

Old Weehawken Ferry

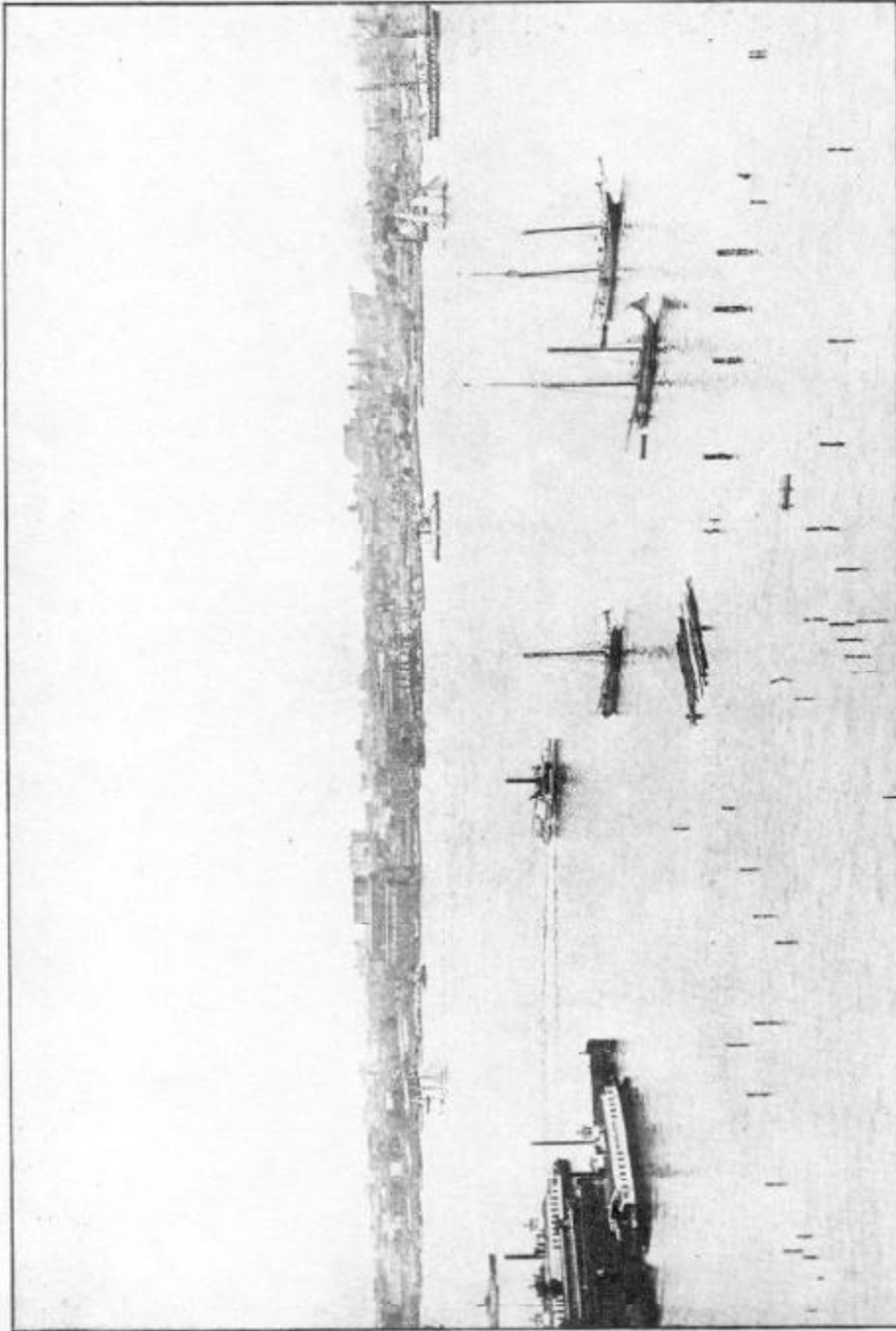
*Their wheels no more the waters churn;
The throbbing engine's pulse is still;
The helm no longer guides their course,
In answer to the pilot's will.*

