



Women of Dutchess County, New York: Voices and Talents

Part I

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Candace J. Lewis, *Editor*



Franny Reese “Defender of the Hudson Valley”

by Molly B. Jones

“Frances Reese, 85, Defender of Hudson Valley”: so proclaimed the headline on her obituary in *The New York Times* on July 9, 2003. “Valley ‘Visionary’ Dies,” read the *Poughkeepsie Journal’s* headline. “Service set for ‘Soul of the Hudson Valley,’” said the *Times Herald-Record* in Middletown, New York. “River loses one of its treasures,” the *Albany Times Union* wrote.¹

In fact, Franny Reese’s lasting contribution to history reverberates far beyond the region where she lived. Her unwavering commitment as a leader in the 17-year battle to defeat the construction of a huge hydropower plant on Storm King Mountain resulted in a landmark decision that is considered to be the basis of modern environmental law in the *United States: Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference v. Federal Power Commission*.



Figure 1. Franny Reese, “Defender of the Hudson Valley,” here seated at the edge of her beloved Hudson River with Storm King Mountain in the background. N.d. Photograph. Collection of Scenic Hudson, New York.

Franny Reese and the Storm King Fight

The distinctive face of the Hudson Highland’s most prominent mountain rises from the river on the west bank. Across from Breakneck Ridge on the east, creating a dramatic gorge, the mountain would have been forever scarred if the developer, Consolidated Edison, had been able to build the project. The first river valley residents intent on preserving the beauty of the Highlands met in 1963 to see what they could do to stop the project. Soon after, six founders organized what became Scenic Hudson. The new nonprofit organization went to court to challenge the Power Commission’s approval of plans to build the plant.

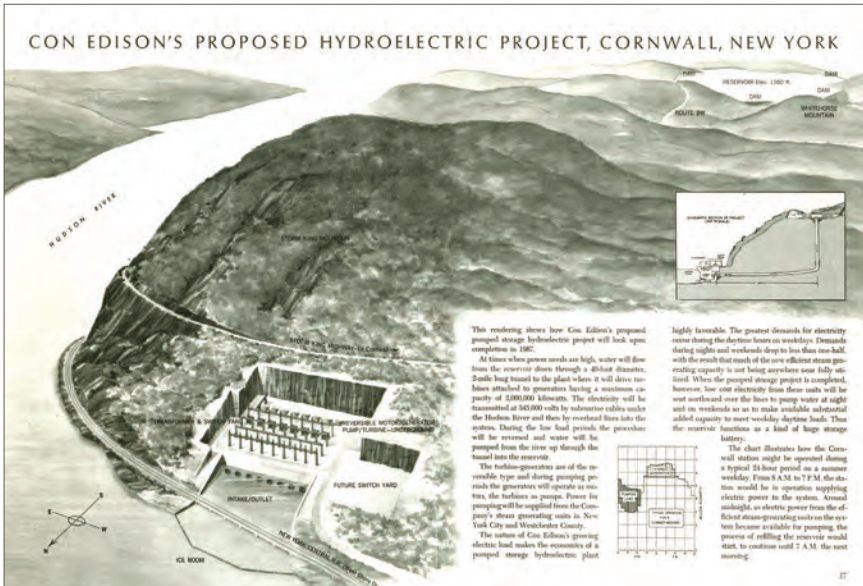


Figure 2. Artist’s illustration showing the plan for the new plant, from the Consolidated Edison 1962 Annual Report. Collection of Scenic Hudson, New York.

In 1965, Scenic Hudson had a big win: the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals in New York ruled to annul the permit for Con Ed to proceed until studies of the plant’s impact on the area’s scenery were completed. The effects of the plant’s operation on fish in the river were also to be studied. The precedent set by the ruling was groundbreaking: no longer did citizens need to have a monetary investment in a piece of land to sue as a plaintiff for its conservation. “Renewed proceedings must include as a basic concern the preservation of natural beauty and national historic sites, keeping in mind that in our affluent society, the cost of a project is only one of several

factors to be considered,” the decision said. The renewed hearings took four years and, in 1971, the Court of Appeals reversed the 1965 ruling and upheld Con Ed’s permit.

