

FORT TRYON PARK, Borough of Manhattan. Preliminary General Plan 1930; Constructed 1931-35; Olmsted Brothers, Landscape Architects; Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., Principal Designer; Planting Plan by James F. Dawson.

Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 2179, Lots 600 and 625; Block 2180, Lots 558, 581, 582, and 742; and Block 2181, Lot 701

Boundaries: Fort Tryon Park is encompassed by a line extending northerly and easterly along the eastern and southern curb lines of Riverside Drive beginning at the northern end of Chittenden Avenue; southerly along the western curb line of Broadway; westerly and southerly along the northern and western curb lines of Bennett Avenue to a point 292.7 feet south of the northern curb line of West 192nd Street; westerly 155 feet; southerly 34.2 feet; westerly 34.1 feet; northerly 326.9 feet; and westerly along a line extending from the northern curb line of West 192nd Street to the point of beginning.

On January 11, 1983, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Scenic Landmark of Fort Tryon Park and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 12). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Fort Tryon Park, one of New York City's most distinctive park designs, is an outstanding example of the landscape work of the notable firm of Olmsted Brothers. Constructed in 1931-35, the park represents a continuation of the picturesque New York City public park legacy begun in Central Park (1857 on) by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Located on some of the highest open public land in Manhattan, overlooking the Hudson River, the 66.6 acre site is rich with historic associations. The park and the Cloisters, located at the northern end, were gifts to New York City by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Fort Tryon Park was the last great park in New York City designed by the Olmsted office.

History of the Site¹

Northern Manhattan, including the area of Fort Tryon Park, was inhabited by Indians long before white colonization. The Wiechquaesgeck Indians were listed as living in northern Manhattan in 1616.² In spite of Dutch attempts to drive out and, in the case of Governor Kieft's War (1643-1645), annihilate the Indians of the lower Hudson Valley, some Wiechquaesgecks managed to survive and continue living in northern Manhattan.³ Wiechquaesgeck Indians lived in the area of Fort Tryon Park and Washington Heights throughout the seventeenth century. The Indians' last occupation of Fort Tryon Park was about 1669 but the Indians did not completely relinquish their land claims there until 1715 when a fund was raised by special tax to make a final settlement with these Indians.⁴

The earliest name recorded for the high ridge of land running along the Hudson River, north of 176th Street (Fort Tryon Park is at the northern end), was the Dutch "Lange Berghe" (Long Hill). Long Hill remained part of the vacant lands of the town of Harlem until its subdivision in 1712. In 1711 orders were given to lay out a wagon road following the ridge (which survives approximately in the location of Fort Washington Avenue and the later mainparkdrive). This area remained largely wooded until the Revolutionary War, when the hills were cleared of trees for firewood and construction of military fortifications.

At the time of the Revolution, Long Hill was known as Mount Washington and the knob at the central portion of the park site as Forest Hill. Mount Washington was the location of northern Manhattan's major defenses during the Revolution; these defenses consisted of a string of fortifications along the ridge, collectively called (under the Americans) Fort Washington. Forest Hill was the site of Fort Washington's northernmost outwork, constructed in the summer of 1776. Fort Washington was Manhattan's last American stronghold, lost in the battle of November 16, 1776; for the duration of the war Manhattan was under British control. During that battle a Maryland and Virginia regiment held Forest Hill for several hours against a far larger force of British and Hessian soldiers. Margaret Cochran Corbin (1751-c. 1800) is believed to have been the first American female soldier in the Revolutionary War (and the first female war pensioner). Corbin aided her husband John by cleaning and loading his cannon during the fighting until he was killed, and then took his place until she was wounded and captured. Renowned American Revolutionary War historian Christopher Ward has stated that the battle at Fort Washington, involving thousands of soldiers in a fierce struggle, was "one of the greatest disasters of the war for the Americans."⁵ The British later strengthened the American fortifications, naming that on Forest Hill Fort Tryon, after Sir William Tryon, last British colonial governor of New York (1771-1780) and major general of Provincial Forces of the Crown during the war. The British evacuated Fort Tryon in November 1783, and its military history came to an end. Strangely, the British name for the fort remained with the site, however, no visible above-ground evidence remains of the Revolutionary fort.

During the nineteenth century the land came into private ownership, and several estates of prominent persons with notable houses were established. The first of the major estates was assembled in 1818 by Dr. Samuel Watkins, son of a wealthy landowner and the founder of Watkins, New York. Watkins' land passed in 1844 to Lucius Chittenden, a merchant formerly of New Orleans. Part of the Chittenden property remained in the family until 1871. Several lots near Fort Tryon were later owned in 1896-1904 by William C. Muschenheim (just after that time proprietor of the Hotel Astor), who built a home called "Fort Tryon Terrace" (destroyed by fire in 1903). A section of the Chittenden estate had earlier been purchased by importer August C. Richards in 1855. Richards built a stone castle called "Woodcliff" (c. 1855) which was designed by architect Alexander Jackson Davis (1803-1892),⁶ noted, among other things, for his Gothic Revival style residences along the Hudson River. Woodcliff was sold a number of times (presumably for use as a summer residence), first in 1869 to General Daniel Butterfield, a Union Army officer

who held it for less than a month, and next to William Marcy ("Boss") Tweed, notorious leader of Tammany Hall who owned it until 1871. Alexander T. Stewart, prominent department store merchant, purchased the property in 1872, and after his death in 1876 it went to his partner William Libbey. Alexander J. Davis remodeled the castle for Libbey and made several additions.⁷ The Libbey family kept the property until 1904-05 and the mansion became widely known as "Libbey Castle." (It survived apparently until the construction of the park, near the site of the South Plaza entrance.)⁸ In 1901-05 Cornelius Kingsley Garrison Billings, one of the country's wealthiest men and noted horseman from Chicago, assembled one of the last large "country" estates in Manhattan, primarily for horses and stables; it consisted of twenty-five acres of the former Chittenden, Muschenheim, and Libbey properties around Fort Tryon. Billings hired Boston architect Guy Lowell to design his Chateausque style mansion "Tryon Hall" (c. 1903) atop Fort Tryon; a swimming pool, formal gardens with pergola, as well as a large stable for trotting horses enhanced the estate, which was developed at a cost of \$2 million. The estate was entered via a winding brick road leading from Riverside Drive passing under and over a large stone arcade (which is still extant). Billings vacated the estate in 1915. Adjoining the Billings estate to the north was the property acquired c. 1842 by William Henry Hays; Hays' summer residence later became the "Abbey Inn." North of this was the property acquired in 1891 by Walter S. Sheaffer, state geologist of Pennsylvania.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and Fort Tryon Park

