INTRODUCTION

Van Cortlandt Park in the northwest Bronx is a natural showcase featuring the last vestiges in the City of upstate New York's native woodlands. The park's 1,146 acres also abound with sites that are important to the history of the region and the nation.

Waiting to be seen in Van Cortlandt Park are rock formations created by the last ice age's glaciers, a mansion that George Washington found to be a handy stopover during the Revolutionary War, a site once used for an Indian village, and the land on which other Indians were massacred.

In addition, structures related to old railroad lines, aqueducts, and existing highways document people's efforts to link the City to resources it needed to grow.

Since the road and rail links have divided the park, its historical sites are described here within sections pertaining to geographic areas.

THE LAND'S HISTORY

The land on which Van Cortlandt Park grows today changed hands five times before it became property of New York City. Its first known inhabitants, the Weckquaesgeek Indians, sold it to the Dutch West India Company in the early 1600s.

Hostility underlaid this seemingly friendly business relationship, and violent confrontations leading to a series of massacres followed.

Dutchman Adriaen Van der Donck subsequently purchased the land from the company. Van der Donck actually bought the property twice, for, as a gesture of trust and friendship, he also paid Indian chief Tacharew.

Nonetheless, animosity remained and, when Van der Donck died in 1655, Indians forced the remaining settlers, including the Dutchman's widow, to flee to Manhattan. When she remarried, the British, who had taken over the City of New Amsterdam from the Dutch and renamed it New York, upheld Mrs. Van der Donck's claim to the property under the name of her new husband, Hugh O'Neal.

The land was sold in 1639 to New York's wealthiest man, Frederick Philips, a British merchant who added it to his vast collection of real estate, which stretched from the modern-day north Bronx well into Westchester County.

The name Van Cortlandt was first associated with the property the year before Philips's purchase. That was when the Englishman's daughter, Eva, married Jacobus Van Cortlandt. It was Jacobus who bought 50 acres of property from Philips and another 50 acres from local settlers to form the foundation of the Van Cortlandt Estate.

The Van Cortlandt family used the land productively until the 1870s, when civilization—in the form of an aqueduct project and the initial impact of urban sprawl on what was to become the Bronx—began inching toward the secluded estate. As a result, the Van Cortlandts sought to sell the property.

During 1874, the same year the Bronx was annexed to New York City, talks aimed at turning the estate into a park began.

In 1881, area resident John Mullaly, fearing that the City's northern fringes would become void of woodland, helped form a lobby group called the New York Parks Association. Two years later, this forerunner of the Parks Department formed a commission run by its president, Luther R. Marsh, and presented a bill to the State Legislature calling for the purchase of the land as a park. Despite arguments claiming the area was too far from the City's population hub and opposition from real estate developers, the measure was passed on July 14, 1884. The City finally acquired the title to the property on December 12, 1888.
Between 1888 and 1934, the Parks Department opened many recreational facilities (including the nation's first municipal golf course), filled in swamps, and planted trees in the park.

Recreation and development activities were disrupted during World War I, when the Army used the park for training.

In 1934, Robert Moses was appointed Parks Commissioner by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and initiated projects that brought playgrounds, walkways, and other facilities to the site. By the time he stepped out of the spotlight of State and City government in 1960, Moses, who never was elected to any office, had also ordered the building of major highways that divided the park into sectors.

The 1960s saw overuse and funding cutbacks lead to general deterioration in all Parks Department properties. In 1961, sewage seeped into Tibbett's Brook, killing thousands of the lake's fish. In 1970, a large swimming pool was opened, further straining inadequate park resources.

During the mid-1970s, the Parks Department was deeply affected by New York City's fiscal crisis. Yet, there was a turn toward improvement in Van Cortlandt Park, as local residents began to solicit funds for it and to enlist politicians in their preservation efforts. As a result, a restoration plan aimed at enhancing the park's recreational facilities and preserving its historical landscape was drawn. It is being implemented now.

HISTORICAL SITES

THE SOUTH END

Throughout its history, the south end of Van Cortlandt Park, less rugged than the green space's other sections, has been the area's center of activity.