This was only the beginning of the first of many twists and turns through the courts. “There were definitely times when we were discouraged,” says Albert Butzel, the well-known environmental lawyer who began working just after the Federal Power Commission licensed the plant and stayed on through a dozen decisions from the first to the final “peace treaty” in 1980.

In 1971, we lost before the Court of Appeals, and people lost interest in the case. It became difficult to raise money. Franny Reese stayed as the strength of the organization [Scenic Hudson]. She generally held the organization together when the prospects for winning were very bleak, and later she took on a new role as the organization became the leader of the environmental movement in the Hudson Valley. Franny was amazing. What she accomplished was remarkable, and she deservedly got credit for it.²



Figure 3. Franny Reese, chair of Scenic Hudson, and Robert H. Boyle, chair of the Hudson River Fishermen’s Association (now Riverkeeper), both wearing glasses, sign the “Peace Treaty on the Hudson” with Con Edison’s Charles Luce, New York Attorney General Robert Abrams, and (standing) Russel Train, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator. 1980. Photograph. Collection of Scenic Hudson.

The ruling stated that groups with “special interest in aesthetic, conservational, and recreational aspects” had legal standing as an “aggrieved” party. Language from the ruling was incorporated into the National Environmental Policy Act, which established the Environmental Protection Agency and mandated environmental impact studies for certain construction projects. From the growing awareness of environmental issues raised by the Storm King case came a long list of other laws, including the Clean Water Act.

Scenic Hudson after Storm King

After Scenic Hudson finally won the case, the organization might have declared victory and disbanded. Instead, its board of directors decided to broaden its mission by engaging in other environmental issues affecting the river. Franny, who had chaired the board since 1966, continued in the leadership role until 1984. During her tenure, the Scenic Hudson Land Trust was established with a substantial gift from DeWitt and Lila Acheson Wallace, co-founders and publishers of the *Reader's Digest*. Four marshes along the river with a combined total of 3,500 acres were conserved as National Estuarine Research Reserves.

Today, Scenic Hudson is nationally renowned for its success in creating riverfront parks and preserves from New York City to the Adirondacks. In recent years, the organization has continued to oppose developmental threats to the valley, but it also became a champion of efforts that would improve the quality of life for residents. It has been aggressive in promoting land conservation, farmland preservation, land-use planning, and the protection and improvement of environmental quality, including pollution controls and cleaning up PCBs in the riverbed.³

Franny Reese State Park

In the year of Franny Reese’s death, Scenic Hudson purchased 253 acres on the west side of the river south of the Mid-Hudson Bridge connecting Poughkeepsie and Highland to keep the land from residential development. Four years later, the State of New York’s Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation purchased the property and named it Franny Reese State Park. The park, which is managed by Scenic Hudson, has nearly three miles of trails which intersect with the Loop Trail connecting the Walkway Over the Hudson and the Mid-Hudson Bridge, offering exhilarating views of the river she loved.

"Franny Reese State Park is a very good example of the kind of collaboration that Scenic Hudson has been able to accomplish," says her son Alexander. "Very important land along the river has been saved for the public."⁴

Franny: Famous for Her Energy

Frances Gallatin Stevens, known to everyone as "Franny," was born in Manhattan in 1917 and raised in rural Somerset County, New Jersey. In 2003, she was fatally injured in an automobile accident on Route 9 not far from Obercreek, her home in Hughsonville, an unincorporated hamlet in the Town of Wappinger. Her advancing years had not slowed her commitment to Scenic Hudson and the many other organizations she supported. Her energy, for which she was famous, did not appear diminished, either. "She was in the prime of her life at 85," said Scenic Hudson President Ned Sullivan at the time of her death. "She was going strong."⁵

