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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

White Rock: Bay Rat Fortress

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

The legend of White Rock long preceded first contact. Big kids told us about the magical place years before parents reluctantly allowed us junior rats to cross enough streets to make our first pilgrimage. To get to this sacred location on the bluffs overlooking the docks, we first had to get to the playground at West Third and Cascade streets. This involved crossing to the north side of West Fourth Street, a major event in our eventual autonomy. Then we had to cross West Third Street to the playground and then West Second Street to Second Field. Finally, we had to follow the pathways north to the edge of Second Field and then traverse the mysterious middle pathway along the bluffs and to the east.

When we finally mustered the courage to make this enormous trek, we set off on one of our first adventures, using only the legends that had been related by elder Bay Rats to guide us. The adventure was further enhanced by the understanding that our parents had not all granted us the permission (that we were assuming) by crossing West Second Street. As far as they knew we were all at the supervised playground at West Third and Cascade streets. The great adventure began with us crossing to the northern edge of Second Field. A few of us had been to Second Field before, but on the “down-lo.” With hearts in our mouths, we followed the path that

led from the elevations of Second Field down to the middle levels of the Bluffs. Halfway down the path it leveled out and continued east. We followed it through scrub brush, under a vine trellised area filled with wild grapes and elderberries, and out into bright sunlight.



This building appeared at West Second and Cascade streets.



The rear of the building looks out over Presque Isle, in much the same way that the north end of Second Field once did.

And there it was! Just as it had been described, there stood a huge wedge of gleaming white stone, literally towering over the railroad tracks below us. It was even better than we could have imagined. The immense stone structure, which seemed to be perched thousands of feet above the railroad tracks and docks, was sculpted into several different levels, allowing us to find several places from where we could sit and observe activities on the docks as well as boats traversing the bay. We were where we knew that we belonged. It was a place that was clearly destined to become our headquarters; a gathering place for years of adventures. As we hung out at White Rock we speculated about its origins. We concluded that it might have

been built by Native Americans or used as an artillery station for fighting the British during the War of 1812. Perhaps it was a hiding place on the Underground Railroad. White Rock was the kind of place that encouraged imagination. And we were imaginers.

In hindsight it is difficult to imagine how much time we spent at White Rock. Hundreds of hours? Thousands of hours? We gathered there individually and in groups for years ... until high school distractions took most of us to other seemingly more important places. I secretly visited from time to time through high school, and even college. Once when I was an upper classman at Gannon and dating Mary Ann, the girl who was going to become my wife, I took her there to share the spiritual power of the place. After trekking through poison ivy, managing to get hundreds of burrs on our clothing and fighting off mosquitos that were as big as small birds, we finally reached White Rock. When I announced that we had finally arrived, Mary Ann looked at me as if I had lost my mind. She was probably correct.

Years passed. I had experienced an engineering career, left Erie to go to graduate school and returned to Gannon to join the faculty. It was a time before the Bayfront Parkway so there was no way to see my beloved old haunt without hiking along the old paths, so I drove to Second and Cascade and parked. Progress was slowed by a new structure that filled Second Field. As a part of its expansion United Oil had built a headquarters building on the corner plot of land that had once been a Bay Rat adventure area. I cleverly waited until after business hours, snuck around to the back of the building and found vestiges of the old pathway that led to White Rock. To have called them vestiges would have been a significant overstatement. Unused pathways are quickly claimed by nature and obliterated. But I was determined so I continued to trash my way along the remains of the old path until I finally reached the old fortress.



This view of the Bayfront Parkway is almost identical to the former perspective from White Rock.

It was 1971, about 20 years after we had first anointed it as “Bay Rat headquarters,” and time had not been kind. It was suddenly obvious that White Rock had always

been a man-made edifice of some kind and that it was composed of concrete without the benefit of stabilizing rebar. It wasn't gleaming white marble or granite as we had imagined it. White Rock had also deteriorated badly. It was smaller than it had originally been. Or did we imagine it to have been bigger than it really was? The 1971 White Rock seemed to be melting into the surrounding earth. Disappointed, I scrambled straight up and over the Bluffs, hoping not to have to return to the United Oil Headquarters property and get in trouble for trespassing. Back to the car, I continued to think about our once-proud Bay Rat fortress.



