

A History of Recreational Fishing  
on the Hudson River  
from Colonial Times to 1920

by William Zeisel

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The Institute for Research in History  
1133 Broadway, #923  
New York, New York 10010  
(212) 691-7316

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## INTRODUCTION

Fishing as a pastime on the Hudson River estuary goes back a long time. The earliest written reference, by Daniel Denton, dates from 1670, thirteen years before the death of Izaak Walton, the patron saint of angling. During the 18th and 19th centuries recreational fishing became an important leisure-time activity among all classes, ages, and ethnic groups up and down the river. In 1790 President George Washington, then residing in the nation's temporary capital, New York City, enjoyed Manhattan's fine opportunities for riding and driving, and he also took a fishing trip to the grounds off Sandy Hook. Today, despite the densely commercial and urban character of much of the estuary, it remains a major recreational fishing ground. In 1979, for example, the estuary saw more recreational fishing and more fish caught than Chesapeake Bay.<sup>1</sup>

### Scope of Study

The estuary is here defined as extending from the Federal Dam at Troy to Sandy Hook, and including the East River and the tidal portions of all tributaries of the Hudson River. The study also discusses fishing above Troy dam, when information is available, and beyond Sandy Hook, in the river's zone of influence, as well as in the western edge of Long Island Sound.

Recreation fishing as a concept denotes fishing done solely or mainly for enjoyment, rather than as a source of food or income. As a practical matter the distinction is not always easy to make, since some recreational anglers may sell a portion of their catch and most recreational anglers eat their catch, but as a general idea it is clear enough. Recreational fishing includes sport fishing, the pursuit of "game fish" species which requires special skill or equipment. Often sport anglers are distinguished from recreational anglers for their greater interest in fishing; for example, sport anglers are more likely to join clubs and subscribe to fishing magazines. Still, the distinction is not iron-clad, and there are surely some recreational anglers who

spend more time fishing than some sport anglers. In this study recreational angling as a general term includes all non-subsistence, non-commercial fishing, including sportangling.

Fishing as a recreation has been done with many kinds of implements, from nets and spears to eel bobs and shotguns, and some of these appear in this study. Mainly, however, the tool of the trade is the hook, tied to a line, and either heaved by hand or cast with a rod. As a convenient shorthand the study also refers to all persons who fish for enjoyment as anglers -- a gender-neutral term-- but it should be understood to include non-anglers as well. The exceptions to this usage will be clear from context.

Although the study focuses on recreational fishing, it also uses information about subsistence and commercial fishing where appropriate, especially as a means of suggesting the quality of fishing possible in a given place, or as a way of indicating fishing activity in periods where the historical sources say little or nothing about recreational fishing.

The sources for the study of recreational fishing are unevenly distributed both geographically and temporally. The best information comes from New York City, the largest population center on the estuary. Little information survives for fishing during the colonial period, and almost all of it relates to New York City. Fishing in the upriver stretch begins to appear in the historical record in the first few decades of the 19th century, but does not provide any clear picture until the 1850s and 60s. By that time the information about fishing in New York City waters is very considerable. After 1850 the historical documentation for the whole river improves, especially for the New York City area, which in 1881 even acquired its own fishing magazine, The American Angler, the nation's first publication devoted solely to recreational fishing. In 1892 the Albany Times Union began running regular fishing columns during the season, and other upriver newspapers followed suit, although often the information was about waters other than the Hudson River.

Three distinct zones of recreational fishing have existed on

estuary. The first, the upper river, from Troy to Westchester County, has been the least intensively fished by recreational anglers, simply because it was the least heavily populated. The second, the New York City area, which stretches from Yonkers to Sandy Hook, has been the most heavily fished and the most completely described in historical sources. The third, the outside waters, embracing the offshore fishing grounds such as the Sea Bass Banks off Long Branch and the Cholera Banks, acquired a large seasonal population of boat and ship anglers during the 19th century.

Themes

The major themes of this study derive from the nature of fishing, which involves the interaction of human and natural factors and agents. The human factors include levels of fishing activity, kinds of persons who fished, and the social nature of fishing activity, such as clubs and group outings. The natural factors include the location and physical aspect of fishing places and the size of fish populations.

Broadly speaking there are two major strands to the discussion. The first is the evolution of recreational fishing as a clearly defined sport, from its roots as mainly a rural pastime and subsistence-based activity. The best attested fishing of the colonial period is seining by farmers on their own property, for their own consumption. Angling was usually a rude affair, done with handlines or with woodern poles that lacked reels. The only formal angling tradition was that of Izaak Walton and his successors in England. During the 19th century fishing in North America came of age, as anglers gained in sophistication and developed their own body of literature and lore, adapted to local circumstances.