Although best known for her commitment to Scenic Hudson, Franny dedicated her energy to a number of other causes. A year or two before her death, she told a friend that she was, at that time, serving on 44 boards.⁶ "She was a very incisive thinker and strategic planner," says Mary Flad, who worked with her to find a future for the Maple Grove estate in Poughkeepsie. "She was important on so many boards. She could come in with the vision and her checkbook and make things happen. Her untimely death was a blow to the Maple Grove project."⁷

"Franny was a wizard at how she could draw you in to volunteer on one of her projects," says Mary Lunt, who became friends with Franny when they played doubles at the Poughkeepsie Tennis Club. "Once she got to know you, she would figure out what would interest you. You had to be absolutely determined to say 'No' to her."⁸ Mary and her husband, Bill, came up with a project of their own: saving a large orchard in the Town of Poughkeepsie from development, which became, with the support of Scenic Hudson, Peach Hill Park.

Mary Lunt is one of many women who were inspired by Franny Reese to champion projects and programs in the area. Another is Frances F. Dunwell, who has had a long and successful career in environmental conservation. She has been the coordinator of the Hudson River Estuary Program, part of the State of New York's Department of Environmental Conservation, since its beginning 30 years ago. In her book, *The Hudson: America's River*, she dedicated her work "To my family and friends, and in particular to Franny Reese, without whom, in so many ways, this book could not have

been written.”⁹ Still another inspired by Franny was the late Klara Sauer, who for 20 years (1979-1999) was executive director of Scenic Hudson. During her tenure, the organization grew from a three-person office with a \$65,000 budget to a staff 10 times as large and a \$2 million budget.¹⁰

Under the aegis of its effective and indomitable leadership, Franny Reese and Klara Sauer, Scenic Hudson adopted an ambitious mission that led to a proactive engagement in preserving the distinctive landscape, history, and culture of the Hudson Valley. Through initiatives that have preserved farmland and places of distinctive scenic or historical significance, as well as its efforts to develop riverside parks in cities and secure greater public access to the river, Scenic Hudson has become the most important conservation organization in the Hudson River Valley and surely one of the most consequential in the United States.¹¹

Franny’s Other Causes and Projects

Francesca Olivieri, one of Franny’s granddaughters, recalls that her grandmother loved to play tennis. “She could place the ball so perfectly,” she remembers. “She was really consistent. I have a theory that tennis is a window into your personality. She was unassuming but so effective.”¹² The lawyer Albert Butzel agrees that she was unassuming, but says that’s not why she was successful in her work. “She was as tough as nails,” he says. “She knew what she thought should be done, and she saw that it was done.”¹³

Among the local organizations Franny served: Marist College, Locust Grove, the Boscobel Restoration, the Grinnell Library in Wappingers Falls, and the Stewart Airport Commission. She was an active member and supporter of Zion Episcopal Church in Wappingers Falls. Farther afield, in Manhattan, where she kept an apartment, she volunteered for Columbia Presbyterian Hospital and is credited with helping save the historic early twentieth century mansion now called The House of the Redeemer, a New York City landmark.

Her awards include the Eleanor Roosevelt Val-Kill Medal; the Governor’s Parks and Preservation Award; the Historic Hudson Valley Award for Land Conservation; the New York State Bar Association Award for Advocacy of Environmental Causes; the Marist College President’s Award; and the Mid-Hudson Pattern for Progress Award.

“A teacher at heart, Franny taught us to see the Hudson Valley’s exceptional beauty and reminded us that we are its stewards,” Dennis J. Murray, the president of Marist College, said. “Her life was a special gift to

us all.”¹⁴ President Murray was quoted as telling the author in an article shortly after she died: Franny Reese, as vice president of the Marist board and chairwoman of student affairs, bridged the generation gap effortlessly. Her interest in art and architecture extended to the design of the college’s library, a prominent building on the river. “I think Franny had a unique appreciation for beauty, whether it be the beauty of the river, the beauty in the Hudson Highlands, in a building, or in a tree,” Murray said.¹⁵

