

The W. R. Blackie Collection (Part 1)

By: Gary S. Rappaport¹

I. Introduction

In 1922, at the Lake Mohonk meeting of the New York State Historical Society, W. R. Blackie, a Methodist minister with a passion for archeology and collecting Native American² relics, delivered an address entitled “Indians of New York City and Vicinity.”³ Blackie’s research into the Native Americans of New York City and the lower Hudson Valley, and the tribes that may have antedated the American Indians encountered by the first white settlers, led him to dolefully conclude:

The coming of the whites spelled the death knell of the Indians of this region. How numerous they were we may not know, but of this we are certain they were deprived of their lands and possessions, their fishing grounds and hunting preserves. No longer do they roam at will among the hills or fish in the streams; avaricious whites laid waste their villages, robbed them of the

¹ The author expresses his appreciation to the staff the New York State Museum including without limitation, Andrea Lain, Kristin O’Connell, John Lothrop, and Molly Scofield in Albany, the archive staff at the Smithsonian (Museum of the American Indian) in Maryland, Marcia Case, formerly of Tarrytown and the grand-daughter of Leslie Verne Case - a leading early 20th Century authority on the Native American presence in Westchester County, the staff of the Gottesman Libraries —Teachers College Columbia University, Librarian Patrick Raferty and the staff at the Westchester County Archives in Elmsford, Madeline Byrne of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, and Robert Pellegrino, Ardsley Village Historian, for their invaluable assistance in providing portions of the materials and artifacts presented here. In addition, the author extends his gratitude to Claudia Keenan and Jane Summers for their editorial comments and Blake Rappaport, for his technical assistance.

² How to describe the indigenous inhabitants of North America has been fraught with controversy. While Native American was initially a commonly used term, during the 1960s, the American Indian Movement preferred “American Indian.” Others maintain both terms are imposed by outsiders and, where possible, call themselves by their tribal names which is itself often difficult. In the absence of a consensus, Native American or American Indian will be used unless an original document requires otherwise to preserve its historical accuracy.

³ The Quarterly Journal of the New York State Historical Association, vol. 4, no. 1, 1923, pp. 41–48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43564598.pdf>

caches of corn, slaughtered their women and children and even sometimes scalped their warriors. To use the poetic utterance of one of the poets, “All, all are gone, the old familiar faces;” gone to the shades of their ancestors or to the happy hunting grounds, and all that is left as memorials to them are the implements and the few ornaments the time has not yet been able to obliterate.⁴

Who was W. R. Blackie and what is his connection to Ardsley?

William Reid Blackie was a native of Glasgow, Scotland where he was born in 1870.⁵ His 1946 New York Herald Tribune obituary (below) gives a general outline of the events of his life, but it omits many parts of his biography, including one that continues to resonate a century later in Ardsley - his investigations and mapping of the Native American presence in our village.

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44519/the-old-familiar-faces>

⁵ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/180858359/william-reid-blackie>

The Rev. W. R. Blackie, Pastor in State 43 Years

Methodist Missionary in Alberta Before Turn of Century

PATTERSON, N. Y., Feb. 16.—The Rev. William R. Blackie, seventy-four, who for forty-three years was a member of the New York Conference of the Methodist Church, died Thursday at his home.

Mr. Blackie, born in Glasgow, Scotland, first became a preacher in 1890 at Hamilton, Ont., where he had gone to live with his uncle. A year later he volunteered for missionary duty and was sent to the frontier provinces of Alberta and Northwest Territory, where he served several horseback circuits.

Returning East because of illness, he joined the New York Conference in 1900 and has held pastorates in New York City, Yonkers, Pleasantville, Morsemere, Ardsley, Woodlawn Heights, Beacon, Red Hook, Milan, Chatham and Poughquag. He retired two years ago.

During World War I Mr. Blackie served with the Young Men's Christian Association in France, and later was commissioned as a captain in the Corps of Chaplains, United States Army Reserve. He defended the role of Army chaplains before the New York Conference in 1935, and was a leader in the fight against a resolution of pacifist sentiment on "the abolition of war" which was finally voted down by the conference.

Surviving are his wife, Mrs. Agnes Love Blackie, and two sons, John S. and William R. Blackie Jr.