The second strand is the alteration of the estuary's physical and biological aspects during the past three centuries. The advent of European settlement in the early 17th century began a long process of changes, both gross and subtle, that have refashioned the river's shoreline and bottom, altered the quality

of the waters, and affected the organisms that live in it. Changes of this sort have deeply affected all fishing on the river, both recreational and commercial.

Although the two strands of history are conceptually distinct, they are functionally interrelated, since the factors that helped create the sport of fishing also contributed to the physical and biological changes in the estuary. Fishing as it evolved in the 19th century drew heavily on technological change, for example, the invention of steamboats and railroads. It also was affected by the rise of large urban centers; the changeover from an agricultural to an industrial economy and workforce, and the vast growth of wealth in the United States during the 19th century, especially in the New York City region and the major upriver towns such as Troy and Albany. These developments also contributed to the physical transformation of the river, as docks were built, wetlands filled, stream dammed, and new substances introduced into the water. Late in the 19th century the detrimental aspects of these developments were beginning to attract the attention of anglers and others concerned about the river. By 1920 the decline of the river as a recreational resource was the stuff of local newspaper editorials. The anglers suffered as much as any group from the decline, yet as residents of estuary shores they were in their own way equally culpable for the changes. The year 1920 thus represents a logical end point for this study, which describes the evolution of Hudson River recreational fishing from colonial times through the full development of the urban-industrial revolution that has transformed the estuary and the society living around it.

#### NOTES

1. Daniel Denton, A Brief Description of New-York, (1670, rptd. Ann Arbor, 1966); I.N. Stokes, The Iconography of Manhattan Island (New York, 1915), vol. 1, p. 380; John B. Williams et al., 1979 Maryland Saltwater Sport Fishing Survey (Annapolis, 1982), p. 1; Terrence P. Smith et al., "Partitioning of National Surveys of Recreational Fishing Statistics" (University of Maryland, Jan. 1985).

NAMES OF FISH CITED IN TEXT

Does not include fish whose common name -- "sucker," "sunfish," "shark" -- includes many possible species.

blackfish, tautog	<u>Tautoga onitis</u>
bluefish	<u>Pomatomus saltatrix</u>
brook trout	<u>Salvelinus fontinalis</u>
brown trout	<u>Salmo trutta</u>
bullhead, hardhead	yellow bullhead, <u>Ictalurus natalis</u> ; brown bullhead, <u>Ictalurus nebulosus</u>
burrfish	striped burrfish, <u>Chilomycterus schoepf</u>
butterfish	<u>Peprillus triacanthus</u>
carp	common carp, <u>Cyprinus carpio</u>
catfish	white catfish, <u>Ictalurus catus</u>
cod	Atlantic cod, <u>Gadus morhua</u>
crappie	black crappie or strawberry bass, <u>Pomoxis nigromaculatus</u> ; white crappie, <u>Pomoxis annularis</u>
cunner, bergall	<u>Tautoglabrus adspersus</u>
dogfish	spiny dogfish, <u>squalus acanthias</u> ; smooth dogfish, <u>Mustelus canis</u>
drum, black drum	<u>Pogonias cromis</u> (see also red drum)
eel	American eel, <u>Anguilla rostrata</u>
flounder	winter flounder, <u>Pseudopleuronectes americanus</u>
fluke	summer flounder, <u>Paralichthys dentatus</u>
herring	alewife, <u>Alosa pseudoharengus</u> ; blueback herring, <u>Alosa aestivalis</u>
kingfish, barb	northern kingfish, <u>Menticirhus saxatilis</u>
largemouth black bass	<u>Micropterus salmoides</u>



ling	<u>Urophycis chuss</u>
menhaden, mossbunker needlefish	Atlantic menhaden, <u>Brevoortia tyrannis</u> Atlantic needlefish, <u>Strongylura marina</u>
ocean sunfish, headfish	<u>Mola mola</u>
pickerel	chain pickerel, <u>Esox niger</u>
pike	northern pike, <u>Esox lucius</u>
porgy, scup	northern porgy, <u>Stenotomus chrysops</u>
puffer, blowfish	northern puffer, <u>Sphoeroides maculatus</u>
rainbow trout	<u>Salmo gairdneri</u>
red drum, channel bass	<u>Sciaenops ocellata</u>
salmon	Atlantic salmon, <u>Salmo salar</u> ; Pacific or coho salmon, <u>Oncorhynchus kisutch</u>
sea bass	black sea bass, <u>Centropristis striata</u>
sea robin	northern sea robin, <u>Prionotus carolinus</u>
shad	American shad, <u>Alosa sapidissima</u>
sheepshead	<u>Archosargus probatocephalus</u>
smallmouth black bass	<u>Micropterus dolomieu</u>
smelt	rainbow smelt, <u>Osmerus mordax</u>
spot, Lafayette	<u>Leiostomus xanthurus</u>
striped bass	<u>Morone saxatilis</u>
sturgeon	Atlantic sturgeon, <u>Acipenser oxyrinchus</u> ; shortnose sturgeon, <u>Acipenser brevirostrum</u>
tomcod	Atlantic tomcod, <u>Microgadus tomcod</u>
weakfish	<u>Cynoscion regalis</u>
white perch	<u>Morone americana</u>
whiting, silver hake	<u>Merluccius bilinearis</u>
yellow perch	<u>Perca falvescens</u>