Franny came to be involved in Locust Grove, a large property on a bluff south of Poughkeepsie overlooking the river, as a result of her marriage to Willis Reese. The land was owned in the 1700s by Henry Livingston, Jr., a member of the prominent pre-Revolutionary War family, from whom Willis was descended. After ownership of the property passed to a not-for-profit educational foundation in 1975, Willis served on the board of directors, and after his death, Franny joined the board. During her tenure as chair, she promoted the idea to feature information on Samuel F. B. Morse, who had built a mansion on the bluff in 1850. The visitors’ center built during her tenure contains a gallery dedicated to Morse’s life and work as an artist and inventor.¹⁶

Franny’s Early Life

Remembering what she knew of her mother’s childhood, her only daughter, Frances Reese Olivieri, says that her mother believed that her parents were disappointed when, nine years after her sister and only sibling was born, she was not a boy. She was named for her father, Francis. “She had some learning disabilities,” Frances Olivieri says. “Her mother worked with her. She was left handed, and she was made to write with her right hand. She had a wonderful sense of direction but her understanding—the way she explained directions—was totally backwards.”¹⁷

Somerset County, where she was raised, was then (and is now) famous for its horse farms. “Mum was an excellent rider, and she was sent to Foxcroft School in Virginia for boarding school, which was known for its riding. She was unhappy there, though, until she was allowed to have a dog.”

Frances Olivieri remembers her mother telling stories about spending summers as a child with her family in Murray Bay (now La Malbaie), Quebec, making beds of evergreen branches. “She loved the out-of-doors,” she says. “She appreciated the beauty of the natural world, and she knew a great deal of natural history. She knew the names of all the mosses, for example.”

Her Love for the Arts

Franny Reese's early interest in nature was matched by her appreciation for and desire to create art. After studying playwriting and English at Barnard College, she attended Yale Art School. During her lifetime, she wrote plays and poetry. Her watercolor paintings were known to her friends and family and were often featured on her Christmas cards. She learned metalworking and pottery. "Mum was always doing some kind of artwork," Frances Olivieri says. "We were taking a drawing class together when she died."



Figure 4. Painting of a raccoon and mallards by Franny Reese originally installed in her son Bill's bathroom at Obercreek. Oil on canvas. Photograph by Molly B. Jones. Collection of Frances Reese Olivieri.

Convinced of the importance of nineteenth century Hudson River School landscape paintings to American cultural history, Franny persuaded the Metropolitan Museum of Art to commission and publish *The Hudson River and Its Paintings* (American Legacy Press, 1972), a large, handsome illustrated book that renewed interest in and appreciation for this period of art history. The author, John K. Howat, curator at the Met and later head of the museum's American Wing, dedicated the book to Storm King Mountain and the Hudson River Gorge and contributed all royalties to Scenic Hudson. The book was useful in the legal argument to save Storm King Mountain from disfigurement.¹⁸

While she enjoyed traditional art forms, she had fun with her creativity. "She was incredibly inventive," her daughter remembers. She painted a series of animals and birds on panels mounted in her son Bill's bathroom. "The bathtub had a beaver, and there were rabbits and birds." When the panels were taken down, Frances Olivieri kept a few. "She was wonderful with Halloween costumes, too," she says. "One year she made me a pussy

willow costume, and I won the prize as ‘most beautiful.’ Another year two of my brothers were two poles with a clothesline strung between them and squares of fabric hanging like laundry that spelled out “I LOVE YOU.”

Franny and Willis

Franny was married at age 19 to Willis Livingston Mesier Reese, who went on to a distinguished career as a law professor at Columbia University and the director of the Parker School of Foreign and Comparative Law for 25 years. Her husband shared her interest in conservation and historic preservation. “They were a marvelous pair,” says Mary Richardson Miller. “Brilliant, both of them, and devoted to each other.”¹⁹ In addition to their daughter, Frances, they had four sons: William, John, George, and Alexander.