Wealthy financier and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had long been interested in purchasing the property around Fort Tryon, having an attachment to it since childhood when he had taken walks there with his father. With the intention of creating a park, Rockefeller purchased the twenty-five acres of Hays and Sheaffer estates in January 1917, and the twenty-five acre Billings estate soon after, for a total of just under \$2 million (substantially less than the city valuation). On June 13, 1917, he announced to Mayor John P. Mitchel his decision to give the property to the City as a park, with the following stipulations: that the City improve and maintain the park, that the City connect it by land purchases to Fort Washington Park (north of Riverside Park), and that the deed be given to the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. The plan was to connect this park by a ferry at Dyckman Street to the New Jersey Palisades, also preserved through land acquisitions by the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. The City accepted the offer; however, Mitchel's successor John F. Hylan was forced to refuse the gift due mainly to the unimproved nature of the land, which would have been very expensive to develop for park purposes, and the fact that the Palisades Commission was legally prohibited from accepting the deed. Thus, the park idea lay dormant for ten years.⁹

In 1925 the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased "The Cloisters" and its collection of medieval art, located just south of the park site at Fort Washington Avenue and West 190th Street, through Rockefeller funds. First opened to the public in December 1914, this collection had been de-

veloped by noted sculptor George Grey Barnard (1863-1938), who later maintained a studio for fifteen years in the Billings estate stables. The Cloisters reopened in 1926 as a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with additional works of art from Rockefeller's collection. In 1926 the Billings mansion was destroyed by fire; only the walls were left standing.¹⁰

Rockefeller hired the firm of Olmsted Brothers, landscape architects of Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1927 to develop plans for a public park. A preliminary report was issued by Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr., in 1927, and an intensive study of the site was conducted in 1928-30. Olmsted, Jr., principal partner, also spent several months in Europe studying parks and estates with similar site problems of rocky topography and thin soil. The preliminary general plan for the park was completed in May 1930. On June 5, 1930, Rockefeller again officially offered the park to the city, this time to be improved at his own expense according to the plans of Olmsted Brothers. The property included 56 acres with four reserved for a new Cloisters building, also to be funded by Rockefeller. The name of the park was chosen by Rockefeller: "It seems appropriate that the park should be named Fort Tryon Park, perpetuating the Fort Tryon of Revolutionary days, which was located within its borders."¹¹ The City was obliged to align streets as necessary, and to provide paving, curbing, water, drainage, sewers, electricity, and telephones. Rockefeller also offered to fund the reconstruction of Claremont Park, north of Riverside Drive and West 122nd Street, adjoining the Rockefeller-funded Riverside Church, designed by architects Allen & Collens with Henry C. Pelton. Plans for Claremont Park had already been submitted by the Olmsted Brothers firm. These offers to the City were accepted by Mayor James J. Walker, and Fort Tryon Park was officially acquired by the City on December 28, 1931.

Olmsted Brothers

The Olmsted Brothers firm, the designers of Fort Tryon Park, was the contemporary successor to the original firm of Olmsted, Vaux & Co. (1857-72). Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (1822-1903) and architect Calvert Vaux (1824-1895) were instrumental in establishing the profession of landscape architecture in the United States through their many designs which continued the principles of the English naturalistic romantic landscape tradition. The original firm and its successors worked on hundreds of projects throughout the United States ranging from municipal and state parks, parkways, estates, and institutional grounds, to residential subdivisions. Olmsted & Vaux's first design (as well as the first designed American park) was Central Park (1857), now a designated New York City Scenic Landmark and National Historic Landmark; their other New York City projects included Riverside Park, Prospect Park, Ocean and Eastern Parkways, (all designated New York City Scenic Landmarks), and Morningside Park. After Olmsted's individual practice (1872-84) and move in 1883 from New York City to Brookline, Massachusetts, the firm continued as follows: F.L. & J.C. Olmsted (1884-89), with Olmsted Sr.'s nephew and stepson John C. Olmsted as partner; F.L.

Olmsted & Co. (1889-93), with Henry S. Codman, until his death; Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot (1893-97), with Charles Eliot, until his death; and again F.L. & J.C. Olmsted (1897-98). Olmsted, Sr., in poor physical and mental health, retired from practice in 1895. Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr., joined his half-brother John C. in 1898 to form Olmsted Brothers. This firm operated after John C.'s death in 1920 under Olmsted, Jr., until around 1950 when it became Olmsted Associates. The firm was operated continuously until 1979 when the Brookline office and archives were acquired by the National Park Service. The Olmsted office was considered the leading American landscape architectural firm and achieved a high level of distinction in its many landscape projects over the years.

Olmsted Brothers became particularly known for its landscape designs for private estates and for the planning of residential communities, but the firm worked on a wide range of projects, including parks such as Fort Tryon Park and Claremont (Sakura) Park (1932-34). Communities planned by the firm include: Roland Park, Baltimore (1897 on); Forest Hills Gardens, Queens (1912 on); Kohler, Wisconsin (1913 on); Prospect Terrace, Waltham, Massachusetts; and Palos Verdes Estates, California (1923 on). Regional park and planning reports were produced for Baltimore, Boulder, New Haven, Newport, Pittsburgh, and Rochester. Other examples of the firm's work include: Brooklyn Botanic Garden (1910 on); U.S. Military Academy Grounds, West Point, New York; Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle (1909); Nethermuir (Henry De Forest Residence), Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island; Ormiston (J.E. Aldred Residence), Glen Cove, Long Island; and Planting Fields Arboretum (c. 1919-21), Oyster Bay, Long Island. Fort Tryon Park is considered one of the firm's finest designs.

