

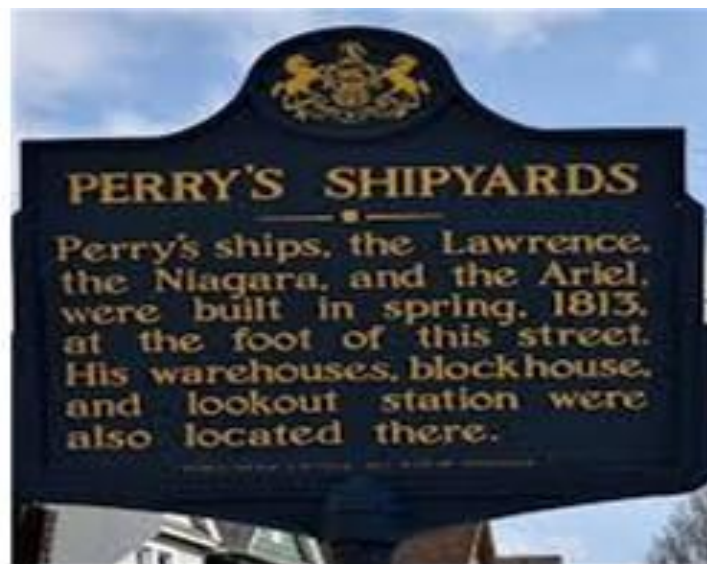
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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Cascade Creek: Stream of Dreams

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Editor's Note: Following is a classic "On the Waterfront" article by Dr. Frew. It was published originally in October 2020.



Bay Rat explorations of the Cascade Dock area eventually revealed Cascade Creek (technically, the West Branch of Cascade Creek). Our first creek expeditions began at the wooden suspension bridge and took us north toward Presque Isle Bay. The creek split into two branches when we first discovered it and we followed both to their ends, sometimes using paths that paralleled the creek, and alternatively walking on the edge of the water.

Both branches terminated in stunning views of Presque Isle Bay, which allowed us to see the Cascade Dock to the east as well as the shoreline heading west toward the Bierig boathouse. Beyond Bierig's boathouse (long before Dave Bierig created his sail-making business) we could see the walled border of the mysterious Strong Estate. And just offshore we spotted two concrete islands that turned out to be water intakes for the shuttered electric generating plant at West Fourth and Cranberry streets. Naturally, we knew that our adventure had to involve commandeering a large tree trunk that we could use to paddle out to the concrete islands. When we eventually succeeded in reaching the "islands," we imagined that we were Christopher Columbus. Except for the seagull poop, those islands were like the Bahamas to us.



*This historical sign still lives at the corner of West Sixth and Cascade streets.
There is another on West Second Street.*

Judging from the historical plaques at West Sixth and Cascade streets and at West Second and Cascade (both of which still exist), we thought that we had re-discovered the place where part of the War of 1812 American Feet had been built; the Niagara, Lawrence, and Ariel. We had become historians as well as adventurers. Later we learned that the Pennsylvania Railroad had adjusted the

creek's outlet when they built the Cascade Docks. Dobbins and Perry had selected the mouth of Cascade Creek as a shipyard because its vigorous currents had carved a deep pool at the outflow. Perry's large ships had drafts of about eight feet and the creek pool provided that. Designers of the new docks in the late 1800s imagined that the deep pool would be best used for incoming bulk ships, carrying coal and or iron ore, so they took advantage of the deep water that ended up between the western and the middle docks. The dock builders did not care about water depths on the west side of the docks where the creek was re-routed. But, of course, we did not realize this at the time. Who knew that someone could move a creek?

Once satisfied that we had "discovered" every geological and historical nuance of the north end of Cascade Creek we shifted our operations south. A few days later, we began at the suspension bridge and walked in the creek bed along the railroad tracks toward Cranberry Street. Bypassing Strong's Pond (more about that in a later article), we followed the creek under the old Sixth Street Viaduct, where we found a relatively new (for us) pooling area. Sheets of gray slate defined the creek bed below the viaduct and there was a relatively deep pool of water in the center.

It was here that we first began to notice the odd colors of the water. There were streaks of green, red and blue, especially in the many smaller pools that dotted the slate creek bed under the bridge. We also began to notice that there were no living things. We hadn't thought about that as we followed the first portions of the waterway, but under the viaduct we became aware of the fact that Cascade Creek was devoid of life. As hard as we looked there were no minnows, tadpoles, fish, or crayfish. A few birds, but they were all dead.