Mary Miller knew Franny and Willis when they were neighbors for a time in Hewlett, Long Island. With their five children, the Reese family lived in Hewlett during the week, as Willis’ commute was more convenient than traveling from Dutchess County. “Every Friday we would drive up here to Wappingers,” remembers Alexander Reese, the youngest of the children, “and every Sunday we would drive back.” He remembers when his father managed a milking herd on the Obercreek property, after which a local farmer raised Hereford cattle and corn.²⁰

Obercreek

Willis Reese died in 1990.²¹ Franny died in 2003. After the death of his mother, Alex, who was living nearby on Wheeler Hill Road, bought out his siblings’ share of the main house and adjoining 30 acres. Today, he and his wife operate a certified organic farm and brewery, and he serves on the board of the Glynwood Center for Regional Food and Farming. Based in Cold Spring, the nonprofit organization advocates for local food production in the Hudson Valley and beyond. “I think Mum would be very happy with what Alex has done at Obercreek,” says his sister Frances Olivieri.

The original structure on what became the Obercreek estate was built in 1856 by William H. Willis and has now been in the family for six generations, undergoing a series of additions and renovations. The house is a blend of architectural styles most recently modified by Alex’s wife, Alison Spear, an architect.²² Unchanged is a magnificent Gothic Revival chapel on the second floor carved from red oak by the Russian-American sculptor Gleb W. Derujinsky, which was commissioned by Willis Reese’s mother. (A side note: His father, William Willis Reese, was president of the Dutchess County Historical Society from 1928 until his death in 1942.)



Figure 5. The Reese family chapel at Obercreek. Photograph by Alexander Reese.

The Episcopal Bishop of New York, The Right Rev. Andrew ML Dietsche, tells of being shown the chapel after Franny Reese's funeral, when a reception was held on the lawn at Obercreek. "Her prayer book and her glasses were there, just as she had left them," he recalls. "She had her questions, but she was devoted to the practices of the Christian tradition."²³ Her family recalls that she was in the chapel nearly every day. Before her death, she specified that if the home were ever sold to someone outside the family, the chapel would be removed and reinstalled in an appropriate location for prayer and meditation.

Judith Barba, who worshiped with Franny at Zion Church, remembers the funeral well. As anticipated, the congregation could not all be seated in the church's pews, and the overflow crowd filled the Parish Hall, where the service was piped in. "The music director asked me if I would sing in the choir for the service," Judith recalls. "She said, 'That way you're sure to get a seat.'"²⁴ The night before the funeral, when visiting hours were held, there was "a line of hundreds of people stretching out to the street waiting to greet the family and pay their respects," remembers Mary Flad.²⁵

Franny’s Legacy

Like his mother, Alex Reese is active in historic preservation and environmental affairs. Before her death, they had overlapping terms on the board of Boscobel House and Gardens near Garrison. “My mother was interested not only in the historic house but also in the wildlife trail to Constitution Marsh,” Alex says. “It was a pleasure to work with her.”²⁶ In recent years, Alex has taken a leadership position at Scenic Hudson, the organization most closely associated with his mother’s name, currently serving as a member of the Board of Directors and vice-chairman of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust. “I’ve had all sorts of different positions at Scenic Hudson,” he says. “I’ve been very much involved in the Scenic Hudson mission. It’s in my DNA.”

Last summer, two members of the family’s next generation—teenage sons of Alex’s nieces—worked on the Obercreek Farm. “They weeded and watered and worked to remove invasive plants,” says Augusta Reese Donohue, one of Franny’s granddaughters.

Augusta lives in Cold Spring Harbor on Long Island and is a member of the executive board of the North Shore Land Alliance. Her cousin, Francesca Olivieri, has served on the board of Scenic Hudson. The cousins received their activist training by spending time with their grandmother at Obercreek when they were children. “We were always going off to something,” Augusta recalls, “a fundraiser, or a park opening, or a clean-up. We went to Boscobel, we went to Storm King. I didn’t know why we were doing these things—I didn’t have the big picture at that time. Now I know that these were very valuable experiences for me.”²⁷

Also, she remembers, no matter what the weather, her grandmother insisted on taking a walk every day. “I’d say, ‘Granny, it’s raining,’ and she’d say, ‘There are boots in the closet.’ I remember once I was at Obercreek—I was about 18—and Granny said ‘We need to go tobogganing.’ I didn’t want to go to the effort of blazing the toboggan path, so she did it, and we went sledding. She was well into her 70s at the time.” Her death was “shocking and horrible,” Augusta says. “She wasn’t slowing down in any way.”

