

## Legends & Folklore of Columbia County

Love learning about obscure stories that don't always make it into the history books? Columbia County is full of them. Hop in the car and explore the legendary folk tales, strange occurrences and larger-than-life legends that once roamed this region of the Hudson Valley.



Before you begin, fuel up for your drive with breakfast from one of the many restaurants offering takeout on **Warren Street in Historic Hudson**.

### Directions to First Stop:

Head east from Hudson, following the signs for 23B. Turn right onto Spook Rock Road after approximately 1.5 miles. In about 1 mile, stop at the pull-off on Claverack Creek, where you'll see the Spook Rock historical marker.

### 1 Legend of Spook Rock

Spook Rock Legends & Lore Marker  
Greenport

This idyllic spot on the Claverack Creek is said to be the final resting spot of two star-crossed lovers. As the story goes, a beautiful Mahican maid fell in love with a young man from an opposing tribe (possibly Mohawk), defying the wishes of her father. There are many tellings of what happened next; one version states that the gods, angered by the couple's love, caused the creek to flood the region, killing them on this spot. Author Ruth A. Stickles, in her book *Folklore of Columbia County*, interprets another version:



“One fateful night, under the cover of a violent storm, the Mohawk made his way to the overhanging rock, which was the lovers' place of rendezvous. The rock gave way just as the maid ran to her lover's arms. As lightning flashed and thunder roared, both were swept off the mountain with the rock, which went crashing down the hill. As the boulder came to rest in the stream below, they were buried beneath its ponderous weight. When white settlers came, each time they rang a church bell to mark the death of one of their people, it was said that the rock turned over, releasing the lovers for a shadow of a moment in the old world of their happiness. Then Spook Rock rolled back to entomb them again, together for all eternity.”

Some have claimed to hear the maiden's cries or see her wandering this stretch of road in search of her lover.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Keep heading east on 23B. In about 2 miles, turn left onto Route 9H (North) toward Kinderhook. Turn left at the sign for **Martin Van Buren National Historic Site**.

### 2 Aaron Burr's Hiding Place?

Martin Van Buren National Historic Site (Lindenwald)  
1013 Old Post Road, Kinderhook | [nps.gov/mava](https://nps.gov/mava)

The Lindenwald estate is best known as the beloved home of President Martin Van Buren from 1841-1862. Before the Van Buren family took ownership, however, the estate (then known as Kleinrood) belonged to Judge William P. Van Ness, who served as Aaron Burr's "second" in Burr's famous duel with Alexander Hamilton. Following the duel, rumors spread that Van Ness had spirited Burr away to safety in Kinderhook, giving him access to a secret room at Kleinrood. Other historical accounts claim that Burr went into hiding at Maizefield, a historic home in nearby Red Hook (Dutchess County).



The grounds of Lindenwald are home to many trails (and possible hiding places). You can even follow the **Dutch Farming Heritage Trail** (1.7 miles each way) to the next stop on this itinerary.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Drive north on Route 9H for 1 mile, and turn left at the sign for **Ichabod Crane Schoolhouse**.

### 3 Ichabod Crane Taught Here

C.1850 Ichabod Crane Schoolhouse

2589 Route 9H, Kinderhook | [cchsny.org/ichabodcraneschoolhouse](http://cchsny.org/ichabodcraneschoolhouse)



A teacher named Jesse Merwin was the longtime schoolmaster at this rural schoolhouse. A close friend of Washington Irving, Merwin is widely believed to have been the model for the iconic Ichabod Crane, the character made famous in Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. The two corresponded for more than 30 years, and Merwin even named a son Washington Irving Merwin after the author.

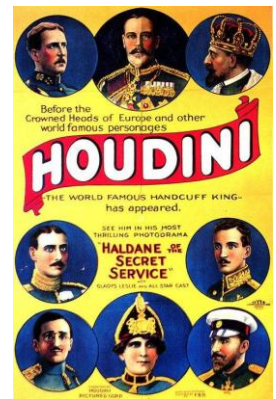
For a time, Merwin boarded at Lindenwald while it was still owned by William P. Van Ness, and went on to develop a friendship with Martin Van Buren. In 1846, Van Buren wrote: "...I have known J. Merwin, Esq...for about a 3rd of a century, & believe him to be a man of honor and integrity and that he is the same person celebrated in the writings of the Hon. Washington Irving under the character of Ichabod Crane..."