II. Rev. W. R. Blackie, Ardsley Community Hero

Blackie was assigned to the Ardsley Methodist Church in 1909 by the New York Conference of the Methodist Church and quickly became a pillar of the community. In 1912, he gave the invocation for Ardsley's first high school (known

as the Ashford Avenue School).⁶In the “Devoted to Interests in Village of Ardsley” section of The Irvington Gazette, Rev. Blackie was listed as the Secretary of Ardsley’s Fire Department and the 3rd Vice-President of the Ardsley Fish and Game Protective Association.

On December 6, 1914, downtown Ardsley suffered what is known as the “Great Fire.” Under the newspaper headline “Fire In Ardsley Kills Four,” the following appeared:

One of the heroes of the fire was the Rev. William R. Blackie, pastor of the Ardsley Methodist Episcopal Church and chaplain of the Fire Department.

Blackie worked side by side with his flock of firemen. Although his face was scorched and his eyebrows burned off, Blackie later formed one of the fire patrol that guarded the remains all afternoon and evening.

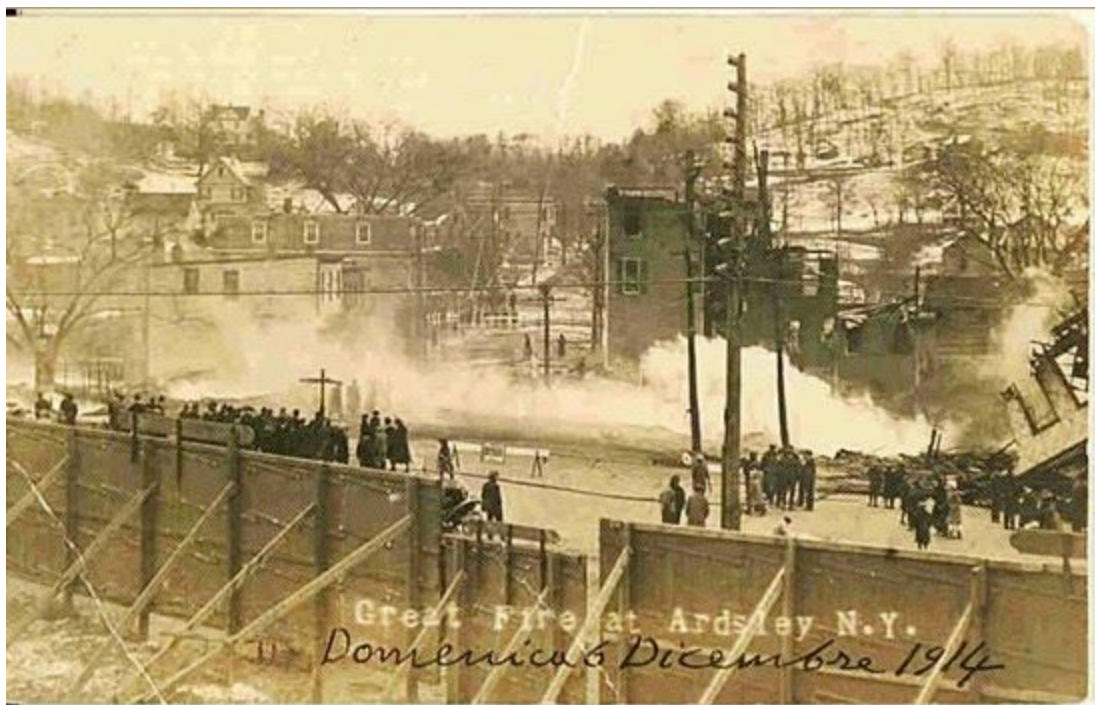
Near church time, after the fire was well under control, the sexton asked Blackie whether he should ring the bell for morning service.

⁶ On the origins of Ashford, the “Diamond Jubilee Celebration” journal published for the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Village of Ardsley (1896-1971), explains that an early inhabitant, Capt. John King, who, beginning in the 1840s, operated a cucumber farm (“King’s Pickle Works”)(one of several cucumber farms in the area) hailed from Ashford, County Kent, England. Being a large landowner and prominent citizen, he bestowed the then hamlet of Saw Mill Corners with the name of Ashford for his ancestral home. Although the pickle farm closed in 1878, King Street off Ashford is a lasting reminder of his time in Ardsley. King’s estate is shown in the 1901 map of Ardsley contained in this website. The Ashford School (after enlargement in 1925) accommodated all Ardsley school district pupils from kindergarten to twelfth grade until replaced in Concord Road Elementary in 1953 (initially serving grades K-3), in 1958 by Ardsley High School (serving grades 9-12) built on the old Adolph Lewisohn Estate, and in 1971 by the Middle School on the old Holscher Farm. Due to the baby boom, and the influx of families into Ardsley following the three phase Huntley Estates developments on the former Lewisohn estate, for a short period, classes were also held in both the Methodist Church and the Municipal Building. For a discussion of the destruction of the 450 year old Pow Wow Council tree on the old Holscher Farm when the Middle School was built, see footnote 18 of Part 2 of “The First Amendment at the Ardsley Schoolhouse Gate” in the Spring 2021 edition of The Beacon on this website.