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870-1957), principal designer of Fort Tryon Park, continued his father's distinguished and prolific legacy and was considered one of the outstanding American landscape architects of his generation, as well as a noted planner and conservationist. Born on Staten Island as Henry Perkins Olmsted, he was renamed as a child by his father. Even by the time of his graduation from Harvard in 1894, he had become an apprentice to his father on such notable projects as the Stanford University Campus, Palo Alto, California; 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago; and Biltmore (George W. Vanderbilt estate), Asheville, North Carolina, gaining valuable experience for his multi-faceted career. In 1895, the year of his father's retirement, Olmsted entered the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot as an assistant, and in 1898 formed Olmsted Brothers. That same year he was appointed landscape architect to Boston's Metropolitan Park Commission, serving until 1920. In 1899 he was a founder and Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects, serving as president in 1908-09 and 1919-23. He was chosen to head the first professional university program in landscape architecture at Harvard in 1900, and taught there from 1901 to 1914, thus having a major influence on the training of the next generation of landscape architects. Olmsted was chosen to be a member of the McMillan Commission charged with the re-implementation of L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., and is largely credited with the creation of the Great Mall. During his long career he became involved in many of Washington's major landscape projects; he also

served as a member of the National Commission of Fine Arts (1910-18) and later on the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (1926-32). Olmsted is credited as largely responsible for the Congressional Act of 1916 which established the National Park Service. During World War I he turned his attention to housing problems. Later Olmsted served as a member of an advisory committee on Yosemite National Park (1928-56) and produced a state park study for California in 1929. Moving to California in 1950, he turned the firm over to his associates and devoted himself to conservation projects.

James Frederick Dawson (1874-1941) produced the planting plan for Fort Tryon Park.¹² Born at the Arnold Arboretum, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, he was the son of the superintendent. Educated at the Arboretum and Bussey Institution, Harvard, in 1894-96, Dawson entered the firm of Olmsted, Olmsted & Eliot in 1896. Studying abroad in 1900-02 and 1904, he became an associate member of Olmsted Brothers in 1906 and a full partner in 1922. Dawson became a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1905 and a Fellow in 1914. His work, concentrating on private gardens, public parks (like Fort Tryon Park) and institutional grounds, included: Rockefeller Burial Ground, Tarrytown, New York; Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle (1909); Panama-California Exposition, San Diego (1911); University of Washington Arboretum, Seattle; State Colleges, Alabama; Capitol grounds, Montgomery, Alabama; Capitol grounds, Olympia, Washington; and the park systems of Seattle, Spokane, and Louisville. Dawson also worked on the plans of the communities of Broadmoor Heights, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and St. Francis Wood and Palos Verdes Estates, California.

At the time of the construction of Fort Tryon Park, Olmsted Brothers had three other partners. Percival Gallagher (c. 1874-1934) studied at Bussey Institution, Harvard, worked in the Olmsted office from 1894-1904, formed the firm of Pray & Gallagher, and returned to Olmsted Brothers as a partner in 1906. A member of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1904, he became a fellow in 1910. Gallagher worked on the Rogers Estate, Southampton, Long Island; the Sesquicentennial Exposition, Philadelphia, (1926), and the park systems of Essex, Passaic, and Union Counties, New Jersey. Edward Clark Whiting (1881?-1962) graduated from Harvard College in 1903, studied for two years in Harvard's graduate landscape architecture program, began working for Olmsted Brothers in 1905, and later became a full partner. Henry V. Hubbard (1875-1947) was born in Taunton, Massachusetts, and received three degrees from Harvard, the latter in landscape architecture in 1901. Hubbard was widely known as an authority on planning and zoning, serving on the Harvard faculty from 1906 to 1941 (first in landscape architecture and later in regional planning); he was the founder and editor of Landscape Architecture and was an editor of City Planning Quarterly. Hubbard became a member of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1905, a fellow in 1910, and served as president. He joined Olmsted Brothers in 1920, and was a member of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission (1934-47).

Construction of the Park

Construction work by Olmsted Brothers, which began on Fort Tryon Park in August 1931, required a variety of procedures: demolition of the Billings mansion and stables; extensive rough grading of the site; layout and construction to sub-grade of the roads and paths with their retaining walls and parapets; construction of rock-filled slopes; construction of masonry arches, terrace and overlooks, wading pool and various structures; preparation of planting beds and lawns with loam and fertilizer; and planting of trees, shrubs, herbaceous areas and lawns (including the transplanting of some 180 mature trees on the site to avoid their destruction). A deep cut was made into the ridge of rock facing the Hudson River in order to build a drive which connected the park with Riverside Drive. The 36,000 cubic yards of gray Manhattan schist that were removed were employed in the construction of the architectural elements of the park, and a great deal of care went into the quality of the masonry. A workforce averaging 350 men worked on the site daily, under the supervision of Edward J. Carillo, Superintendent in Charge of Construction for Olmsted Brothers. Construction work was performed by the Arthur J. Johnson Corp. under contract with Marc Eidlitz & Son, General Contractors.¹³ During construction, artifacts of the Revolutionary War were uncovered. The park as constructed was a refined version of the original preliminary general plan. A small parcel of land along Broadway from Bennett Avenue to West 196th Street was added to the park in 1933 through a gift of J.D. Rockefeller, Jr.¹⁴

