



OBSERVATORY COTTAGE

Oysters

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Do you have an oyster plate in your cupboard? Once these special plates were as popular as local oysters were abundant.

There was a time, hundreds of years ago, when oysters flourished in the Hudson River. Archaeologists point to mounds of empty shells as evidence that from Cold Spring on down to the Battery, the early Native people consumed vast amounts of oysters. Large layers of oyster shells, called middens, lined the shores of the Hudson. In Hastings, oyster shell debris was found in the ravine, under the Warburton Avenue Bridge.

By the middle and late nineteenth century, these meaty mollusks, these briny bivalves, had become very popular all over America—on the half shell, fried, stuffed and stewed. Found in the tidal waters on the East coast, they were plentiful and inexpensive and could be enjoyed in oyster bars, saloons, and on street corners for pennies



Pen and ink with watercolor of the Hastings waterfront, 1961, by Hastings artist Allen Grant.

apiece. In Victorian times, oysters were usually served as the first course at elaborate dinner parties. My 1919 edition of Fannie M. Farmer's *The Boston Cooking School Cookbook* lists more than 40 entries for ways to prepare and serve oysters.

There are numerous varieties of the American oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) and each is named for the

waters where they grow. What is necessary for their proliferation is the Atlantic seawater being diluted by inflowing fresh water to produce moderately salty water conditions that help the oysters grow plump. The Hudson River, with waters that flow both ways, once offered this perfect condition. However by the 1940s, most of Hudson's oyster population