“Church in a time like this!” exclaimed Blackie. “We won’t have any church to-day. Tell my congregation to go work to feed and clothe all these destitute people.”⁷

A New York Times article about the 1914 fire noted the following:

“Women residents of Ardsley, headed by Mrs. William Blackie, pastor of the Methodist Church (sic), formed a relief brigade and took the families driven out by the flames to their homes. On this committee were Mrs. William Lawrence, Mrs. W. I. Odell, and others. They also served coffee to the firemen.”⁸



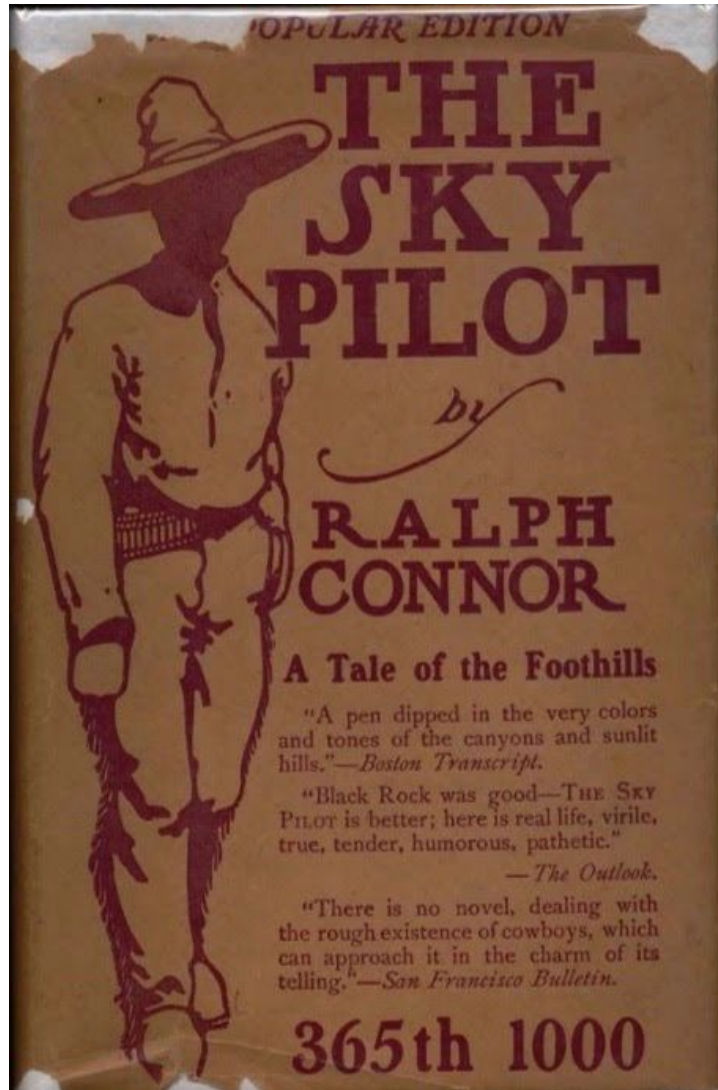
⁷ Blackie’s son William became a Captain in the Eastchester Fire Department. In the Diamond Jubilee Celebration journal, Ardsley historian Arthur Silliman reported the Great Fire took place “midst squalls of snow and rain.” It is believed the current bell at Ardsley’s Methodist Church is the same bell in use during Blackie’s time of being its pastor.

⁸ December 7, 1914. p. 6. The fire rendered 90 persons homeless.

Blackie's valiant leadership during the Great Fire was not surprising. As a traveling priest in the foothills of Western Canada, he was the inspiration for Canadian author Ralph Connor's popular 1899 novel, *The Sky Pilot*.

