

DEVELOPMENT

Housing Blocked at Ferry Site

By MARC FERRIS

A BATTLE over a plan to build five big houses on a 17-acre plot of land in Rockland County has ended with historic preservationists claiming that they have blocked plans for the subdivision — at least for now.

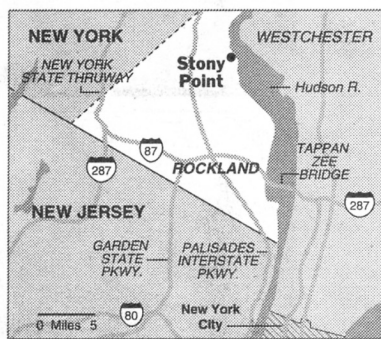
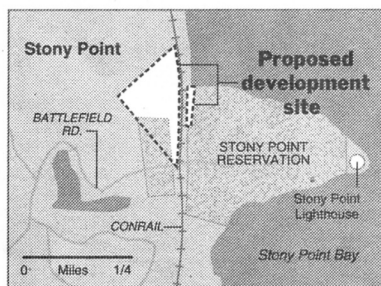
The plot of land not only includes the landing site of the old King's Ferry, a major crossing point of the Hudson River from 1664 to the mid-1800's, but also abuts the historic site of the Battle of Stony Point, the last major skirmish in the North during the Revolutionary War. The battle, in July 1779, consisted of a daring midnight raid on a heavily fortified British garrison carried out by three prongs of attackers, one of which came over the land in question. Most of the Americans killed in the battle are still there, said one historian, Julia Warger, estimating that 16 or 17 bodies lie in shallow graves.

The prospective developer, Woodfield Acres, based in New City, withdrew its application to build five homes in a development to be called Hudson Highlands, on the property last month, but the land is still for sale. "It's not in the cards to continue with that subdivision at this point in time," said Steven Kunis, an officer with Woodfield Acres, who cited a business decision as the reason for not continuing. "Public hearings allow you to get the pulse of the community, which offers a guide on what to do when it comes to land use."

As strip malls spread and large houses dot the hillsides, 10 percent of Rockland County's land is left for development and the county is experiencing a push to save its remaining open space, said County Executive Scott Vanderhoef. The state of New York had sought to buy the 17 acres to protect it, but state officials could not agree on a purchase price with the owner, and so the land had been scheduled for home construction.

"Open space is disappearing and parcels that were left aside in past development periods are now being built up," said Winston Perry, vice president of the Historical Society of Rockland County. "I'm not anti-development but a few significant parcels should be saved because of historical or environmental value and I think this is one of them."

The property, a triangular wedge, is divided into two parcels. A one-acre sliver east of the active Conrail



The New York Times

Railroad tracks is the ferry landing site, including the remains of a stone pier, which is visible at low tide, but is largely inaccessible because of the railroad and the steep slope that leads up to Stony Point.

King's Ferry "was the I-95 of the revolutionary period," said Mr. Perry. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington crossed the Hudson dozens of times at King's Ferry. After his famous meeting with Benedict Arnold near Haverstraw in 1780, British Maj. John Andre crossed the river at King's Ferry and was captured in Tarrytown. In 1781, 2,500 American troops and 3,500 French troops under General Rochambeau's command forded there as they traveled to the decisive Battle of Yorktown and on their way back to Boston. The road they marched down is largely intact.

THOUGH it has never been subject to archaeological investigation, the land was also an integral part of the Battle of Stony Point, said Ms. Warger, historic site manager at the Stony Point Battlefield site.

"The battle provided a shot in the arm for American morale," said James M. Johnson, executive director of the Hudson River Valley Institute at Marist College. "This country's fate was decided alongside the Hudson River several times. Combine the King's Ferry with the Stony Point battle, throw in the Andre and Arnold affair, and it's easy to argue that this site has national signifi-

cance."

A large portion of the battlefield west of the tracks has been destroyed by an open pit mine operated by Tilon Minerals, which makes the remaining 16 acres that much more valuable, said Ms. Warger. The property includes three houses, one of which was slated for demolition. The new homes would have been in the range of 4,000 square feet, said Mr. Kunis.

A Cultural Resources Survey commissioned by Woodfield Acres and conducted by Columbia Heritage Ltd. in Newburgh concluded that any development in the area offered a "high potential for affecting buried cultural remains" from the 18th and 19th centuries.

In 1898, the state began acquiring land associated with the Battle of Stony Point, including the oldest lighthouse built along the Hudson River, which dates to 1826 and belonged to the federal government. By 1978, the state had amassed 87 acres, which comprises the current park site.

In 1996, the state entered negotiations with the owner of the 17-acre parcel, Richard Feldmann, but the two sides could not agree on a price, said Wendy Gibson, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Parks, Recreation, and Conservation. She declined to give more specifics.

Jennifer Grossman, vice president for land acquisition at the Open Space Institute, based in Manhattan, who is familiar with the negotiations, said that the land was appraised for approximately half a million dollars and that Mr. Feldmann wanted more than twice that amount.

In 1999, the Open Space Institute bought 32.15 acres of land around the eastern landing of King's Ferry in Verplanck for \$1.1 million to forestall the development of condominiums on the site. The land is now administered by the Mount Gulian Society, a private nonprofit preservation group based in Beacon.

In 2000, the institute also spent \$117,500 for a 5.21 acre parcel that includes the site where Washington and Gen. Anthony Wayne planned the Battle of Stony Point, known as Washington's Lookout, and donated it to the Town of Stony Point with the stipulation that it be administered as a nature and historical preserve.

Talks with the state over the 17-acre property near the battlefield broke down in 2002 and Mr. Feldmann contracted to sell the land to

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Woodfield Associates. Neither he nor Mr. Kunis would divulge the selling price.

Opposition to the project was on display in hearings held by the town planning board from July through October. The hearings never got past the preliminary stage. Ms. Warger and Mr. Perry spoke at the October meeting, which was attended by about a half-dozen people who live near the proposed development. The board scheduled public comments in December, but on the day of the meeting, the developer withdrew its application, said Barbara Palazzo, planning department clerk. Mr. Feldmann said the land is still on the market.

The county government has considered becoming involved with the negotiations, said Mr. Vanderhoef, working with the state.

Mr. Kunis offered to donate the one-acre ferry site to the state in return for widening the access road into the rest of the property to 40 feet. The state and Tilcon own the road, said Lambert Gingras, real property manager with the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, which administers the Stony Point site, though there is a dispute over ownership along with the terms of an 1861



Susan Stava for The New York Times

A plot of land that abuts the historic site of the Battle of Stony Point was saved, for now, from being developed into home construction.

easement.

The land exchange was unacceptable to the state, since the widening would have had an impact on a stone wall that runs along the base of a promontory, said Mr. Gingras.

"It's not clear what can be done with the road," he said. "They can use it to bring in construction material, but there are town regulations as to

how wide a road has to be to become a town road or private road."

Preservationists would like to see the road, and the rest of the land, remain intact. "Any development in there hurts our ability to interpret the history for the public," said Ms. Warger. "Once a bulldozer goes in and disturbs the ground, any chance to preserve the history is gone."