Scenic Hudson’s Ned Sullivan, who at the time of her death said that Franny was “in her prime” when she died at age 85, says today:

While I miss the sage advice and caring spirit of Franny Reese, I and many of my Scenic Hudson colleagues continue to be guided by her passion for preserving the Hudson Valley’s natural and historic treasures. She possessed boundless energy and an infectious, can-do attitude that kept Scenic Hudson afloat during our long campaign to prevent construction of the Storm King hydroelectric plant. After that victory, she encouraged the organization to reach new heights—creating riverfront parks, protecting views from Olana, halting new threats to the river, and commencing our farmland protection program. We all benefit from Franny’s powerful legacy—a valley whose natural beauty remains available for all to explore.²⁸

- ¹ Wolfgang Saxon, “Frances Reese, 85, Defender of the Hudson Valley,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2003; See also Dan Shapley, “Frances Reese, 1918-2003: Valley Visionary Dies,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, July 4, 2003; Wayne A. Hall, “Service set for ‘soul of the Hudson Valley,’” *Times Herald-Record*, Middletown, NY, copy of newspaper clipping, date not known; David S. Sampson, “River loses one of its treasures,” *Albany Times-Union*, July 24, 2003.
- ² Albert K. Butzel, interview by author, telephone and email, January 21, February 22, and March 1, 2020.
- ³ David Schuyler, *Embattled River: The Hudson and Modern American Environmentalism*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2018), p. 141.
- ⁴ Alexander Reese, interview by author, telephone, February 21 and 25, 2020.
- ⁵ Wayne A. Hall, *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Candace Lewis, interview by author, Poughkeepsie, August 12, 2019.
- ⁷ Mary Flad, interview by author, email, February 19, 2020.
- ⁸ Mary W. Lunt, interview by author, telephone, January 30, 2020.
- ⁹ Frances F. Dunwell, *The Hudson: America’s River*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, expanded and updated edition of *The Hudson River Highlands*, 1991).
- ¹⁰ John Ferro, “Klara Sauer, leading Voice of environmental movement, dies,” *Poughkeepsie Journal*, 24 June, 2015.
- ¹¹ David Schuyler, *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.
- ¹² Francesca Olivieri, interview by author, telephone, January 31, 2020.
- ¹³ Albert K. Butzel, *Ibid.*

- ¹⁴ Scenic Hudson, *Franny Reese State Park: Park Guide and Trail Map*, undated.
- ¹⁵ Dan Shapley, *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Kenneth Snodgrass, interview by author, telephone, February 7, 2020
- ¹⁷ Frances Reese Olivieri, interview by author, Frances Olivieri's home, January 25, 2020.
- ¹⁸ David Schuyler, *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁹ Mary Richardson Miller, interview by author, telephone, January 16, 2020
- ²⁰ Alexander Reese, *Ibid.*.
- ²¹ Peter B. Flint, "Willis Reese, 77, Professor and Expert in International Law," *The New York Times*, 11 July 11, 1990.
- ²² Nina Griscom, "Alison Spear Renovates a Historic Farmhouse in Upstate New York," *Architectural Digest*, March 15, 2017 (reprinted from June 2013 issue).
- ²³ The Rt. Rev. Andrew ML Dietsche, interview by author, author's home, November 24, 2019.
- ²⁴ Judith I. Barba, interview by author, telephone, January 8, 2020.
- ²⁵ Mary Flad, *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Alexander Reese, *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Augusta Reese Donohue, interview by author, telephone, February 7, 2020.
- ²⁸ Ned Sullivan, statement provided to author, email, February 7, 2020.