The park's completion was delayed during the summer of 1934 due to the city's lack of funding to fulfill its obligations, and only the northern playground was placed in use. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Parks Department Commissioner Robert Moses, finally obtaining Public Works Administration funds and emergency relief workers, spent \$800,000 to finish the paving and utilities. Construction of the new Cloisters building began in April 1935, according to the design of architect Charles Collens. Fort Tryon Park was officially dedicated on October 13, 1935, at a ceremony attended by Rockefeller, LaGuardia, Moses, Gen. Hugh S. Johnson, director of the Works Progress Administration, and George Blumenthal, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The cost to Rockefeller for the construction of Fort Tryon Park was \$3.6 million.¹⁵

The Design

The design for Fort Tryon Park represents a continuation of the legacy of public parks in New York City established by the Olmsted firm beginning with Central Park. These parks followed in the eighteenth-century English naturalistic romantic landscape tradition. The four landscape styles found within this tradition are readily apparent in Fort Tryon Park: the "beautiful" in its small open lawns, the "picturesque" in its wooded slopes, the "sublime" in the views of the Hudson River and Palisades of New Jersey, and the "gardenesque" in the Heather Garden. Fort Tryon, as a twentieth-century park, does not necessarily employ exactly the same design vocabulary as the nineteenth-century parks; however, the landscape principles are firmly rooted in the long tradition of the Olmsted office.

The site for Fort Tryon Park is magnificent, on some of the highest open land in Manhattan, with views in all directions: to the west, of the river and Palisades; northward, of Inwood Hill and the river towards Tarrytown; southward, of the river towards the George Washington Bridge; and eastward, of Inwood and the Bronx. It was, however, a site that was basically difficult to adapt for use as a public park, with its steep rocky topography and thin soil. Olmsted Brothers created an outstanding park design which, true to the Olmsted legacy, respected the uniqueness and natural landscape possibilities inherent in the site. This design recognized that the primary function of the park was as a "landscape park occupying a site of extraordinary landscape interest,"¹⁶ a preserve of open land with spectacular views of the Hudson River, that was therefore to be used for "passive" recreation (except in one location on low ground at the northern edge of the park where a playground was placed). A secondary function was as the setting for the Cloisters, which Rockefeller wished to be the "culminating point of interest in the architectural design of the park."¹⁷ Within these overall purposes, the park was designed to present a variety of landscape experience. As stated by Olmsted, Jr., in his preliminary report of 1927:

In general it seems obvious that, not only on the crest where the best outlooks are most readily obtainable, but especially upon the steep and generally rocky slopes below that crest, there should be provided a great number of interconnecting paths and sitting places and terraces, contrived at many levels, to present an almost endless succession and choice of places where people can walk and sit, singly and in groups, without crowding, without being overly conscious of the people on other walks and terraces, even in some cases with some approach to a sense of solitude. Each unit in this intricate series of places should offer a picture of as great perfection as can be contrived, using the same great distant views over the Hudson and over the City again and again but framing them differently, presenting them with constantly differing types of foreground, some intricate and intimate, some grandiose and simple, some richly architectural or gardenesque, some picturesquely naturalistic; and, by way of contrast, some presenting wholly self-contained scenes.¹⁸

The steep topography dictated many of the design decisions and features of the park. Stone retaining walls with parapets were employed extensively to retain soil as well as to keep pedestrians on the paths. The wooded slopes were an artful arrangement of the natural and artificial, with the addition of soil, rockwork, and extensive plantings to existing vegetation and rock forms. The relatively few flat areas available were reserved for the creation of small open lawns bordered by trees.

Many other principles of "Olmstedian" design are seen in Fort Tryon Park: the use of curvilinear paths, drives, and stairs; the separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, along with the use of arches; the separa-

tion of active and passive recreation; the variety and profuseness of carefully arranged plantings; the concepts of design variety, sequential experience, and surprise; the contrast of water, woods, lawn, and the gardenesque; the use of some formal elements within the naturalistic whole; and the subordination of architecture to the landscape, and the use of natural architectural materials (in this case Manhattan schist taken from the site). It is interesting to compare the design of Fort Tryon Park with two of its antecedents, the Rambles in Central Park and Morningside Park, where similar principles were employed on high rocky sites.

Certain elements of the design of Fort Tryon Park are different from the earlier Olmsted parks in New York City. These include the more "architectonic" character of the park with the Cloisters and the extensive use of stone retaining walls, the accommodation of automobile traffic with small parking lots and automobile overlook, the specific architectural character of the buildings, the formal design of the children's playground, and so prominent a use of a gardenesque feature, the Heather Garden.

Major Features of the Park

Circulation System. The main park drive (now Corbin Drive) begins at Corbin (South) Plaza at the north end of Fort Washington Avenue and curves northward to and around the Cloisters. Another drive enters the park off Riverside Drive through the rock cut and passes under the other drive (which is carried by a masonry arch) and joins it to the north. A small connecting section of drive south of the Cloisters also passes under the main drive (which is carried by a masonry arch) and allows traffic to travel back out to Riverside Drive. Several small parking lots are located along the drive, at the Concessions Building and around the Cloisters, and an automobile overlook is to the northwest of the Cloisters.

Several miles of pedestrian paths curve along and climb the sides of the ridge at various levels, and are constructed with stone steps flanked by carefully cut and placed natural stone edging, stone retaining walls, parapets, and overlooks, natural stone drinking fountains, and seating areas. Two pedestrian tunnels carry paths under the drive, at the rock cut and north of the Concessions Building, and the arch over the rock cut carries a path as well.