**Directions to Next Stop:** Head north on Route 9H, then take the exit for Kinderhook. Turn right onto Hudson Street, then turn right onto Chatham Street. Drive 1.5 miles, then turn right onto Main Street into Valatie. Park at the parking lot just on the other side of State Route 203.

### 4 Harry Houdini Braves Beaver Falls

Beaver Cotton Mill Overlook

2228 State Route 203 (at Main Street), Valatie



Harry Houdini was the world's most famous magician in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The masterful escape artist and stunt performer began appearing in movies in 1906, and it was a film shoot that brought him to the Village of Valatie in 1921.

At that time, Valatie (pronounced va-LAY-sheh, an adaptation of the Dutch word *Vaaltje*, meaning "Little Falls") was home to several mills on the two waterways that flow through town, the Kinderhook Creek and the Valatie Kill. Here, near the base of scenic Beaver Falls, Houdini performed a mesmerizing stunt on a water wheel for his final film, *Haldane of the Secret Service*. Nearly all of Valatie's historic mill buildings have since vanished, and the mill that once stood in this spot burned to the ground in the Great Blizzard of 1888.



Valatie is a great place to grab a snack or lunch for the next leg of your drive. There are several restaurants to choose from, including the **Main Street Diner**, **Valatie Bar & Grill**, **Filli's Deli & Bakery**, and **Magdalena's**.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Make a left onto Main Street, then a right onto Mechanic Street (State Route 203). Follow 203 until you come to Kinderhook Lake, which will be on your left. **NOTE:** There is no public parking at Kinderhook Lake.

### 5 An Electric Park That Glitters No More

Kinderhook Lake

State Route 203, Niverville



A generic term for amusement parks operated by railroad and electric companies, "electric parks" dazzled with bright lights, motorized trolleys, entertaining rides and vaudeville acts. A grand electric park once sprawled across 40 acres at Kinderhook Lake, and was heralded as "the largest amusement park...between Manhattan and Montreal."

The park opened in 1901 and was devised by the Albany & Hudson Railroad Company to draw more passengers on weekends. It was such a success the railroad added double cars to accommodate massive crowds. The park was known for its wholesome atmosphere, a place where "ladies and children can go unattended." World War I brought about the end of the Electric Park; after shuttering for the 1917-1918 season it struggled to reopen, and closed for good in 1920.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Continue north on State Route 203 until you reach the intersection of 17, just before the hamlet of North Chatham. Turn right. Continue on 17 (it will become State Route 66) through the Village of Chatham, about 8 miles. Turn left onto State Route 203. In about 8 miles, 203 will dead end at State Route 22. Turn right.

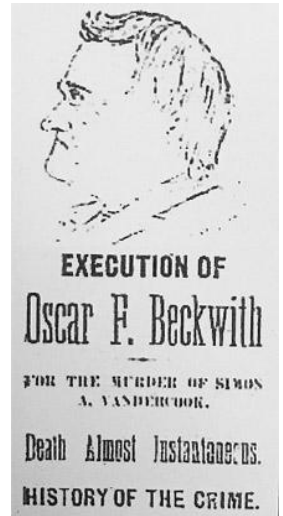
## 6 Austerlitz Cannibal


Old Austerlitz (Austerlitz Historical Society)  
11550 U.S. 22, Austerlitz | [oldausterlitz.org](http://oldausterlitz.org)

**NOTE:** *The Austerlitz Historical Society is currently operating with limited hours. While there is no specific location associated with the Austerlitz Cannibal, this site will give you a feel for Austerlitz in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.*

In 1878, Oscar Beckwith was a 70-something hermit living in the backwoods of Austerlitz when a fortune-seeker named Simon Vandercook entered his life. After Vandercook purchased land from Beckwith on a dubious promise of gold, a dispute arose between the two men, with Beckwith threatening to sue.

One winter morning in 1882, Vandercook vanished after a visit to Beckwith's cabin. Within days, the grisly remains of his dismembered and partially burned body were found inside the empty cabin. A manhunt for Beckwith ensued, and newspapers began printing sensational (and likely exaggerated) stories, including one that claimed Vandercook's liver had been found in a frying pan. Rumors grew, and soon Beckwith was labeled "the Cannibal of Austerlitz." He was finally arrested in 1885, and after multiple trials and appeals in Hudson, was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. His hanging in 1888 was the last public execution in New York.