The Sky Pilot was the novel that made Connor famous. It sold over a million copies, as did two of his later novels. It is set in a frontier community, Swan Creek, in the foothills of the Rockies, west of Calgary. Its characters are early settlers, ranchers, and cowboys, and at the center of them is a church missionary, Arthur Wellington Moore, who is quickly dubbed "the Sky Pilot," a nickname that sticks with him. The preface sets the tone as well as the story's moral universe: The measure of a man's power to help his brother is the measure of the love in the heart of him and of the faith he has that at last the good will win.⁹

⁹ <http://buddiesinthesaddle.blogspot.com/2011/05/ralph-connor-sky-pilot-1899.html>



III. The American Indians in Ardsley

The presence of American Indians in the vicinity of present day Ardsley was explained in the below century old excerpt from the Dobbs Ferry Register.¹⁰ As we will see in later chapters, due to the efforts of Rev. Blackie, we now know the Native Americans occupied several sites in Ardsley.

¹⁰ June 25, 1920, p.12

Not only was the winter village of the Dobbs Ferry Indians near the picturesque falls of the Nepperhan at Woodlands, but the country east of there seems to have been their summer hunting ground as well. W. H. Brown, Sr., who lives on the Sawmill River road between Ardsley

and Woodlands, showed the reporter for the Register two flint arrowheads that he picked up years ago in the vicinity of his home. Mr. Brown is in his 79th year, his mind is very alert and interested in life, and his health is so good that the day the reporter called he had not hesitated to go out and capture single handed a hive of bees that had swarmed. Mr. Brown does not know the exact location of the old Indian village, but is inclined to believe that it was near the Nepperhan, probably on high ground, and not far from the beautiful intervale below the dam at Woodlands. A handful of oyster shells, some of them not more than an inch across—such as the squaws may have used in making beadwork but which would not have been collected as food by white men—were found beneath the bank of the sand pit in the intervale below the Woodlands dam by the Register man. This was on the west side of the river and just east of the railroad, shortly below Mr. Brown's house.

The Indians may have had their huts there, and it was pointed out, also, that some of them, very likely, made their homes near the brooks that make down over the hills to the river from the east. One such tiny brook, which would have afforded sweet water for drinking and cooking, comes down through Mr. Brown's yard. Mr. Brown remembers this brook in his boyhood, and recalled that it was a laughing stream fully as large if not larger than it is now, and that under a big elm still visible from the Brown yard was a natural spring of extremely cold, clear water, but that when the aqueduct was built through the valley, thirty-seven years or so ago, the aqueduct work struck the seam of this spring which had given water to the Indians and white people alike, and it ceased to yield on the surface. A man who has spent more time than perhaps anyone else in collecting the Indian history and relics of this section of Westchester county, is Rev. W. R. Blackie, formerly pastor of the Ardsley church, who used, when he lived at Ardsley, to go out and follow the plows in fields where it was believed the Indians had roamed, and who was successful in picking up many arrowheads and other implements. Rev. Mr. Blackie, through his interest in Indian lore, has become an authority upon Westchester Indian history, and is now engaged in some special work along this line. His home is at No. 239 East 237th street, Woodlawn Heights, New York.

IV. The 1906 Antiquities Act

After the Civil War and through the balance of the nineteenth century, as the United States expanded westward, there was growing scholarly and public interest in what were deemed the antiquities of the American Indians — their abandoned and ruined dwellings and what were seen as their prehistoric objects. Swelling

demand for these relics led to unrestrained vandalism and indiscriminate digging. At the same time, eastern universities and scientific organizations, who were creating new fields of professional study in archeology, ethnology and anthropology pressed for action to stop the plunder which was known as “pot hunting.” Some of these same concerns to preserve Native American history gave rise to the founding of New York City’s American Museum of Natural History in the late 19th Century.

