

The Bronx

Waterfront History

By Professor Lloyd Ultan

Although The Bronx is the only one of New York City's five boroughs that is part of the mainland, it is surrounded on three sides by water. It is not surprising, therefore, that its waterfront has played an important part in its growth and development.

The first use of Bronx waters was for transportation and commerce. Until the advent of railroads, water transportation was the easiest and cheapest form of travel. Colonial settlers built docks from their waterfront property to moor boats and ships to exchange goods with New York City at the tip of Manhattan. The town of Westchester maintained a dock on Westchester Creek where boats came up the East River from New York twice weekly to exchange goods. A similar dock served the town of Eastchester on the Hutchinson River where New York boats arrived weekly via Long Island Sound. Stone was quarried on the manor of Fordham and shipped by boat along the Harlem and East Rivers. Benjamin Palmer envisioned City Island as the great entrepot for the entire Long Island Sound region. Gouverneur Morris gave directions to potential visitors to sail up the East River past today's Randalls Island to his home. Similarly, Elizabeth Colden DeLancey instructed her father, Cadwallader Colden, to come by boat along the East River into the Bronx River to the dock she and her husband, Peter DeLancey, maintained at West Farms.

In the nineteenth century, Jordan L. Mott built the Mott Haven Canal off the Harlem River for commercial shipping, and his own dock was located there on the river beside his iron foundry. Gouverneur Morris II promoted Port Morris as a commercial landing as well. As the only Bronx deep water port, oil tankers unloaded their cargo into pipelines there in the twentieth century. The Harlem River Ship Canal was cut through Spuyten Duyvil to allow deep-draft ships to travel between the Hudson and East Rivers. Nineteenth century passenger steamboats plied the Harlem and East Rivers docking at Landing Road in Fordham, Morris Dock (now Morris Heights), Highbridge and Mott Haven to carry commuters to Wall St. Today, passenger ferries dock at Yankee Stadium. Soon, fishing boats will land at the new fish market in Hunts Point.

In the nineteenth century, however, the use of the Bronx waterfront also was seen for recreation and amusement. Gouverneur Morris enjoyed casting for

fish off Stony Island (now Port Morris), and fishing for bass with his friends in a boat in the Harlem River. The opening of High Bridge in 1849 attracted tourists to cross it for the spectacular view. This led to an amusement park opening just below the span. Hotels opened to serve guests. Other amusement parks later opened along the East River at Oak Point and Soundview. Wealthy men established yacht clubs on the Harlem in Highbridge, on the Hudson in Riverdale, along the East River in Port Morris and on Long Island Sound on City Island. A state-mandated commission purchased Pelham Bay Park in 1888 to be “the Newport of the masses,” where anyone could fish, bathe, and sail without joining a posh yacht club. In 1937, the new Orchard Beach was added to the recreational facilities of this shorefront park. Today, there are plans to build a major golf course in Soundview Park with its waterfront views. Plans are also being generated to create recreational sites along the Hudson, Harlem and East River waterfronts in The Bronx.

Thus, the Bronx waterfront is still used for travel, commerce and recreation. It is a major factor in the borough’s history. §

Lloyd Ultan, Bronx County Historian, is a professor of history at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Hackensack, NJ and author of articles and books on Bronx and American history, including *The Beautiful Bronx*, *The Bronx In The Frontier Era*, *Presidents of the United States*, *Legacy of the Revolution: The Story of the Valentine- Varian House* and co-author of the *Life in The Bronx* book series.



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