When the Indians inhabited the region, they formed a trail known as the Hudson River Path. It led from the southwest part of the Bronx to the village location on what is now known as the Parade Ground. Part of the path, which is long gone, went along the route of Kingsbridge Road and entered the park's land at Bailey Avenue.

In 1890, the excavation of an area west of the Parade Ground off 246th Street uncovered human and dog graves, artifacts, and fire pits from the Indian era.

The first European to settle on the land was Adriaen Van der Donck, who built a farmhouse just west of the location of the present-day mansion. He built his home to face south because the area that is now the park's southern border was a natural marshland reminiscent of those in his native Holland. The foundation of this building is believed to have been unearthed during a 1910 excavation.

Jacobus Van Cortlandt purchased the property that eventually became the Van Cortlandt Estate in 1699, but he and his wife spent most of their time in Manhattan. Nonetheless, the owners planned to keep the land for farming, and in the early 1700s established a burial plot on a hill north of the house, on the other side of the Parade Ground plain.

In 1748, Van Cortlandt's son, Frederick, built a three-story mansion that to this day stands as the focal point of the area's historical treasures, and as the oldest building in the Bronx.

The mansion and the family plot on Vault Hill became important in the history of the United States and New York City when the Colonies rebelled against British rule and started the Revolutionary War. The war placed the Van Cortlandts in an uncomfortable position. Early in the conflict, British General Sir William Howe moved his army onto the estate. As a result, the land was behind British lines for most of the war. But the Van Cortlandts wanted to remain neutral during the conflict, and in fact favored the rebels to an extent.

Eventually, the mansion became known to an American general named George Washington, who stayed in it for the first time in 1776, during the campaign that climaxed in the Battle of White Plains. Then, in 1781, he met there with French commander Rochambeau for a strategy session as 5,000 of their troops waited outside on the Parade Ground and on Vault Hill. According to undocumented accounts, Washington tricked the British into believing he was staying at the mansion overnight by having his men light bonfires on Vault Hill and fleeing.

Washington's final stay at the mansion was in 1783, when he took refuge there prior to triumphantly marching into Manhattan, which had just been abandoned by the British.

In 1776, Augustus Van Cortlandt, who had been appointed by the British as City Clerk, took the City records out of Manhattan for fear that they might be destroyed during an evacuation. At first, he hid them in the mansion. However, he changed his mind and stashed them on Vault Hill. Some believe he placed the records in a hollow fence post on the site of the family burial plot, while others speculate that he hid them in a burial vault. When the war ended, Augustus turned the records over to the new government.
The Van Cortlandts moved out of the mansion in 1888, when the City gained ownership of it and the rest of the estate. In 1896, responsibility for operating the mansion was handed over to the National Society of Colonial Dames. A year later, the building was opened to the public. It was encircled by an iron fence in 1953, and has since been declared a City and national historic landmark.

The original marshland south of the mansion that attracted the Dutch settlers in the 1600s had by the 1900s become a public nuisance, serving as a breeding ground for mosquitoes. It was filled between 1906 and 1922.

Directly south of the mansion lies a grand stairway that leads to where the Colonial and Shakespeare gardens, created in 1902, grew. Despite flourishing to include 250,000 plants by the mid-1930s, the gardens were phased out before the end of that decade because of poor site drainage.

In 1939, a track-and-field stadium for 1,500 spectators was completed in the vicinity. It was joined in 1970 by a swimming pool.

The City had an easy time clearing the meadow known as the Parade Ground after it took control of the land. The only work needed to prepare it for recreation was the demolition of some building foundations and a greenhouse.

At first, the Parade Ground was opened to the public on a part-time basis with priority given to the National Guard, which used it for maneuvers, mock warfare, and polo matches.

In 1917, the United States entered World War I. The Army took over the entire park as a training facility, and camouflaged trains and airships were common sights in and around it. The Parade Ground was the focal point of all this activity, and crowds of up to 30,000 surrounded the large grassy plain when war games were staged.

The public regained use of the park again after the war. In 1938, the large field was modified with the addition of baseball, soccer, and cricket areas.