The Bluffs daffodil-beautification project

I continued to look for White Rock after the new Bayfront Parkway was built. For several years I glanced up at it as I drove to Gannon each morning. And it was always there, helping remind me of the old days. Not as prominent as it had once been and with much of the mystery removed by my visit. But at least it was still there. Then the Bluffs beautification began. The first step in the process was an effort to plant daffodils along the Bluffs and over the Parkway. Interestingly, the designers planted a clump of yellow flowers on either side of White Rock.



Bluffs Beautification Programs have greatly enhanced the aesthetics of the Bayfront Parkway.

Time marched on and as beautification projects continued, White Rock remained. Until one fateful moment when a new promenade path was created, leading from Second and Cascade down the former right-of-way of the original Cascade Street and to the mid-Bluffs pathway that used to flow from Second Field to White Rock. Somehow the architects of the beautiful new walkway decided that a crumbling concrete edifice was in the way. It was summarily removed. Gone forever.



The new walkway connects Second and Cascade with the old Mid-Bluffs pathway.

A few days after White Rock had been sacrificed to progress, I was with an old friend, Dave Bierig. When I mentioned the removal to Dave, he noted that he had also marked its disappearance. Dave drives the Parkway each day on the way to his

sailmaking shop at the foot of Cranberry Street. When I asked if he knew the mysterious origins of White Rock, he laughed. Then he explained. Dave's family had regularly been traveling there for years before I had discovered the place. His mother and father used to take Dave along as they traversed Second Field, followed the Mid-Bluffs pathway and walked to the grove of elderberry bushes that grew a few yards from White Rock.

As Dave narrated, I learned that the Mid-Bluffs pathway was originally a short, railroad spur-line that led up the hill and away from the tracks that once covered the roadbed of today's parkway. That spur led up the Bluffs to a water tower, whose foundation was still evident near the trellised area where the grapes and elderberries grew. The water tower was used to service the last of the steam engines, which were moving coal cars back and forth on the tracks. The old steamers had to stop periodically to fill up with water. White Rock, the mysterious fortress on the Bluffs, was the train-stopper on the end of the spur line and next to the water tower. Its purpose was to keep the steam locomotives from derailing at the end of the line. Mystery solved. And the stand of wild grapes and elderberries had grown into the remains of the old water tower foundation.



Typical steam engine water tank

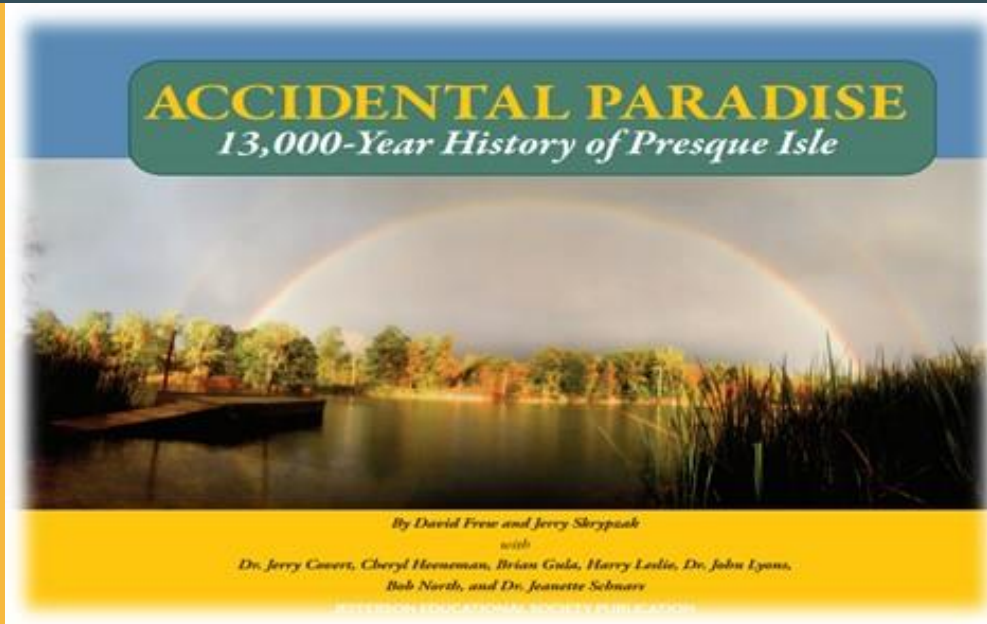
As I write, I wonder how many others recall White Rock and what their experiences were with the once stately Bay Rat fortress.

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by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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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