PART I

Upriver: Capital District to Westchester County

## CHAPTER ONE

## The Hudson Above New York City: Background

Fishing in the upriver Hudson has been deeply influenced by human activity during the past three centuries. Although the river from Troy to the Tappan Zee has always had a much smaller population than the stretch at New York City, it has nevertheless experienced major human impacts even early in its recorded history. Some were gradual, other more rapid, and in combination they have affected the size of fish stocks, the mix of species, and access to places for fishing.

The first European settlers found a tidal river that extended well above Troy and penetrated east and west in numerous tributaries that provided spawning and nursery grounds for a large variety of fish. Trout abounded in streams and brooks in the Hudson valley from Troy to New Jersey. Native Americans exploited scale and shell fish as food but do not seem to have caused any significant change in the physical, chemical, or faunal aspects of the river. The European settlers, by contrast, began to have an immediate effect, even though their numbers were small, through the building of dams on many tributaries. The Hudson valley offered many fine dam sites as sources of water power for mills to grind grain and plaster, saw wood, and cut stone. Colonial newspapers contain hundreds of advertisements for dam sites, especially in the more rugged areas where the vertical drop of water was greatest. The Dutch dammed the Normanskill near Albany in the 17th century, and by the early 19th century, if not well before, dams also confined Catskill and Esopus creeks, the Walkill, and the Quassaick to name a few. The Croton River was dammed in the 1840s to serve the New York City water supply system. In 1826 the most imposing dam of all was completed across the Hudson itself at Troy. This structure, today called the Federal Dam but in the 19th century referred to as the State Dam or simply Troy dam, was an enormous stopper at the top of the river, whose tidal portion was thus pushed south about 25 miles.

henceforth no shad would ascend to their northernmost ancient spawning grounds at Baker's Falls (Fort Edward).<sup>1</sup>

The Troy Dam and scores of smaller ones gradually constricted the tidal portion of the river. Water could flow over the dams into the river, but not vice versa, and the same was true for fish. The dammed tributaries became non-tidal environments that slowly changed their character, cut off as they were from influences from the Hudson.

The constriction of the tidal river's extent was the first in a series of human actions that altered fishing on the river above New York City. The next was the advent of commercial net fishing for the seemingly inexhaustible stocks of large fish such as sturgeon, shad, and striped bass. Had the market netters fished solely for local consumption, their effect on the river might have been relatively slight, for the upriver population was only a fraction of that around New York City. Unfortunately, Hudson River fish found markets not only in Albany, Kingston, and Peekskill, but in Manhattan also. When a commercial caviar industry began to develop in the 1870s and the 1880s, sturgeon stocks dropped rapidly and the fishery soon collapsed. In only a few years the egg-hunters had managed to accomplish what two centuries of netting for sturgeon meat had not. Shad also began suffering declines in catch during the 19th century, owing largely to overfishing. In fact, the decline of the Hudson River shad fishery was a driving force behind the first efforts, in the 1870s, to restock the river with fish raised in hatcheries.

For recreational anglers the declines in sturgeon and shad were unfortunate but not very painful, since these two species were rare side catches. Much more worrisome was the decline in striped bass, the river's prime game fish from Troy to Sandy Hook. Although stocks of bass held up remarkably well under pressure from netters, by the first decade of this century the state fish and game commission was becoming concerned about falling commercial catches in the river. Again, overfishing by netters was blamed.

The next major event in the river's history was the great transportation revolution that swept the Northeast during the first half of the 19th century. Steam led the change, first on boats and then on rails. Transportation improvements brought population increases and industrial development, as upriver towns began providing foodstuffs, manufactured goods, and raw materials for New York City and other towns. The exploitation of steamboat travel encouraged the dredging of channels in the river and created the need to dispose of dredge spoils, in many cases probably in marshes and other fish habitats. Steamboats produced tons and tons of ashes, generally disposed of by dumping overboard. Near Tivoli the Little Channel became so filled with ashes by 1907 that it was deserted by both spawning shad and shad netters.<sup>2</sup> Many other fishing grounds must have suffered a similar fate.