A Memorial Grove, designed to honor Americans who lost their lives in World War II and Korea, was planted just off Broadway, adjacent to the Visitors' Center, in 1949. Each tree represents a soldier. Names were inscribed on plaques at the base of the trees.

Mock battle is staged on Parade Ground by the New York National Guard during maneuvers. 1902.

Courtesy of the George Stonebridge Family
THE LAKE

Always among the most popular attractions in the park, man-made Van Cortlandt Lake also proved to be among the most fragile ones as the area around it changed. Yet, despite pollution from upstream neighbors and runoff from nearby roadways, it has survived for almost 300 years.

Tibbett's Brook, which runs into the lake from Yonkers, was the body of water which originally drew the Indians to the flat land of the Parade Ground. About 10 feet in width at the time, the brook supplied the Indians, who called it Mosholu (wide river), with food and water.

Shortly after the Van Cortlandts purchased the property in 1699, the brook was dammed east of the mansion to power grist and saw mills. The family also used the lake in winter, when it sold ice to local businesses.

By the 1880s, the lake's economic importance had waned. Yet, Van Cortlandt family members and friends still enjoyed it as a setting for summer picnics and winter skating.

The lake became a popular attraction as soon as the City opened it to the public. In 1889, fishing and swimming were common, and ice skating became the winter fad. As many as 10,000 people glided on the lake surface on weekend afternoons during the cold months.

In 1902, a study concluded that the lake, measured at 13 feet in depth, needed dredging. It had not been maintained in that manner since 1750, so the Parks Department tore down the earthen dam, emptied the lake, and removed 30,000 cubic yards of deposits that had settled on its bottom. The project faced delays and was not completed until 1911. When the work was finished, the brook was dammed again.

In 1961, pollution seeped into the brook upstream and killed thousands of fish in the lake, spurring efforts still taking place today toward the lake's revitalization. In 1978, the fish population was restocked.

In 1981, a study revealed that the lake's maximum depth was 4 1/2 feet, and in 1985 plans were proposed to have it dredged again and to divert pollution and road silt from it.

As is, the lake is the largest freshwater body in the Bronx and offers water-related activities to thousands of park visitors each year.

Its upper basin can be appreciated from the abandoned railroad tracks or the Van Cortlandt Golf Course, which itself made history as the nation's first municipal course when it was opened in 1895. (It originally consisted of nine holes, but was renovated and enlarged in 1899.) Its clubhouse, located on the southern part of the lake, was built in 1902.

In 1914, the Mosholu Golf Course was opened in the southeast portion of the park.
THE NORTH END

Access to most of the north end of Van Cortlandt Park can be gained only through the use of foot-beaten walking trails. This part of the park is one of the few places in New York City where one can come in direct contact with the native woodlands that extend into Westchester County and the rest of upstate New York.

Visitors to this section will find sites that played important roles in the area's settlement and urbanization. The Croton Aqueduct Trail, the Old Putnam Railroad roadbed, and Indian Field all fall into this category.

Meanwhile, students of the area's natural history are sure to appreciate examples of glacial gneiss, the hardwood forest, and an ample supply of birds and mammals.

The aqueduct trail and the railroad bed extend to the north end of the park from the south. In fact, an old train station is located near the lake's south shore. However, in following the trail or the roadbed north, one gradually moves away from New York's hustle and bustle and into quiet woods in which the only sound is often that of one's own feet snapping the twigs and ruffling the leaves beneath them. One may even encounter a raccoon, fox, or pheasant during a hike on these paths.

The Croton Aqueduct Trail takes one through one of the most quiet areas of New York City. 1985.

City of New York Parks & Recreation

The aqueduct trail starts in Van Cortlandt Park, but, with the exception of an interruption in Yonkers, can actually be followed north for more than 25 miles. While walking this trail within the park, one encounters air vents and a gate house that were part of the underground water passage. The tunnel wall is visible in some spots.

The need for an aqueduct tapping the Croton watershed in Westchester became apparent during the 1830s, when the population of New York, which by then was 330,000, faced a cholera epidemic and a great fire.

The City's voters approved a referendum to build a waterway that would carry 100 million gallons a day to New York via the High Bridge to a reservoir located at 42nd Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues. (Today, this is the location of the New York Public Library and Bryant Park.)