“The spirit of the times was well expressed by
[American anthropologist] T. Mitchell Pruden in 1903:

.... to gather or exhume specimens—even though these be destined to grace a World’s Fair or a noted museum—without at the same time carefully, systematically, and completely studying the ruins from which they are derived, with full records, measurements, and photographs, is to risk the permanent loss of much valuable data and to sacrifice science for the sake of plunder.” After 25 years of effort, Congress, in 1906, passed the Antiquities Act. The Antiquities Act (16 U.S.C. 431-433) was the first United States law to provide general protection for any general kind of cultural or natural resource.¹¹

¹¹ Archaeological Method and Theory: An Encyclopedia, edited by Linda Ellis, pp.33-35, Garland Publishing Co., New York and London, 2000. Since 1906, 13 presidents, both Democratic and Republican, have used the Antiquities Act to proclaim 125 national monuments covering nearly 100 million acres of federal public lands from the Grand Canyon in Arizona to the African American Burial Ground in lower Manhattan.

We know from Blackie's eloquent 1920 address quoted in the Introduction he was part of this larger societal interest in reclaiming what little was left of the Native American presence in both Ardsley and Westchester. Arthur Silliman's "A Short, Informal History of Ardsley," mentions Rev. Blackie regularly took the youth of his congregation on excursions to the "Old Indian Cave" at Thirty Deer Ridge.¹²

Thirty Deer Ridge was, according to an old legend, named by the Native Americans when a Weekquaeskeck hunting party looked up at the high cliffs and saw 30 deer at one time standing on a rocky ledge looking down on them. An article about Ardsley's "Old Indian Cave" by Arthur Silliman appears in the Fall 1974 (and Golden Anniversary) edition of *The Westchester Historian* (and is reproduced here courtesy of the Westchester County Archives):

¹² Thirty Deer Ridge is in the general vicinity of the present day Ardsley Chase development off Ardsley Road between Ardsley and Edgemont and the Boulder Ridge townhomes off Sprain Road. In Professor Robert Selig's report on the 1781 Franco - American encampment in Greenburgh, a map from 1851 is shown [Click here](#) depicting a fort in the northerly portion of the Ridge. This was also the general vicinity of the Old Indian Cave explored by Blackie.

ARDSLEY INDIAN



BETWEEN THE SPRAIN BROOK and the Grassy Sprain, on the easterly side of the Ardsley School District, from the reputed Indian Trail which is now Ardsley Road, south to the present Salvation Army Camp at Jackson Avenue is a rocky wooded ridge which was known in early days as Thirty Deer Ridge. To the west, the ridge faces the campus of the new Ardsley Middle School, and to the east, the new Sprain Brook Parkway.

According to tradition this area, abounding in beaver, wild cats and bear, as well as deer, was part of the hunting ground of the Weckqueskecks, the Mohegan tribe whose headquarters were on Wickers Creek. The creek flows across the golf course north of the Dobbs Ferry Gould Playground and across the grounds of Mercy College before flowing into the Hudson River.

Our story goes back to the days of the building of the Catskill Aqueduct in the valley of the Grassy Sprain, now largely occupied by the Sprain Brook Parkway. A great deal of manual labor was required for the construction, and anyone in the Ardsley area who wanted a job

could find one, even teenagers. In this vicinity an open ditch was excavated, forms erected, concrete poured and the ditch filled in. The time was during the years of 1914-1916.

Quoting my friend, the late Benjamin F. Ferguson, then a lad of about twenty years: "When the Catskill Aqueduct was being driven along the valley, I fired a steam shovel just south of Jackson avenue. One rainy Saturday several of us had braved the weather only to learn that the mud along the ditch was so soft that work was suspended for the day. Back we headed for town, short-cutting across the Thirty Deer Ridge.

"The storm grew more and more violent. One Ardsley man said he knew of a hillside cave where we might take refuge from the storm. We agreed to let him lead the way. He had his marks well in hand and we landed, five strong, huddled into a small cave where we had to sit with heads bent over to escape bumping against the overhanging rock. Later I related the circumstances to the Rev. William Reid Blackie, then pastor of the Ardsley Methodist

Arthur W. Silliman

Church. He had me draw a rough sketch showing where the cave was located."

Ben was a member of a youth group organized by the Rev. Blackie, who was quite an authority on the Indians of Westchester. It is said the Reverend had carte blanche to scour the Adolph Lewisohn estate (present site of the Ardsley High School) for abundant Indian relics, and that he wrote his master's thesis on the local Indians.