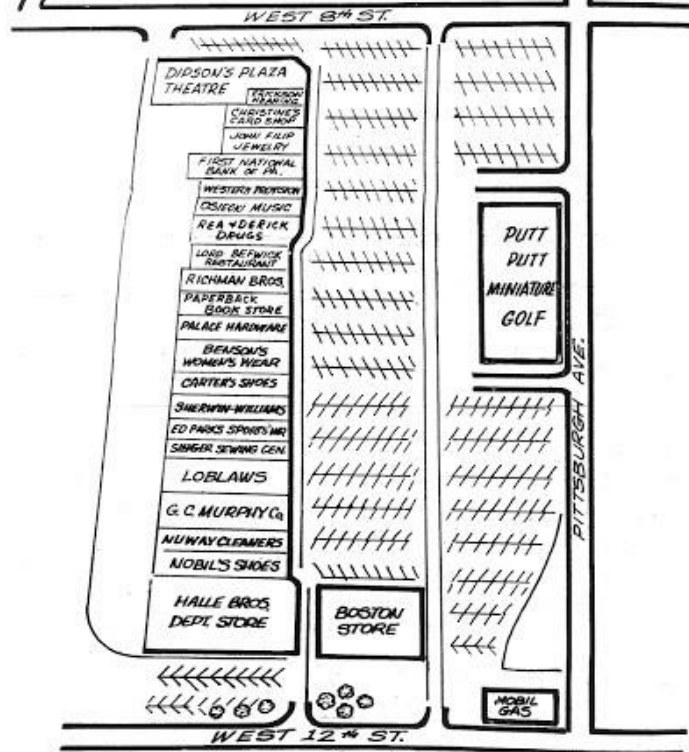
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*This view illustrates the western Cascade Dock and the outflow of Cascade Creek. Both are framed by the United Oil storage fields on both sides of the railroad tracks. The Bierig family cottage can be seen on the shoreline at the right and the old power plant top right.
(Image by Jerry Skrypzak)*

From the pools below the viaduct we continued walking in the creek and eventually found ourselves at Frontier Park. To call it a park in the 1950s would have been a serious exaggeration. We knew Frontier from sledding and realized that the bitter end of the main sledding hill terminated in a creek. But the lower parts of Frontier were totally unfamiliar to us as we followed the waterway west. The creek was only semi-interesting until we found a fork in the waterway less than halfway through Frontier. One branch of the fork led to a large pool of water.

It seemed deep enough to swim in, but we were beginning to understand how polluted it was, so we avoided the temptation. None of us had our Boy Scout limnology badges at the time (we were not Boy Scout material) but we could tell from the noxious odor as well as the thick, colorful oil slick that we probably should avoid it. And that was when several of us experienced the dreaded risk of creek and wilderness explorations: the “soaker.” Every kid had encountered this danger. After several normal steps along badly marked pathways and through wetlands, a foot somehow dropped through the surface with a terrifying squishing sound and disappeared into the mysterious ooze that permeated so many of our walkways. If the victim was fortunate enough to be able to extract his foot with a shoe still attached, his once dry and orderly footwear was usually saturated with a nasty and smelly paste. The cure for a soaker was to dip the foot into clear water. If such a pool could be located, the fresh water could theoretically resolve the sticky problem, at least partially.

We had already found the hopeful pool of water but upon inspection the water dripping through it looked so gross that instead of trying to rinse our shoes we decided to retrace our steps to the fork in the creek and explore the other branch. After continuing west for a few hundred yards, we made another exciting discovery: a huge concrete tube that ran under West Eighth Street near the west end of Frontier. This tube was large enough to walk and crawl through, so we did, dragging our shoes in the running water as we continued. The southerly end of the tube opened to reveal an undiscovered paradise of trees, brush and vacant land. It would be decades before modern development on the south side of Eighth Street would lead to Romolo Chocolates, Country Fair (Delaware), or the new Greengarden Plaza. But during the 1950s, there was nothing but trees, brush, and the creek.