—HENRY COLLINS BROWN

IN THE middle of the last century, prominent businessmen of Hudson County and vicinity saw the possibility of developing the river front territory of the present town. In 1852, according to an article appearing in the columns of the *New York Evening Express*,¹ a group of men including Judge Francis Price; his son Rodman McCauley Price², Governor of New Jersey in 1853; Dudley S. Gregory, first mayor of Jersey City; William Watson Niles, progressive Vermont-born lawyer and financier; Louis Becker, Barney Bertram, General Elijah Ward and William Cooper, President of the Weehawken Land and Ferry Association, developers of Guttenberg, incorporated the Weehawken Ferry Company to link Union Township, now West New York, with New York City. A charter was granted by the New Jersey Legislature, and a ten year lease issued to Judge Price by Comptroller Flagg of New York for the use of a plot of land at the foot of West Forty-second Street as the New York terminal of the new enterprise.

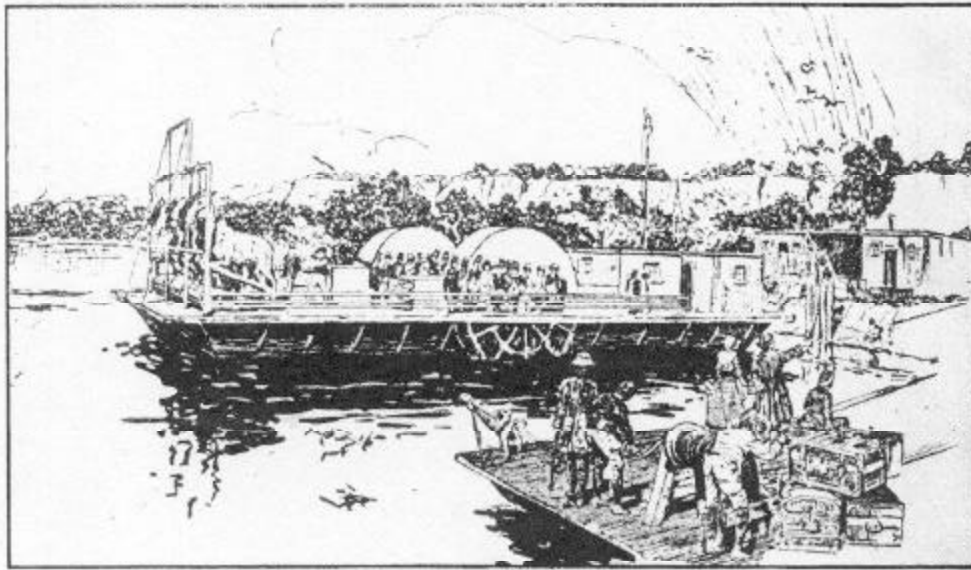
The first ferry service to Union Township was begun on January 1, 1859, supplying a much needed additional crossing midway between the ferries of Hoboken on the south and Fort Lee, the old Huguenot Peter Bourdett's pre-Revolutionary crossing at the north. That ancient landing was in a beautiful glen just south of the entrance to Palisades Interstate Park about a mile north of the present Fort Lee Ferry at Edgewater.

The need for a new crossing at Union Township was most keenly felt, since the old Bull's Ferry near Guttenberg had discontinued operation



Old Weehawken Ferry—the "Midland" and "Oswego"

in the early 1800's. After an uninterrupted service of over a century from its terminal south of King's Bluff, the equally ancient horse propelled Weehawken ferry of Stephen Bayard, had likewise ceased to exist.



Old Team Boat

The new Weehawken Ferry Company's landing place was in Slaugh's Meadow at the foot of the present Fifty-eighth Street of West New York. This locality was named after Jacob Slaugh³, that ambitious individual who had made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the tyrannical Kieft, predecessor to Peter Stuyvesant. For this rash act he was shot and his head stuck on a post.