Plantings.¹⁹ Before its construction the park site contained many trees, including areas of woodland as well as exotics which were remnants of various estates. Some 180 existing mature trees were transplanted, and Olmsted Brothers planted over 1600 species of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants, particularly species that could survive in rocky conditions, so that the park was given the aspect of a botanical garden. The predominant character of the park is naturalistic and wooded, and hundreds of mature trees were planted (few saplings were used). The park today contains a number of specimen trees. Considerations were given to varying the planting and seasonal character of areas of the park, by the use of evergreens, spring or summer

flowering species, and those exhibiting fall foliage color. Sections of the park offer a contrast to the wooded character, seen in the several small open lawns. The lawn to the east of the terrace was originally called the "Children's Play Lawn," and the small lawn to the northwest of that (now overgrown) was designated the "Picnic Grounds." There are also formally planted areas, including the trees at the playground, Corbin (South) Plaza, Promenade, and Terrace. Two areas of special planted character were the Heather Garden and Alpine Garden.

Corbin (South) Plaza. The park's major southern entrance is polygonal in plan, surrounded by a low stone wall with stone entrance posts and octagonal stone "police booth" (gatehouse), and is lined with rows of plane trees. A planted circle is in the center of the plaza. The IND Subway station building at the southeast was constructed c. 1930 and was apparently clad with stone several years later, with a hipped slate roof and iron grilles added.²⁰

Promenade and Heather Garden. A formal Promenade lined with elms and recessed specially-designed seating areas runs between Corbin (South) Plaza and the Terrace. Running along side to the west the Heather Garden survives in altered form. This was conceived as a gardenesque area featuring the heathers and heaths, which thrive in barren open areas and whose low height would preserve views of the Hudson River from the Promenade.

Terrace. The Terrace is located at the north end of the Promenade and Heather Garden. Actually consisting of a main observation terrace and a lesser one (Northeast Terrace) connected by a masonry arch, this is the highest elevation in the park (at 250 feet) and was the location of Fort Tryon and the later Billings mansion, "Tryon Hall." The Terrace is raised and constructed with stone retaining walls with parapets (which are forty feet in height in places). The main terrace is extensively planted with elms and has a bronze plaque at the southern end commemorating Fort Tryon and Rockefeller's gift to the city. The lesser terrace has a flagpole with bronze base.

Fort Tryon Monument. Located north of the Concessions Building on the east side of the Northeast Terrace is the bronze monument erected in 1909 for the Hudson-Fulton Celebration to commemorate the role of the Maryland and Virginia regiment and Margaret Corbin in the battle on Forest Hill. The monument was donated by Cornelius K.G. Billings through the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, and was designed by architect Charles R. Lamb.

Remnants of the Billings Estate. A small frame and stucco gatehouse built on a tall stone base set into the cliff is located to the west of Corbin (South) Plaza. The original winding brick entrance road to the Billings estate from Riverside Drive is located to the north of the gatehouse. The granite gateposts at Riverside Drive are extant (the gates were removed). The road passes northward through a large stone arcade with tile vaults, then loops around southward to pass over the arcade and then doubles

back again northward. The road (its brick partially covered with asphalt) is used as a pedestrian path and the arcade continues to function as an overlook.

Concessions Building. Located to the northeast of Corbin (South) Plaza, this is a two-story stone building set into the hillside with slate hipped roof, three side pavilions (the southern one, originally open, is now enclosed), and arcade entrance. It was built to house a refreshment pavilion, park administrative headquarters, and restrooms.

Shelter Overlook. Located at the northeast corner of the lawn to the east of the Terrace, the Shelter Overlook is a simple open octagonal structure with octagonal roof supported by stone piers. A fire in recent years destroyed the original tile roof; it is now being restored with a slate roof.

The Cloisters. Constructed in 1935-38 from designs by architect Charles Collens, this branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for medieval art and a designated New York City Landmark, is a major focal point of the park. The site is surrounded by the loop of the park drive, and the building and courtyard (parking lot) are enclosed by rampart walls. An entrance for buses at the northeast and two drives that curve upward to the courtyard are paved with Belgian block. An apple orchard was planted along the south side, while denser plantings were used along the north and west. A northern addition to the Cloisters was constructed in 1961.

Alpine Garden. Along the top of the ridge east of the Cloisters is the area originally known as the Alpine Garden, which is now largely obscured by the growth of the woods. It still features tiny stone steps, narrow paths, and a grotto, but was originally planted with rock-loving Alpine species.

Fan Chamber. Located in the park near Broadway and Dongan Place is this plain two-story brick building (surrounded by a stone wall), which functions as a ventilating shaft for the underground subway line.

Comfort Stations. One comfort station, which takes the appearance of a small stone cottage with slate roof, is located in the park near Broadway and Sherman Avenue. The other is a low structure set into the hill below the drive and path north of the Cloisters.

Children's Playground. Located at the northeastern tip of the park, the playground was the only area designed for active recreation. Roughly triangular in shape, it has a large shallow wading pool in the center, is enclosed by a low stone wall with stone "police booth" (gatehouse) and entrance posts, and is formally planted with rows of plane trees. A low one-story stone fieldhouse with arcade entrance and flat rooftop viewing platform is set into the hillside at the southwest. A subway entrance is found to the northeast of the playground.

Archaeology

Archaeological materials have been consistently unearthed in Fort Tryon Park from 1918 until the present. In 1918, professional archaeologist Alanson Skinner from the Museum of the American Indian explored the area (then called "Fort Washington Park") and found "traces of Indian shell heaps, fireplaces, and pits, indicating an ancient camping ground."²¹ Even though extensive ground alteration occurred in the 1930s during the landscaping of the park, archaeological materials still lie buried in the ground. During the 1970s, fifty years after Skinner's discoveries, amateur archaeologist Michael Cohn from the Brooklyn Children's Museum reported finding pottery sherds, projectile points and clam and oyster shells on an embankment in the park.²² If only projectile points had been found, they might have been from arrows aimed at (but missing) animals hunted by Indians far from their villages. However, the presence of sherds and shells indicate some type of habitation site.