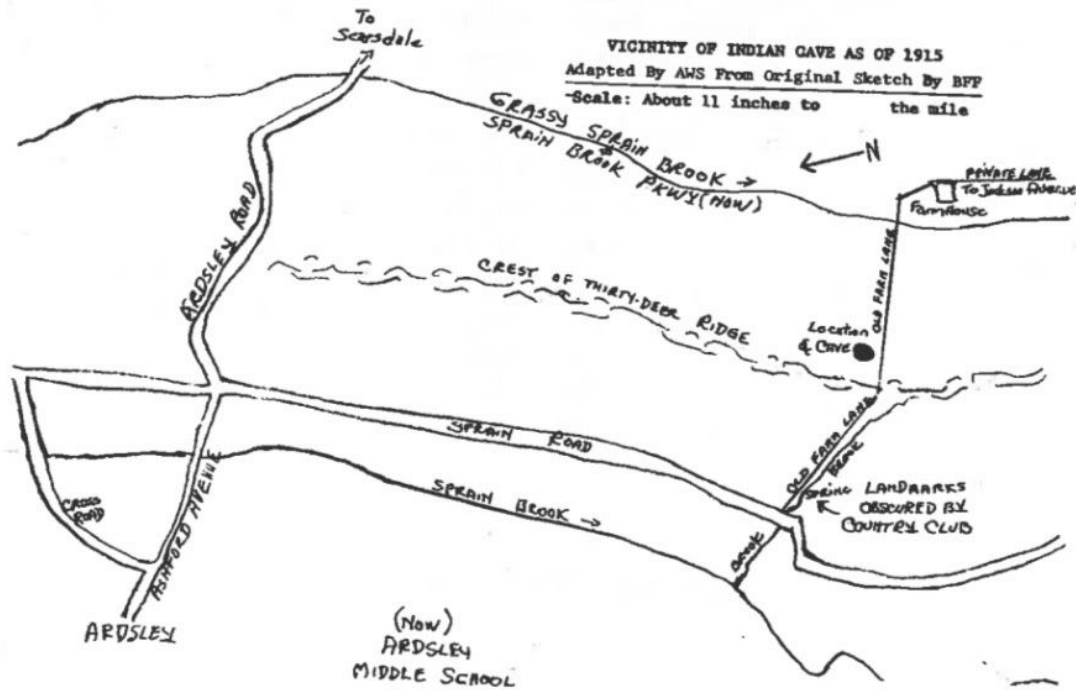
Continuing Ben's account: "Several days later when I appeared at a youth meeting at the church, Rev. Blackie called me into his study. There in the cupola room of the parsonage he showed me a batch of arrowheads and a well-preserved tomahawk and asked me if I could tell him where he had gotten the artifacts. Knowing he had free access to the Lewisohn estate, I guessed they came from there.

"My guess was wrong. Rev. Blackie said 'Remember that cave you fel-

lows got into to get out of the rain? These all came from there. I dug deep into the leaves the winds had blown in there, right under where you chaps had sat. Fourteen inches down was this cluster.' Rev. Blackie used that as part of his thesis when he tried for a degree."

Ben had a remarkable memory for details of events long past, as evidenced by his contributions to Volumes I and 2 of the History of Ardsley. Fifty years later when he mentioned this Indian cave incident, I pressed him for details and without hesitation he drew two maps, showing how the cave might be approached from different directions. However, most of his landmarks, barns, farm houses, wagon trails, brook and spring have been obliterated in whole or part since the approaches to this area are now fast being developed.

The author, fifty-two years ago like many of the neighbors who got their family drinking water in gallon



jugs from the spring indicated, could not even locate the spring or even the little brook and farm lane, because of the Country Club grading and fencing as well as the adjoining homes. The terrain is rugged in the vicinity of the cave, and should a search be made precautions should be taken against snakes. However,

there are still enough clues available so that anyone willing to make a thorough search might be able to find the cave.

Appended is a map of the vicinity of the cave, adapted by the author from original sketches by Ben Ferguson. The scale is fairly accurate, about eleven inches to the mile.

V. Aboriginal Westchester

Blackie's influence on the study of the American Indian presence in Westchester was highlighted in a "forward" written by Tom Morrison of Dobbs Ferry decades after Leslie Verne Case (1874-1937) edited *Aboriginal Westchester*, a voluminous 1930s study on the history of the Native Americans in Westchester

(which Blackie contributed to perhaps as part of the thesis mentioned by Ben Ferguson) in anticipation of its long delayed publication:

Over eighty years ago three wise men of Westchester County pooled their mutual fascination and knowledge about the Native Americans who had been their area's earliest occupants. They put together the document *Aboriginal Westchester*, which is the essence of what you now hold in your hands. Their fascination and knowledge seem to have been propelled by a shared belief that regard for the earth and for those who lived closely with it might somehow be a vital antidote to the ills of society.