 Drive 10 miles south to quaint **Hillsdale** (10 mi.) for a picnic from local restaurants like **Roe Jan Brewing Co.** and **Crossroads Food Shop**.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Continue south on State Route 22 (10 miles) until you reach the intersection of Under Mountain Road. Turn left. Travel about 1 mile, and keep your eyes peeled for the "Famous Prize Fight" Historical Marker.

## 7 Boston Corners' Infamous Past

Famous Prize Fight Historical Marker  
Under Mountain Road, Boston Corners

Look at the map and you'll see that Columbia County seems to elbow into the Massachusetts border in this spot. This is Boston Corners, and its story is just as curious as its geography.



In 1852, the hamlet indeed belonged to Massachusetts, and the recent arrival of the New York and Harlem Railroad turned Boston Corners into a bustling transport hub. Meanwhile, its remote location—effectively cut off from law enforcement by the Taconic Range—made it well-suited to wickedness. Thieves reportedly brought stolen racehorses to be dyed, so they could race them elsewhere without detection. Then, in 1853, Boston Corners was the site of a famous boxing match between James "Yankee" Sullivan and John Morrissey. Varying accounts claim that between 3,000 and 10,000 fans of the then-illegal sport flooded in to see the fight, which lasted an astounding 37 rounds before Morrissey took the prize. Not surprisingly, Massachusetts ceded Boston Corners to New York soon after, forever altering the geography of the County. Somewhat in line with Boston Corners' wild and woolly past, the historical marker states the incorrect year for the prize fight—1883 instead of 1853.

**Directions to Next Stop:** Head back north on State Route 22, then turn left at County Road 3. Turn right on Wiltsie Bridge Road and travel 3.7 miles. Follow NY-82 and County Route 8 into Gallatin. **NOTE:** There is no specific site for the Taghkanic Basketmakers, but you can explore this area or head north on Taconic State Parkway for a stopover at **Lake Taghkanic State Park**.

## 8 The Mysterious Taghkanic Basketmakers

Gallatin

The rural hills around Gallatin were once the home of an isolated culture known as the Taghkanic basketmakers, sometimes called “Bushwhackers” or “Pondshiners.” Comprising a small group of families, this tight-knit community crafted some of the most skillfully made and attractive baskets from the early 1800s through the early 1900s. Today, they are prized among collectors.



The Taghkanic basketmakers’ origins and way of life are as mysterious as their eventual demise. The settlement seems to have been centered around a ravine known as Stove Pipe Alley, but their homes have been lost to time. As outsiders discovered the community in the early 1900s, sensational newspaper headlines read, “The Bushwhackers of Columbia County! Strange People Populate Taghkanic Hills!” Whispers of witches, superstitious rituals and intense fear of strangers spread. The community was devastated by the Flu Pandemic of 1918, and the basketmaking traditions had all but faded out by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Directions to Final Stop:** From Lake Taghkanic State Park, head north on the Taconic State Parkway for 1.5 miles. Take Exit 80 for NY-82 toward Hudson/Ancram, and turn right. Continue for 5 miles, then turn right onto NY-23/NY-9H. Continue until you reach Claverack, at the intersection of 23B. **NOTE:** There is no specific site for the Claverack Giant, but the town of Claverack has many Dutch homes and historic markers to see.

## 9 Claverack Giant

Claverack

Picture the scene: In 1705, a Dutch tenant farmer stoops to pick up a massive tooth from the banks of the Hudson River, weighing roughly five pounds and having “a fang that could hold about a half-pint of liquor.” This fossil, which came to be known as the Claverack Giant, was one of the first and most significant fossil finds in American history.

Beliefs about the origin of the tooth were in line with the limited scientific knowledge of the period. Some, including the Puritan minister Cotton Mather, thought it came from the mouth of a biblical giant, washed ashore by Noah’s Flood. Indians of the area, who had long collected such fossils, similarly believed they belonged to ancient giants, which they called Maushops or Weetucks. Scientists would later identify the object as an Ice Age mastodon tooth—the first recorded discovery of its kind. As for the farmer, he allegedly traded the fossil for a gill of rum.



From here, you can drive back to **Hudson** on Route 23B, or head to **Cooper’s Daughter Spirits at Olde York Farm** (284 NY-23, Claverack) for a cocktail in the Tasting Garden. (Call ahead for hours: 518-721-8209.)

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**COLUMBIA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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# Drive Through History Legends & Folklore

## Columbia County