The first boats, the "Lydia" and "Abbie", both paddle wheelers of the pre-walking-beam type, were purchased from the old Union Ferry Company on the East River. Their names were changed to "Weehawken" and "Hackensack". Later in the Seventies came the "Roslyn", "Midland" and "Oswego".

The *New York Evening Express*⁴ in an article appearing on April 6, 1852, ridiculed this new project in the following words: "We are not read up in the details of the new enterprise, but it strikes us that if the object

of the new company is limited to the accommodation of the inhabitants, they will have a very easy task to perform, for about the only inhabitants one finds at Weehawken⁵ just now are some venerable oak and elm trees. As it is presumed *they* don't intend to emigrate to New York the question is very generally asked, "Where is the patronage to come from that is to offset the proposed outlay of half a million dollars?" " Later developments proved that the *Evening Express* had underestimated the possibilities of the new venture, for it turned out to be mutually advantageous to Union Township and New York. In addition to its interest in river transportation, the Ferry Company had acquired, largely through the efforts of Judge Francis Price, vast real estate holdings on the crest of the Palisades—practically the entire area of the present town south of Sixtieth Street to the Union City town line. Here, extensive quarrying was undertaken. Blue-stone City sprang up practically overnight. The great bulk of hard-surfaced Belgian bluestone blocks used in paving lower Manhattan's thoroughfares was quarried in Union Township and exported on barges in lots of thousands from the old Weehawken Ferry.

St. Joseph's of the Palisades, one of the largest and most beautiful churches in West New York, was constructed of this native bluestone during the last days of the quarries, and the original home of Madonna della Libera Church, on Hudson Boulevard, was built of similar material quarried in the western part of the town.

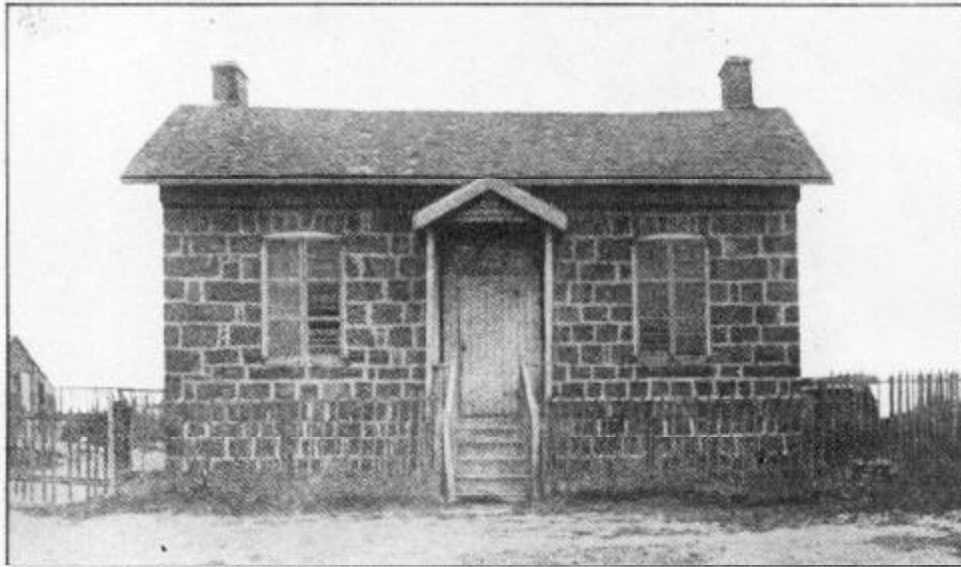
When Boulevard East was first opened to the "pedal-pushers" and horseback riders of the "Gay Nineties", the retaining walls along the skyline promenade were constructed of the same trap rock for its entire length from Weehawken to Hudson County Park.