In addition to the Indian materials, artifacts left by European colonists undoubtedly lie buried in the ground. Since there was a colonial road on the property, there is a high probability of finding archaeological material associated with transportation and trade as well as daily life. Because of the extensive and hard-fought battle at Fort Washington which included thousands of British, German mercenary, and American Patriot troops, there could be many musket balls, cannon balls, and other remnants of military equipment still in the ground. After the battle for Fort Washington, the British rebuilt and occupied the fort from 1776 until 1783, and there should be numerous artifacts associated with that garrison.

Materials from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been found buried as deeply as ten feet below the present ground level at sites in the city. This indicates that twentieth century use of land has not necessarily destroyed earlier sites. In some cases, landscaping fill may have been added, thus protecting a site. Further documentary study is needed to determine specifically where any Indian and/or colonial European artifacts may still be buried.

Conclusion

After the dedication of Fort Tryon Park in 1935, several additional parcels of land increased the size of the park by 10.5 acres.²³ In 1935, 1936, and 1937 three small parcels were acquired along Bennett Avenue. In 1936 the Metropolitan Museum of Art officially deeded the grounds around the Cloisters to the Parks Department. Two parcels of land along Fort Washington Avenue on the south side of Corbin (South) Plaza, originally intended for apartment buildings to complement the park, were given as gifts in 1941 and 1944. The easternmost of the two parcels, the gift in 1941 of J.D. Rockefeller, Jr., now contains steps for the subway building, paved areas with game tables and seating, and ornamental iron fence. The other parcel

has a children's playground.

The Cloisters was designated a New York City Landmark in March 1974. In 1977 the park's drive and South Plaza were named for Margaret Corbin, heroine of the battle on Forest Hill. The park and the Cloisters were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in December 1978. Although some of Fort Tryon Park's planting designs have been somewhat obscured by years of unmanaged growth, the park survives today in unaltered form as an outstanding work of the firm of Olmsted Brothers and one of New York City's most significant parks.

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FOOTNOTES

1. This section is largely based on: Raymond H. Torrey, "Fort Tryon Park," Scenic and Historic America, 4 (May 1936), 3-27, and Edward H. Hall, "Fort Tryon and Vicinity," Twenty-Second Annual Report of The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, 1917 (Albany: J.B. Lyon & Co., 1917), pp. 737-780.
2. Robert Steven Grumet, Native American Place Names in New York City (New York: Museum of the City of New York, 1981), p. 60.
3. Grumet, p. 61.
4. Reginald Pelham Bolton, New York City in Indian Possession: Indian Notes and Monographs, vol. 2, no. 7 (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1975), pp. 20-21, reprint of 1920 edition.
5. Christopher Ward, The War of the Revolution, vol. 1 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 274.
6. This fact was established by piecing together information from: Hall; Roger H. Newton, Town & Davis Architects (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), pp. 278-279; and John Zukowsky, "Castles on the Hudson," Winterthur Portfolio, 14 (Spring 1979), 84-85.
7. Newton, p. 279 (Newton's date is incorrect).
8. The castle appears in photographs dated 1927, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, National Park Service, Brookline, Massachusetts.
9. Torrey, pp. 16-17; New York Times and New York Herald Tribune, June 7, 1930.
10. New York Times, March 7, 1926; Photographs, F.L. Olmsted National Historic Site.
11. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., letter to Mayor James J. Walker, June 5, 1930, New York Times, June 7, 1930.
12. Olmsted Associates Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Job No. 529, File B42.
13. Olmsted Associates Papers.
14. New York City, Department of Parks, Record Map, Fort Tryon Park, M-29.
15. New York Times, October 13, 1935.

16. Frederick L. Olmsted, Jr., Preliminary Report for Fort Tryon Park, 1927, cited in Edward C. Whiting, edit., manuscript for article published in Parks and Recreation (April 1935), Olmsted Associates Papers, File B42.
17. Rockefeller Letter, op. cit.
18. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., op. cit.
19. A planting list for the southern part of the park appears in Torrey. The Landmarks Preservation Commission holds copies of planting plans and plant lists from the F.L. Olmsted National Historic Site.
20. Photograph, F.L. Olmsted National Historic Site.
21. Alanson Skinner, Archaeological Investigations on Manhattan Island, New York City: Indian Notes and Monographs, vol. 2, no. 6 (New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, 1920), p. 137.
22. Elizabeth Spencer-Ralph, "Fort Tryon Park and the Cloisters," National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form (Albany: New York State Office of Parks and Recreation, Division of Historic Preservation, 1978).
23. New York City, Department of Parks, op. cit.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, natural features, landscaping, architectural and other elements of this park, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Fort Tryon Park has a special character, special history and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Fort Tryon Park is one of New York City's most distinctive park designs; that the park is among the finest examples of the landscape work of the firm of Olmsted Brothers; that the park represents a continuation of the New York City public park legacy begun in Central Park by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, and furthermore that Fort Tryon Park was the last great park in New York City designed by the Olmsted office; that the site of the park is rich in historic associations with the Revolutionary War and several large nineteenth-century estates; that the park, which was constructed and donated to the city through the generosity of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., is one of his major philanthropic ventures in New York City; that the park which provides a magnificent setting for the Cloisters is enhanced by its presence; and that the design of Fort Tryon Park is a brilliant response to the topographic difficulties of its rocky site and represents a skillfull integration of its various elements, including views of the Hudson River, manipulation of landforms, surviving remains of nineteenth-century estates, artful plantings, circulation system, and architecture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Scenic Landmark, Fort Tryon Park, which consists of the property bounded by a line extending northerly and easterly along the eastern and southern curb lines of Riverside Drive beginning at the northern end of Chittenden Avenue; southerly along the western curb line of Broadway; westerly and southerly along the northern and western curb lines of Bennett Avenue to a point 292.7 feet south of the northern curb line of West 192nd Street; westerly 155 feet; southerly 34.2 feet; westerly 34.1 feet; northerly 326.9 feet; and westerly along a line extending from the northern curb line of West 192nd Street, to the point of beginning; Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 2179, Lots 600 and 625; Block 2180, Lots 558, 581 and 742; and Block 2181, Lot 701, Borough of Manhattan as its Landmark Site.