Cascade Creek turned west on the other side of the tube and continued, paralleling Eighth Street. We walked on through a small industrial development and into the north end of a new housing development, the Manor. Trekking on, we eventually stumbled into the West Erie Plaza. It was the early 1950s and we found a former wetland that was fast-becoming one of the nation’s first suburban shopping centers. Little did we know that this place was rapidly becoming a model for suburban shopping and an enormous 1960s era success. Development was just beginning, and we could not imagine how the new plaza would eventually turn out. Rather than containing outer buildings and businesses such as Chipotles, and Jimmy Johns, the early plaza consisted of a single strip of storefronts on the western side of the property plus an enormous parking area.

Architects of the West Erie Plaza had cleverly anticipated changing demographics: the growth of automobile ownership, a relentless population shift to Erie’s west, and the enormous frustration that was welling up over the difficulty of downtown parking. During the decades before the emergence of the Mill Creek Mall, the new West Erie Plaza thrived. Going downtown had been automatic in the old days.

With the Fourth Street bus regularly running every 20 minutes, and much of the neighborhood consisting of people without cars, we would mindlessly wander to any corner, hop on a bus, pay a few cents, and be chauffeured to favorite downtown stops. Often the Boston Store. But as more people acquired cars and competition for parking places became intense, families were often forced to park several blocks away and hike to the downtown stores.

Why do that when there were countless free parking spots at the plaza? As time marched on, there would be new stores at the Plaza, and extensions of several iconic downtown emporiums like the Boston Store and Halley's. Not to mention a brand new, modern movie theater.



Here is the West Erie Plaza master plan from the 1960s, a few years after we had “discovered” it near the end of Cascade Creek. In our day, the theater had just opened and there were several empty storefronts.

Although we vowed to return someday to explore the other branch of the creek (Cascade Creek) that we found in the center of Frontier, we never did. It led across Eighth Street and through a pipe that was much too small for us to crawl through. Later we learned that the smaller pipe, feeding the deep pool was the real Cascade Creek (as opposed to the West Branch) and that it continued south for several miles. That is the creek that forms the backdrop for today's Romolo Chocolates, and then winds through the former Lord Corporation property on West 12th Street before it continues (although much of it is tubed underground) south into residential neighborhoods.

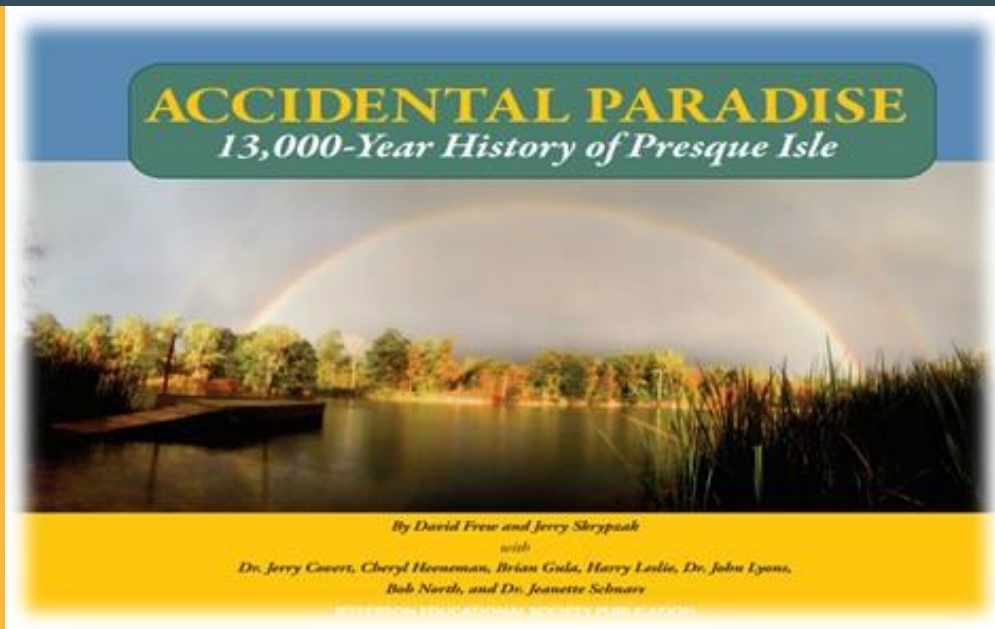
Note: My friend and co-author, Jerry Skrypzak, provided much of the technical information about Cascade Creek.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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