ruins: Forgotten Landmarks of an American Landscape". Because this portion of the book was only available on the Internet as a preview that could not be copied in text format, it had to be captured with screenshots and processed with object-character recognition (OCR). The OCR process is not perfect and some small errors may exist in this transcription.*

As early as the 1840s, Putnam County farmers found that they had exhausted the hilly upland soil of the county's mountainous terrain, leading to the abandonment of agricultural land throughout the region and lending the Highlands an even more picturesque appeal. The county's population declined steadily until 1920, with fewer inhabitants that year than had been recorded a century earlier. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the great availability of inexpensive land in such close proximity to New York City spurred the creation of even more estates here. It was in this context that Sigmund Stern purchased and developed his Cold Spring estate in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Edward Cornish bought the Stern estate in 1917, one year after he ascended to the presidency of the National Lead Company. With his wife, Selina, he made his primary residence at New York City, using the Cold Spring estate whenever he could to engage in the pursuits of a gentleman farmer. The mansion itself was irregular in plan, its exterior elevations composed of a lower story of stone supporting an upper facade of wood. A complex of stone and wood barns occupied the northeastern corner of the property, where Cornish raised cattle and maintained an active dairy farm.

At the time Cornish came to Gold Spring, much of Putnam County's 34 square miles remained undeveloped. Manufacturing centers had not risen in Putnam County to the extent they had elsewhere in the valley. The county's largest industrial employer of the nineteenth century, the West Point Foundry in Cold Spring, had changed and was in decline. But in the 1930s came an industrial revival in the Hudson Highlands that would eventually threaten to destroy what many regarded as one of the natural wonders of the northeastern United States. The reaction to this revival culminated thirty years later in the birth of the modern environmental movement.

The 1930s saw the appearance of large-scale quarrying at Mount Taurus, between the Cornish estate and the old village of Cold Spring. Quarrying was not new to the Highlands. Almost a century before, a natural monument on Breakneck Ridge known as the "Turk's Face" was destroyed by blasting. But quarrying at Breakneck stopped in the 1850s, and the construction of the Catskill Aqueduct through the hillside in 1913 seemed to spell a permanent end for all mining operations in the area, as blasting near the aqueduct was forbidden.

Other Highlands peaks, however, remained vulnerable. Immediately adjacent to Cornish's country retreat, the opening of the Hudson River Stone Corporation's quarrying operation at Mount Taurus in 1931 brought mining at a scale unprecedented in the Highlands. Within a few years the mine had torn a very visible gash across the face of the otherwise pristine mountain. The operation extended out into the river on the peninsula known as Little Stony Point, where a crusher was fed by a tippel that stretched from Mount Taurus over what became Route 9D.

There were numerous outcries and protests against the destruction of the 1,400-foot face of Mount Taurus, and the commencement of mining operations on November 21, 1931, was closely followed by

conservationists throughout the region. Few lived closer to the quarry than Edward Cornish, whose neighboring estate shook with every blast. Though his own company was later to carry out extensive surface mining near the headwaters of the Hudson in the Adirondack Mountains, Cornish, then in failing health, eagerly sought to protect his land from future development by donating mining rights to the Hudson River Conservation Society: thereby preventing future quarrying on the property.

In 1936 Cornish offered the estate for sale to the Taconic State Park Commission. The state had already intervened to protect other parts of the Hudson River shoreline from quarrying, including the Palisades, Hook Mountain, and Bear Mountain, near the south gate of the Highlands. And in 1929 the commission had established the Clarence Fahnestock Memorial State Park, located only a few miles east of the Cornish estate in Putnam County. But the commission, acting under the authority of Robert Moses (then chairman of the New York State Council of Parks) declined Cornish's offer, stating that the site was 'not at all adaptable for a park area' and citing potential costs associated with the upkeep of the mansion and other buildings on the property. It was a decision the agency would later regret.

On May 3, 1938, Edward Cornish died at his desk at 111 Broadway in New York City. His wife, Selina, passed away two weeks later. Under the absentee ownership of Cornish's heirs the property soon fell into decay. The estate continued to deteriorate throughout the 1940s, and a fire partly damaged the house in 1956. Quarrying operations at neighboring Mount Taurus ceased around this time (today piles of crushed rock and the overgrown scar on the mountain remain). But a new industry had already cast a hungry eye toward the Highlands. The first major electric power plant appeared on the Hudson in 1906, with the completion of the Yonkers Power Station for the New York Central Railroad. By the 1950s, as other Hudson River industries such as brick making and textile production fell into decline, electric power generation began to emerge as one of the most prominent industrial activities on the river.

In the late 1950s, the region's two largest electric utility companies each announced plans to build large pumped-storage power-generating facilities at the famed north gate of the Hudson River Highlands. On the west shore, Consolidated Edison proposed building a plant on Storm King Mountain. At the same time, the Poughkeepsie-based Central Hudson Gas and Electric Company made plans for a similar plant across the river near Breakneck Ridge, and the company purchased the unused Cornish estate from the heirs of Edward and Selina Cornish in 1963. Both proposals became lightning rods for the budding environmental movement, directly spawning the creation of the environmental group Scenic Hudson that same year. Later followed by groups such as the...

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...apparently built as part of the estate, or can follow marked trails south of Mount Taurus or north to Breakneck Ridge, from which a network of trails continues north to the city of Beacon via parkland administered by Scenic Hudson.

Like the Overlook Mountain House, part of the appeal of these ruins is that they are left to the elements, and not fenced off. No signs warn hikers to stay out of the buildings, nor are they defaced with graffiti. Today the Hudson Highlands State Park has grown to encompass more than six thousand acres, which include the ruins of Bannerman's Island Arsenal as well as those of the Dennings Paint Brick Works near

Beacon. At least one of the old brickyard buildings is to be restored as part of a new research institute called the Beacon Institute for Rivers and Estuaries, itself an outgrowth of the environmental movement born here, on the Hudson River. But for now there are no plans to maintain the standing ruins of the Cornish estate, and so the overgrown walls continue to fall back into the rocky landscape that surrounds them.