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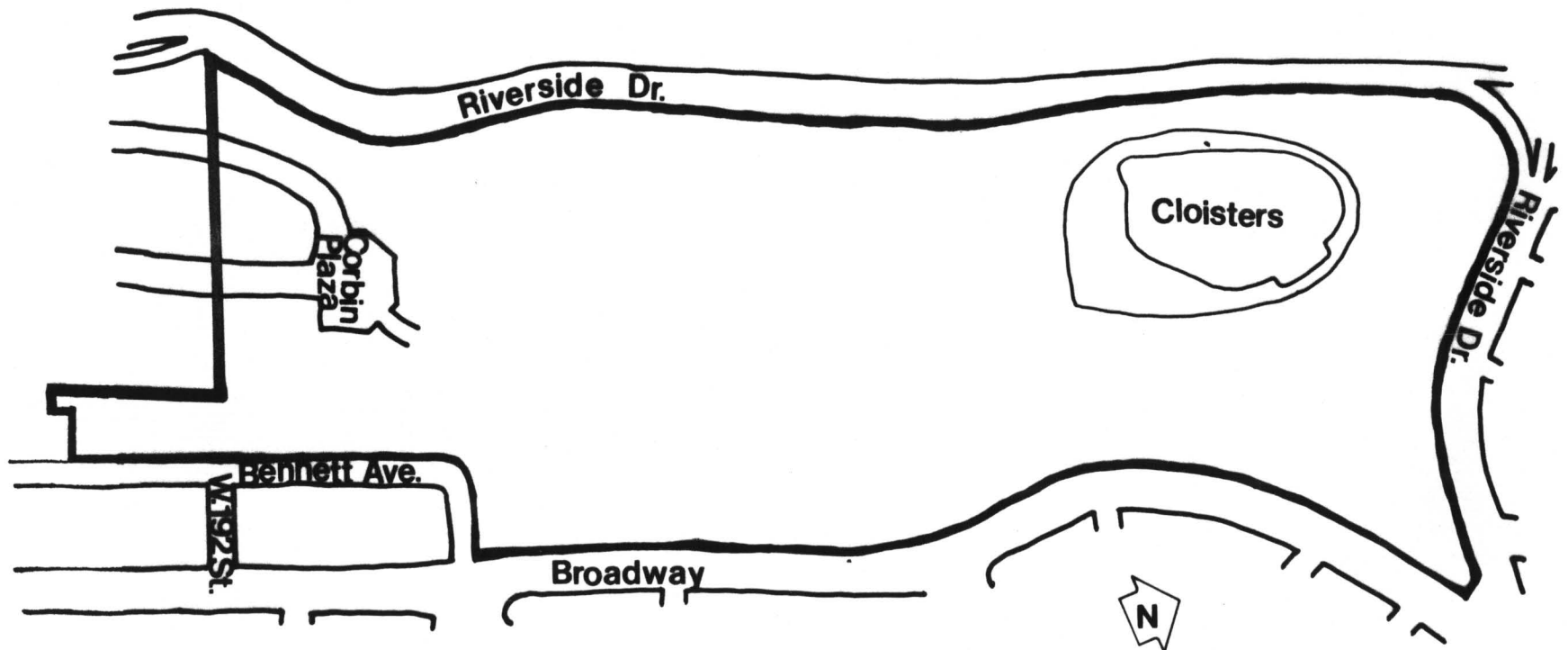
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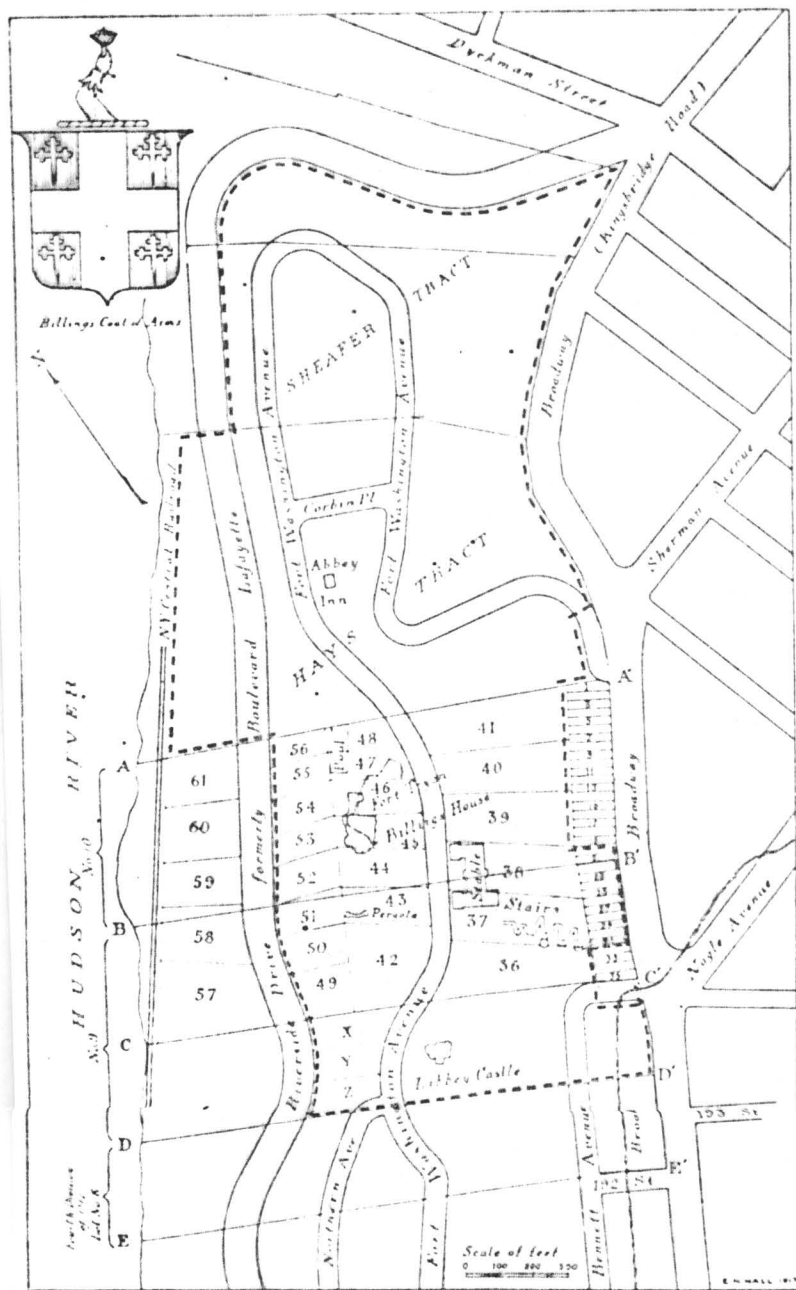
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FORT TRYON PARK
Manhattan