Other spawning grounds were made inaccessible to fish by the railroad, which snaked its way up the Hudson's east shore in the late 1840s and finally reached Greenbush, opposite Albany, in 1851. The trains themselves contributed no burden to the river, but their tracks and trestles, often laid at the shore edge and sometimes directly over shallow water, frequently cut off wetlands and inlets from the river. Many of these mini-environments gradually silted up or dried out, or became uncongenial to their former inhabitants and saw a change in species. The process was gradual, since many of the original railroad embankments and trestles, if one may judge from old maps and illustrations, seem to have allowed for movement of water back and forth. With time, however, openings filled in and major changes followed.

Finally, during the late 19th century, as the last dams were being built, as the west shore railroad was pushing slowly upriver, and as commercial netting was reaching its peak, the river above New York began to show the effects of a new human intervention, pollution with industrial and human wastes. This appeared first and most seriously around the Troy-Albany area, which had the largest concentration of people and industry on the

river north of New York City, but it affected other places too. Aside from the cosmetic effects of allowing untreated sewage to flow directly into the river, there was the problem of reduced oxygen levels from bacterial action. To a lesser degree towns lower down the river encountered similar problems, and by 1907 the state fish and forestry commission characterized the river as "little more than an open sewer, and each year finds the conditions in this respect worse than the year before."<sup>3</sup> This blanket condemnation was probably too harsh for the least industrialized stretches of the river, between Hudson and Nyack, but it shows the degree to which people who knew and cared about the river had come to despair over its future.

Not all the human-made changes were detrimental to anglers, although the benefits were generally inadvertant. The same railroad trestles and embankments that prevented access to some old fishing grounds provided convenient new fishing perches. (They retain that function today. The Croton-Harmon railroad trestle over the Croton River is often filled with anglers taking small striped bass in the spring run.)<sup>4</sup> Even more popular were the many docks and wharves that appeared on town shorefronts during the 19th century. These provided easy access to the water and were especially appreciated by the elderly, who would otherwise have needed to travel along rough ground or beach to reach good fishing places. Dock angling became the most commonly practiced form of recreational fishing in the 19th century all along the river, from Troy to Yonkers.

Another inadvertent blessing was the appearance of the black bass in the Hudson. The species migrated from upstate New York waters through the Champlain and Erie Canals (completed by 1825), and gradually worked its way down the estuary.<sup>5</sup> It seems to have reached its present range by the 1880s, when it was reported as a major angling attraction in the Capital District and points south. The bass received considerable help in its spread from private citizens, who sometimes introduced it into local waters, including Hudson River tributaries, and from the state Commission of

Fisheries, which began its own bass-stocking program in the 1870s. A much less welcome species introduced by human action was the German carp, which first appeared in the Hudson in the 1830s as the result of an accidental release at Newburgh, but which was also stocked in the river by the state Commission of Fisheries late in the 19th century.

The town docks that served as fishing places for black bass and other species also served the steamboats and canal barges that provided a major link between the upriver towns and the great metropolis to the south. That link involved the movement of new people and products and new ideas. A benefit was the swifter transport of magazines, books, and other printed matter about the emerging sport of American angling, which during the first half of the 19th century acquired a sense of its own identity as a legitimate and unique offspring of English and European fishing. In the growing upriver towns handlines gave way to rods and reels and eventually even to artificial flies, and old notions about shad or striped bass not taking the hook vanished before the flood of information about angling techniques and the boxes of artificial lures and beautifully made rods and reels that shipped from New York and London.

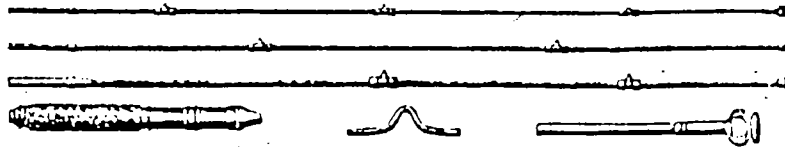
At first virtually all tackle was imported. In 1793, for example, the Albany hardware store Bloodgood & Follet advertised imported fish hooks as one item in an assortment of drygoods, including snuff boxes, inkstands, curry combs, and gun flints, shipped "from Holland and England." By the 1860s Albany establishments that sold fishing gear, such as Ralph P. Lanthrop's hardware store, on 57 State Street, usually omitted any reference to "imported" when describing their wares. In 1878 Albany boasted its own sporting goods store, W.G. Paddock's Sportsmen's Emporium, 60 State Street, which advertised the largest selection of hunting and fishing tackle in Albany.