Judge Francis Price, pioneer adventurer in the great ferry enterprise, who had previously purchased many acres of real estate along the shore front, occupied a cottage on the brow of the hill near the present Thomas Donnelly Memorial Park. This homestead was popularly referred to as "The Cedars"⁶, for it stood amidst a grove of beautiful cedar trees. From the native bluestone, he erected (before 1850) a small land office, still standing today. He intended this as a gate house to a more pretentious mansion, which, though hopefully begun, never reached completion. After

Judge Price's death, "The Cedars" served for a time as a saloon and later burned to the ground.

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Since the days of the Civil War many people have been fascinated by the old gate house on Park Avenue facing Fifty-ninth Street. According



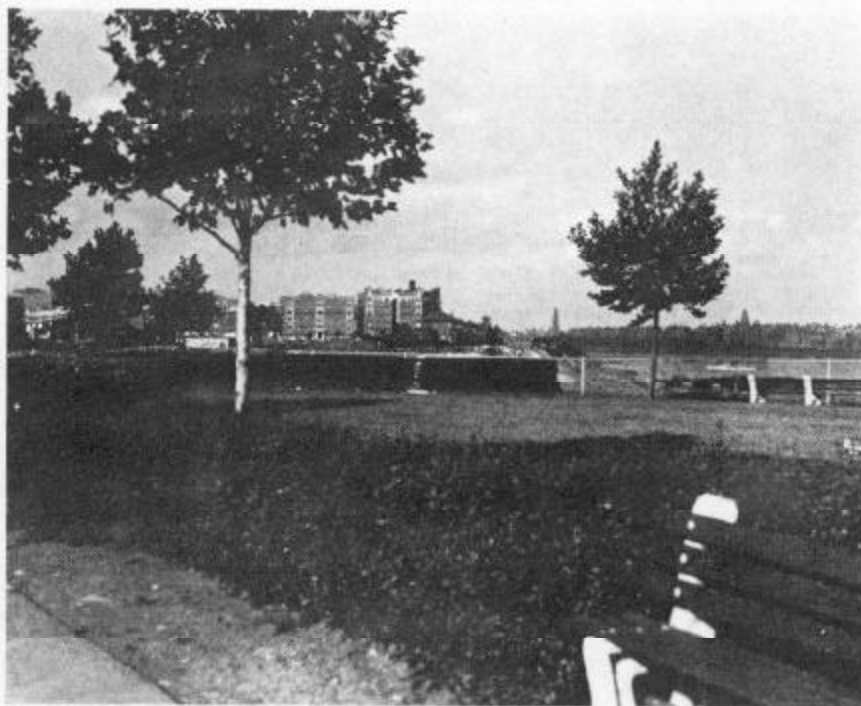
Old Gate House

to tradition, its sombre, gray walls for a brief time sheltered the notorious "Jim" Fisk, accomplice of Jay Gould in the "Black Friday" plot of 1869. Fisk is said to have used this hideout just before he was shot in January, 1872, by his former partner "Ed" Stokes in the lobby of New York's Grand Central Hotel after a quarrel involving financial matters and "Josie" Mansfield, the object of their mutual affection.

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Behind the old gate house and facing the Boulevard are the foundation walls of the stone crusher operated by the old Ferry Company. Here, the Palisade "chiprock" was crushed to the desired sizes for surfacing the roads in the vicinity. In its last years of service (about 1916) it was operated by Gustave Thiel and Anthony Markert.

In 1927, when real estate interests threatened to build apartment houses on the east side of the Boulevard and to obscure the unparalleled view of the New York skyline, a vigilant committee was organized under the slogan, "Save the Palisades". Public-spirited citizens under the leadership of Thomas Donnelly led this successful crusade. As a result, West New York can boast of a number of attractively landscaped parks overlooking the majestic Hudson River. The largest of these, Thomas Donnelly Memorial Park, was dedicated to the memory of this great leader. His memorial bust occupies a prominent place in the park. The "Save the Palisades" Committee, headed by Will Leeger, is still active to safeguard the natural beauty of the historic ridge in North Hudson.



One of Many Small Parks on the Edge of the Palisades



Andrew Melrose

New York from the Heights of Jersey