Editor-in-chief of the project was Leslie Verne Case . As will be evident to the reader of his portion of this book, he was both a punctilious scholar and empirical scientist who insisted on knowing kinesthetically, not just abstractly, the Indian ways of doing things. He was superintendent of schools in Tarrytown, as well as president of the village's historical society. He was an avocational archaeologist who amassed an extensive collection of artifacts, most of which wound up at the Museum of Natural History. You will see some of his photography, a medium which he pioneered such as in having taken the first pictures of lightning.

Reginald Pelham Bolton was the author of numerous historical books, including *Indian Life of Long Ago in the City of New York*. His attention to details of language and of land is striking, as is his insistence that the place names of ancient ones are best understood by how they relate to terrain. He thus reveals a profound understanding of aboriginal thought process, if my reading of recent ethnographic accounts of outback nomenclature is correct.

William Blackie was a Methodist minister in New York City in various Westchester locations. His words reveal a deep respect for those who preceded the Europeans, and more than once he hardly restrains himself from decrying those who had no such regard and who carelessly destroyed the ancient sites that

remained. His earliest ministry was in Western Canada where, as elsewhere, he established a reputation as one not to be intimidated by rowdies, and in this role inspired the writing of a popular novel called *The Sky Pilot*.

Case, Bolton, and Blackie were the backbone of a committee of the Westchester Historical Society. They were charged with the task of bringing together what was knowable about the aborigines of the County. They worked on this project from 1930 until 1936 when the print galleys were set up, but final publication never materialized. One publisher theorized to me that the ill-fated book was an orphan of the depression – that money was just too difficult to come by in those days.

The delayed publication is being offered now for its various layers: for the light offered on how people looked at things in the 1930's, when people were gathering disparate information to make sense of the world; for information about Westchester County's ancient history; and for the spirit which, as posited above, finds and fosters much to honor about Native Americana.¹³

For unknown reasons, but as Morrison suggests, likely due to the Depression, Aboriginal Westchester was never published. Morrison himself was unable to bring his plan to publish Aboriginal Westchester to fruition. Nevertheless, previously in April 1933, The Quarterly Bulletin of the Westchester County Historical Society published the following "Preliminary Notice Prior to Publication," written by Case:

¹³ The Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, where the Case manuscript is stored, is arranging for this seminal work to be scanned and made available digitally. Parts 1 & 2 were submitted by Case to Columbia University's Teachers College in partial fulfillment of his requirements for obtaining a masters degree in Science. Leslie's granddaughter (Marcia Case) shared this family story about her grandfather who lived in the building where the Tarrytown Historical Society (1 Grove Street) is located: "I remember learning about a rock shelter in Millwood off Rt 100, and a Native American burial site Leslie was asked to dig up in Croton. The Native American is now reburied near the Mercy College Campus in Dobbs Ferry, but spent many years on display at the Tarrytown Historical Society. This made sleep overs at grandma's a bit 'unusual' for me!"

ABORIGINAL WESTCHESTER

Preliminary Notice Prior to Publication

By LESLIE VERNE CASE

Volume IX of the Annual Publications of the Westchester County Historical Society for the years 1931 and 1932 will be printed in the near future. About half of this volume of nearly 500 pages has already been printed. It will be illustrated by plates showing hundreds of the artifacts of our pre-colonial predecessors, all of which will aid in the identification of remaining specimens of the arts and industries of the vanished tribes. Many of the items illustrated are of great rarity.

The volume will consist of the seven major divisions noted:

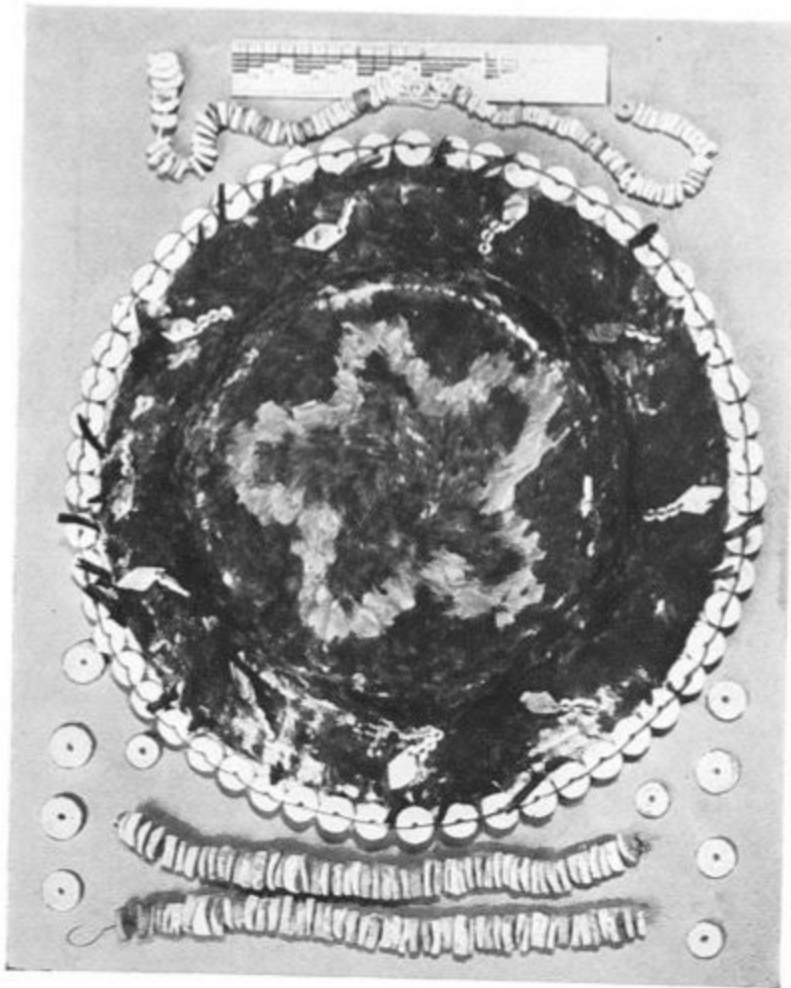
1. Aboriginal Westchester dealing with both prehistoric and historical records, language, philosophy, religion, customs, arts and industries, clothing, food and shelter, implements of peace and war and citations from sources not found in many libraries.
2. A reprint of the rare book, *A Brief Description of New York: Formerly Called New Netherland. With the Places Thereunto Adjoining. Likewise a Brief Relation of the Customs of the Indians There*, by Daniel Denton, published in 1670. This book gives the first printed description in English of the Indians of this region.
3. A valuable contribution to Indian place names and their interpretations by Reginald Pelham Bolton.
4. Investigations made in Westchester County by William Blackie, under the auspices of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.
5. A classical study of the Kitchawank skeletal remains by Dr. Bruno Oetteking of Columbia University. This is the first critical study of Indian remains of Westchester County.
6. Bibliography and index.
7. A map of the Indian occupation of the region embraced in the scope of this volume.

The volume will contain items of interest not only to the historian, the student of Indian lore, and the collector, but to the casual reader as well.

Aboriginal Westchester is sufficiently important to warrant a carefully prepared prospectus; as the expense would be consider-

THE QUARTERLY BULLETIN

able, specimen illustrations are shown on pages 46 and 47 of this *Quarterly Bulletin* as a partial substitute. The modest statement by Mr. Case, together with these illustrations, is merely indicative of the scope and importance of the forthcoming volume. Please refer to editor's notes.



FEATHER WORK AND DISC WAMPUM
Specimen illustration, *Aboriginal Westchester*



MORTARS AND PESTLES
Specimen illustration, *Aboriginal Westchester*

Part IV of *Aboriginal Westchester* was a study entitled “Indian Occupation of Westchester County, New York” written by Blackie on his investigations in Westchester under the auspices of the Museum of the American Indian and the Heye Foundation is reproduced below (prior to its forthcoming digitalization). Blackie’s portion of the manuscript would play an important role in the creation of a series of maps made first in 1933 and later in 1978 documenting the locations where the Native Americans resided in Westchester as can be seen in this bibliography of the comprehensive map of the Native American occupations discovered in Westchester County by the three early 20th century giants in the field cited by Morrison under the direction of Peggy Case, Leslie Verne Case’s daughter:

Bibliography

Blackie, William R., “Indian Occupation of Westchester County, New York,” *Aboriginal Westchester*, L.V. Case, ed., Part IV, unpublished.

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