By that time much of the equipment being sold in the valley was of domestic manufacture, including not only the famous split bamboo rod but high-quality line and lures. A newspaper story in

# SPECIAL JULY SALE OF FISHING TACKLE

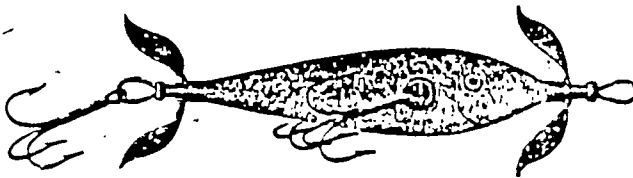
## W. H. SAMPLE & SONS

2,000 High Grade Steel Fishing Rods, Value \$3.75; for 10 days only at..... **89c**



GO FISHING, and get a Reel Rest, fish now with the fishing's good. If you do not know where to go, we can tell you, where they are catching the big ones, come in and see some of our new lures. We have several new novelties that you ought to see.

### THE LARGEST STOCK OF FISHING TACKLE IN THE CITY



Sample's Bass Casting Minnow

The best minnow on the market for bass. Value 75c, our price **35c**

### Clearance Sale of Baseball Goods



#### FIELDERS' GLOVES—

60c value at.....	30c	\$1.25 value at.....	62c
\$1.50 value at.....	80c	\$2.00 value at.....	90c
\$2.75 value at.....	\$1.00	\$2.50 value at.....	\$1.25
\$3.50 and \$4.00 Gloves at.....			\$1.00

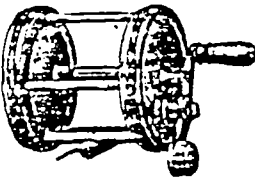
#### BASEBALL MITTS—

\$1.00 value at.....	50c	\$2.50 value at.....	\$1.18
\$3.50 value at.....	\$1.00	\$1.00 value at.....	\$2.00
\$7.00 and \$8.00 value at.....			\$1.18



#### BASEBALL SHOES—

\$3.00 value at..... \$1.00    \$3.50 value at..... \$2.18    \$4.00 and \$5.00 value at..... \$2.08  
 SPECIAL—25c, 35c and 50c Factory Soiled Balls at 15c.



### Double Multiplying Reels—Ivory Tusk Handles

Double multiplying, raised pillar, balanced handled, screwed brass reel, with patent adjustable slide drag and back sliding click, all nickel plated.

No. 1.—40 yards, value \$60; our price..... 35c  
 No. 2.—60 yards, value 75c; our price..... 50c  
 Other reels from \$1.00 to \$7.50.

### Enamel Silk Lines

Martin's Little Tip Silk Line, best quality, 75 ft., value 75c at..... 25c  
 20 ft. high grade Enamelled Line, value 35c at..... 10c  
 For this week only 75 ft. of Highest Quality Enamelled Silk Bass Line, value \$1.00, at..... 39c

BATHING SUITS from \$1.00 to \$5.00—Largest stock in the city to select from—Bathing trunks for boys special 8c.

TENNIS RACKETS—the Spaulding and Victor, from \$1.50 up.  
 WATER WINGS 25c and 35c.



SEE OUR LARGE WINDOW DISPLAY

## W. H. SAMPLE & SONS

36 South Pearl St., Cor. Beaver St.

Fishing tackle advertisement, W.H. Sample & Sons, Albany, N.Y., 1911.

Source: Albany Evening Journal, July 6, 1911, p.14.