Major David Bates Douglass, who was appointed Croton Aqueduct's Engineer in 1833, mapped a route that hugged the Hudson River's east bank to Yonkers, then cut southeast down the Tibbett's Brook Valley through what is now Van Cortlandt Park.

The aqueduct's designers followed a guideline used during the time of its planning that called for disturbing the surrounding terrain to the least extent possible.

Douglass was replaced in 1836 by noted engineer John B. Jervis, who had had a city in New Jersey named for him and in May 1837 oversaw the start of construction.

Water first flowed through the tunnel on June 27, 1842. It was officially opened that July 4. The old aqueduct was used until 1897, a few years after a new one was completed beside it.

Work on the railroad began in the 1870s, when it became clear that a link between New York and Boston was needed. Although its builders did have consideration for the surrounding natural features, the line did affect the lake because it required the building of bridges across it at two locations. The line was completed in 1880.

The railroad was electrified in 1951, but its financial demise was brought about by competition from cars, airplanes, and other railroads. The Putnam Line's passenger service ceased operations in 1958. The track, still in place today, was used as a freight line until the mid-1980s.

An interesting spot one comes across while walking up the railroad right-of-way is where testing took place to determine which type of stone would be best for Grand Central Station. Three marble slabs can be seen off the western side of the rail, just north of the lake's dam.

The aqueduct trail starts in Van Cortlandt Park, but, with the exception of an interruption in Yonkers, can actually be followed north for more than 25 miles. While walking this trail within the park, one encounters air vents and a gate house that were part of the underground water passage. The tunnel wall is visible in some spots.

The need for an aqueduct tapping the Croton watershed in Westchester became apparent during the 1830s, when the population of New York, which by then was 330,000, faced a cholera epidemic and a great fire.

The City's voters approved a referendum to build a waterway that would carry 100 million gallons a day to New York via the High Bridge to a reservoir located at 42nd Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues. (Today, this is the location of the New York Public Library and Bryant Park.)

Major David Bates Douglass, who was appointed Croton Aqueduct's Engineer in 1833, mapped a route that hugged the Hudson River's east bank to Yonkers, then cut southeast down the Tibbett's Brook Valley through what is now Van Cortlandt Park.

The aqueduct's designers followed a guideline used during the time of its planning that called for disturbing the surrounding terrain to the least extent possible.

Douglass was replaced in 1836 by noted engineer John B. Jervis, who had had a city in New Jersey named for him and in May 1837 oversaw the start of construction.

Water first flowed through the tunnel on June 27, 1842. It was officially opened that July 4. The old aqueduct was used until 1897, a few years after a new one was completed beside it.

Work on the railroad began in the 1870s, when it became clear that a link between New York and Boston was needed. Although its builders did have consideration for the surrounding natural features, the line did affect the lake because it required the building of bridges across it at two locations. The line was completed in 1880.

The railroad was electrified in 1951, but its financial demise was brought about by competition from cars, airplanes, and other railroads. The Putnam Line's passenger service ceased operations in 1958. The track, still in place today, was used as a freight line until the mid-1980s.

An interesting spot one comes across while walking up the railroad right-of-way is where testing took place to determine which type of stone would be best for Grand Central Station. Three marble slabs can be seen off the western side of the rail, just north of the lake's dam.
The Putnam Line was not the only rail line that ran through the park. During the late 1880s, a shuttle line linking the community of Kingsbridge with the City of Yonkers was built in the park’s western region. This line operated until 1942. Its rails were removed, but stone trestle supports are visible in certain parts of the park. One can be seen just east of a riding stable located off Broadway, in the northwest sector.

The aqueduct trail and the railroad bed are separated at the south end of the park, but come together in its extreme northern fringes, making a circular hike possible.

The Cass Gallagher Nature Trail, another circular path, winds through the park’s northwestern corner. It was dedicated by the Parks Department in October 1984 in memory of Cass Gallagher, a longtime resident of the Bronx and devoted environmentalist. She was especially committed to the protection and enhancement of Van Cortlandt Park.