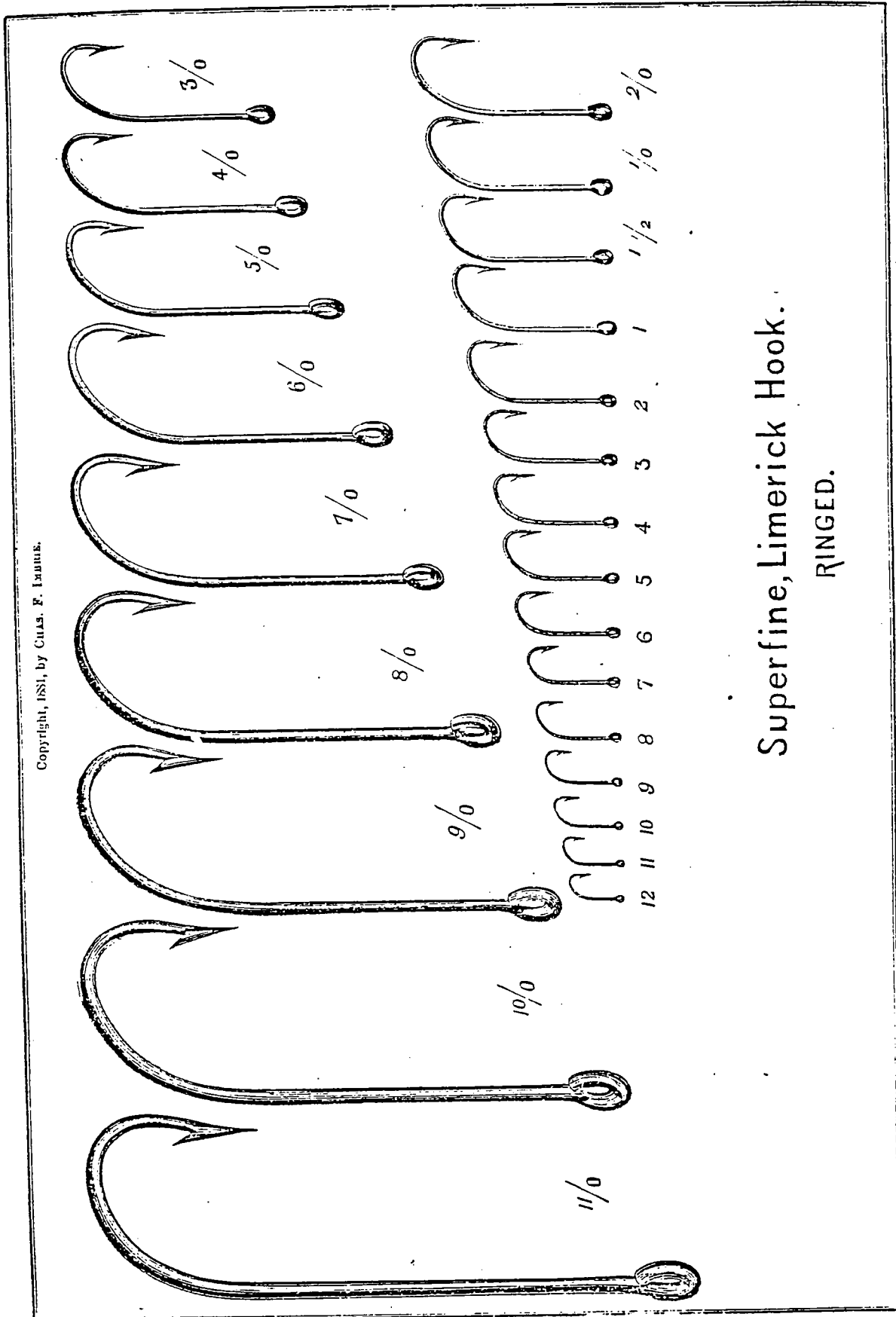


a Hudson newspaper of 1880 claimed that American-made fishing line was without peer, owing to the fine materials and manufacturing machinery used, and noted that the world's largest fish-line factory was at Highland Mills in Orange County, New York. Two years later an editorial note in the American Angler remarked on the rapid progress of American tackle manufacturers, who were even exporting to England. Along with improvements in tackle came new inventions for boats, including the internal combustion engine. As early as 1901 a Catskill resident was trying out a motor-powered boat, a 17-footer, driven by a two-horsepower Palmer engine. By 1910 the gasoline-powered small boat had virtually replaced the sailboat on the Hudson River from Troy to Yonkers.

Those anglers who could not visit the best tackle dealers could do their business by mail. During the late 19th century many companies began selling through the mails, and in 1892 it was commented in an Albany newspaper that "one of the first and infallible signs of the approaching fishing season is the appearance of the new catalogues .... in recent years they have become veritable encyclopedias of angling information."<sup>6</sup> The combination of catalogues and tackle shops meant that after about 1860 any upriver resident who sought to fish according to most advanced ideas could find both the information and the equipment needed anywhere along the river.

The quarry of Hudson River anglers in the 19th century were much the same as today, with some exceptions. The striped bass was unquestionably the most highly prized game fish, and was taken from boats, shore, and docks, almost always with bait. A peculiarity of upriver bass fishing was the use of shad or sturgeon eggs as bait. Before the development of the Hudson River caviar industry in the 1870s and 1880s, spawn was a waste product that netters gave away to anyone who wanted it. At Hyde Park some anglers used to seed the waters with baskets of roe every day to attract and hold the bass. That kind of fishing gave new meaning to the old phrase about shooting fish in a barrel.

Black bass, although present in the river for most of the



Copyright, 1881, by CHAS. F. IMBRIE.

Superfine, Limerick Hook.  
RINGED.

EXPLANATION.—The hooks shown in the above plate are known to the trade by various names. The name in most general use is "Super-Limerick." They are sometimes called merely "Limerick," or, again, "Spear Point Limerick," to distinguish them from "Hollow Point Limerick," which is a much higher priced hook and will be shown in our fourth illustration. The hook now shown, together with the "Kirby," which we will show next week, are the two best known and most generally used of all kinds of hooks. They are the cheapest and almost necessarily the poorest hooks made. These hooks are either flatted or ringed. They are also tapered, or marked, when used for snelling with gut or gimp. [The above plate is used by permission of Messrs. Abbey & Imbrie.]

19th century, and today fished with enthusiasm, attracted little attention on the Hudson until the 1880s. In fact, I have found no reference to the taking of black bass in the Hudson before the 1880s. Nineteenth-century newspaper accounts often referred to fish simply as "bass," evidently meaning striped bass but in some instances conceivably referring to black bass. At least one elderly angler I have talked with noted that around the turn of the century many river residents avoided black bass because they were wormy, which may explain a reluctance to fish for them. On the other hand, lake and pond anglers in the valley were taking plenty of black bass and bragging about it in local newspapers since at least the 1860s.

Shad today attract a devoted following of anglers on the Hudson, mainly at Troy dam, but that is a recent development. During the 19th century it was widely assumed by the general populace and even by most anglers that shad would not take a hook, despite good evidence to the contrary. As early as 1872 a Hudson newspaper ran a story about the successful shad-fishing of Thomas Chalmers and George Murray at Holyoke on the Connecticut River, in 1871. These two men caused quite a stir among the more sophisticated members of the angling establishment when they announced that they had successfully taken shad with a fly. Actually, Seth Green, who became a founding member of the Commission of Fisheries in 1869, claimed to have taken "young shad eight inches long with a fly, at Holyoke," in 1867, but Chalmers and Murray received credit for succeeding with mature fish. The Hudson newspaper column of 1872 that provided news of the shad fishing noted that it was practiced only on the Connecticut River, and in fact it never became popular on the Hudson despite the availability of fish, the knowledge of how to catch them, and an offer by Chalmers during the 1870s to sell shad flies by mail for 12 1/2 cents apiece.<sup>7</sup> Occasionally someone would take a shad while fishing for bass but the only outburst of shad fishing on the river occurred in 1888, when during May and June numerous anglers on the Hudson reported taking shad with artificial flies.

When they told their friends about the catches they were laughed at, since local tradition had it that shad did not take the hook. But it was true. One of the anglers, a railroad conductor named Frank Fuller, vacationing on the river, apparently at Troy dam, angled for shad one afternoon and "in the presence of 50 reputable persons, he caught two large-sized shad and one small one at what is known as the dam here, a famous place for catching black bass, and the outlet of which is to the Hudson river." He used a mainly yellow fly of his own design which he called the "Professor," fishing it wet, about 18 inches under the surface, with a light trout rod and light line, and "played the shad as if bass."<sup>8</sup>

The sudden interest in fly-fishing for shad was probably associated with the contemporary experiments in fly fishing for striped bass along upriver grounds, but neither caught on among local anglers.

Other game fish included pike and pickerel, which are still caught there today. Much more popular along the whole length of the river, however, was angling for the white catfish, which when large (over 3 or 4 pounds) was rated a very good catch. When river catfishing deteriorated in the Capital District around the turn of the century it was cause for mourning among local anglers. In the Kingston area many anglers seem to have specialized in fishing for catties, although they surely would not have turned away from catching a striped bass if occasion offered. The catfish remains a popular catch today, as I discovered several years ago, when I wandered into a bait and tackle shop in Fort Lee one May, to find several anglers exclaiming over their battles with large catfish off the Englewood and Alpine boat basins. Unfortunately the catfish, like the eel and other bottom species, is now off limits for gourmets because of PCB contamination. Amazingly, even a hundred years ago, when PCBs were not an issue, fish could occasionally become contaminated with toxins. One case occurred in 1880, on a stream that enters the Hudson near Tivoli, when a local landowner spread an insecticide, Paris green, on a potato patch. Rain washed the poison into the creek--which was

known for its fine fishing--and fish that ingested the material began dying in great numbers. An accident with Paris Green occurred on Staten Island, also in the 1880s.<sup>9</sup>

Weakfish were an important gamefish in Haverstraw Bay until early in this century, and have returned in recent years. Bluefish are caught there today occasionally but do not seem to have been a significant presence in previous times. Another gamefish of the river was the Atlantic salmon, whose presence in the river is discussed in a later chapter. Suffice it to say here that the focus of salmon angling, during its few brief years, was at Mechanicville dam, north of Troy. Another large fish, the sturgeon, never rated as a game fish and was only occasionally sought out by anglers, but through its sheer size could provide quite a battle. The common way of taking a sturgeon without a net was not by angling, however, but by having one jump in your boat.