The trail’s 100-year-old hardwood forest is an oasis of animals and plants rarely found in urban settings. Rock outcroppings along its path are the remains of an ancient mountain chain that was once taller than the Rockies. The origin of the forest stretches back 17,000 years, when the last glacier melted.

Runners can make their way around this part of the park by using the nationally acclaimed cross-country course. The six-mile path, which begins and ends at the Parade Ground, was opened in 1914. A year later, it was chosen by the Amateur Athletic Union as the site of its junior and senior cross-country championships.

The eastern portion of the park’s northern sector is the site of Indian Field, where a band of pro-Patriot Stockbridge Indians was massacred by British and Hessian troops during the Revolutionary War. The ambush took place on August 31, 1778, near Miles Square Road, which today is called Van Cortlandt Park East. The site is on the corner of 233rd Street, in the vicinity of ballfields and tennis courts.

Thirty-seven Indians, including their chief, Abraham Ninham, were killed in the attack. A few days later, their remains were buried by the DeVoe family near the site of the slaughter.

In 1906, the Bronx Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution had a tablet placed north of Indian Field on Van Cortlandt Park East commemorating the slain Stockbridge Indians. Unfortunately, the Indian chief’s name is misspelled on the plaque.
ROADS

Although the roadways that run through Van Cortlandt Park are not evidence of nature at work, they have historical significance as examples of what was done to make New York City accessible to areas north of it.

Mosholu Parkway was the first major thoroughfare to extend into the park. During the 1930s, it became necessary to connect the parkway, which ended at Grand Concourse, to the Saw Mill River Parkway. It turned out to be a controversial plan because many conservationists were opposed to seeing any cars in the park. Finally, a compromise to narrow the roadway from its original width was reached.

Mosholu is one of four parkways which, along with six parks, were part of Frederick Law Olmsted’s vision of a Bronx parks system.

Olmsted first proposed this system while serving in the Parks Department’s Bureau of Design and Superintendence.

He left this position before his plans were realized, but John Mullaly, editor of the New York Herald-Tribune, picked up on the campaign. As a result, land was purchased for use as Van Cortlandt, Pelham Bay, Crotona, St. Mary’s, and Claremont parks. In addition to Mosholu Parkway, the City constructed or designated Bronx and Pelham, Claremont, and the Bronx River parkways as links between its new green spaces.

When the Henry Hudson Parkway, which loops across the northern part of the park, was built prior to World War II during Robert Moses’ term as Parks Commissioner, it was seen as a solution to the area’s traffic congestion. However, it created other problems, as people who used the railroad began to bring their cars into the City.

As a result, Moses envisioned a highway to augment Mosholu Parkway. This became a reality when the Major Deegan Expressway was extended through the park in 1955.

Meanwhile, a cloverleaf connecting the Mosholu and Hudson parkways was built, destroying a 32-acre freshwater marsh, the City’s last.

Although Moses faced a lot of criticism for dividing the park with highways (which many people felt failed to relieve traffic congestion), much credit has also been given to him for the improvements he brought to the area. Upon taking over as Parks Commissioner, he had underbrush cleared, laid miles of new walkways, paved dirt roads built for department vehicles, added playgrounds, and installed a new lighting system throughout the park. Van Cortlandt Stadium was also built during Moses’ term as Commissioner.
CONCLUSION

History is filled with serious social, political, and environmental lessons. However, one of the great leisurely pastimes it offers is the opportunity to compare our times with the times of others.

That comparison is made much easier and more interesting when things can be seen in the state they were in when they were used centuries and generations ago.

That is part of the fun of discovering Van Cortlandt Park’s history. Not only does its mansion look as if George Washington slept there last night, but the physical quality of the Parade Ground and the woodlands makes it easy to picture a time when Indians and Revolutionary War soldiers were common around them.

Currently, City of New York Parks & Recreation is implementing a plan that will preserve the park’s natural features as well as its built ones, guaranteeing their livelihood for present and future park lovers.

We hope you join the agency in its efforts to keep Van Cortlandt Park green and fit for fitness, nature, and history buffs.

This booklet was compiled by Luis Pons, staff writer of the Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay Parks Administrator’s Office, and is based mostly on research by Bronx Parks Historian Harvey Lubar.