The Hudson has always provided a large assortment of panfish, mainly white and yellow perch, crappie, eel, bullhead, sunfish, and sucker (mainly in the tributaries), as well as herring and smelt in season. In the brackish portions, from Newburgh south, snapper bluefish were a late summer and autumn attraction, along with occasional flounder. Tomcod were common also in that stretch in the spring and fall, but could sometimes be caught all the way up to Troy dam. Exotics included sea bass, needlefish, shark, and something called mermaid.

One of the major constraints on recreational fishing in the Capital District, as well as in most other stretches of the Hudson River, was ice. Winter brought a solid sheet of ice that closed the river to shipping from early December until late February or March. Both the freezing-up and the thawing processes received a lot of attention in the local press everywhere on the river throughout the 19th century. Steamboats stopped running, except for ferries, and canal boats tied up for the winter. Sometime around early January the ice was strong enough to support sleighs and wagons, which were the common means of winter transport across the river until the mid-19th century, when steam ferries became

powerful enough to keep their tracks ice-free. Even then, the ice remained a line of communication not only across the river but up and down it. It was also a great place for having fun, in the form of ice-boat races, horse races, skating, and sledding. What is most striking, however, is the nearly complete lack of reference in the newspapers to ice fishing on the Hudson. In the Capital District, in 1892, the Albany Times Union ran a story subtitled "Royal Sport Fishing through the Ice," but the ice in question covered Lake Champlain. We know that residents of the town of Hudson occasionally fished through the river's ice (see below), so it seems reasonable to assume that Capital District anglers did too, but there is no solid evidence to support this. Instead, most river anglers waited on the docks, like old Capt. Reilly, for the ice to break up and move out in April, before dipping their hooks.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

1. Letter of A.N. Cheney, Fisheries Commissioners Nineteenth Report, (Albany, 1891), p.49.
2. Fourteenth Report of the Forest, Fish and Game Commissioner (Albany, 1908), p. 364.
3. Eleventh Annual Report of the Forest, Fish and Game Commissioner (Albany, 1905) p. 168.
4. Tom Lake, "Hudson River, Part II. Haverstraw Bay," New York Sportsman, February 1984, p. 22.
5. American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine, August 1833, pp. 641-642, "Angling on Lake Champlain." On Hudson River bass in general see American Angler, May 12, 1883, "Fishing and Fishing Grounds," p. 294.

6. Albany Register, Sept. 23, 1793; Albany Evening Journal, Sept. 19, 1867, July 1, 1878; Hudson Evening Register, June 12, 1880; "Publisher's Note," American Angler, July 1, 1882, p. 9; Catskill Weekly Examiner, Sept. 1, 1901; Troy Record, July 6, 1910; Albany Times Union, March 5, 1892.
7. Hudson Evening Register, Aug. 20, 1872; Thomas Chalmers, "Catching Shad with a Fly," American Sportsman, March 28, 1874, p. 407, April 4, pp. 4, 9, May 9, p. 89.
8. American Angler, June 16, 1888, p. 373, "Fly-Fishing for Shad."
9. Hudson Evening Register, Aug. 24, 1880.
10. Albany Times Union, March 19, April 16, 1892.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Who Fished the Hudson above Manhattan?

A case can be made that up to about the turn of the century, the Hudson should have been one of America's most popular fishing rivers. It offered a variety of game fish, was located in a heavily populated section of the country, was easily accessible by boat and train, had a booming resort industry, and was nationally celebrated through its own school of landscape painting as one of the most beautiful and picturesque natural settings in the world. Even in more recent times, when the Hudson had lost much of its old glamor as a scenic wonder, and had become heavily tainted with pollution, it still boasted large populations of fish, including striped bass. Croton Point, for example, has since the mid-19th century, if not before, been a noted bass grounds for sport anglers. Yet, as Boyle noted in his book on the Hudson, he knew of only about 50 anglers during the 1960s who fished those waters regularly for striped bass.

Boyle attributed the lack of fishing interest to the reputedly oily taste of many Hudson River bass and the decades-long neglect of the river by the state. What has become clear from an examination of the historical sources for the 19th and early 20th centuries is that other factors may also be involved, since the relatively low level of fishing effort appears in the earliest solid information about upriver fishing in the 1850s and 1860s.

## Capital District

From the pages of Troy and Albany newspapers it would appear that most local anglers preferred streams, ponds, lakes, and other fishing waters, rather than the Hudson River. A news item in the Troy Daily Times of July 26, 1853, spoke of five local men who had just returned from a fishing trip to Saratoga Lake. A story of 1855 in the Albany Evening Journal referred enviously to the "Dawsonia Party," which had recently sent the writer a "splendid mess of trout," and thanked also "our much esteemed friend, Jared