Public Hearing 1/11/83

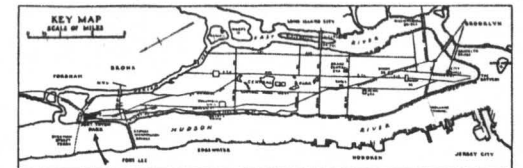
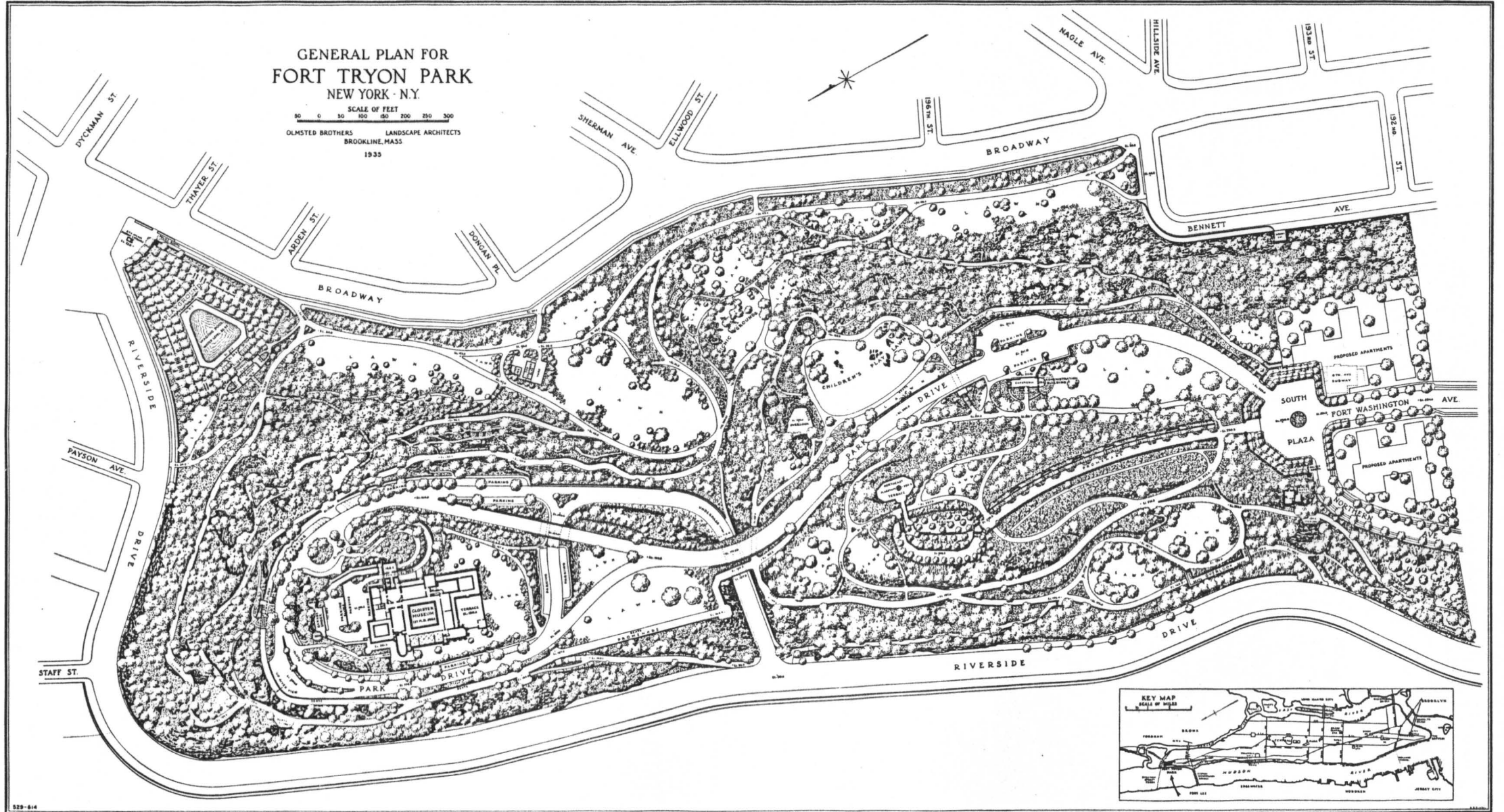


Fort Tryon Park Site, 1917

Source: Hall

GENERAL PLAN FOR FORT TRYON PARK NEW YORK - N.Y.

SCALE OF FEET
50 0 50 100 150 200 250 300
OLMSTED BROTHERS LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS
BROOKLINE, MASS.
1935





Aerial view of Cloisters
and Fort Tryon Park, nd.

Credit: F.L. Olmsted National
Historic Site



Fort Tryon Park, view
north from Terrace, n.d.

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Fort Tryon Park, n.d.

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Terrace, Fort Tryon Park
1937

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Terrace arch and Cloisters
Fort Tryon Park, 1937

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



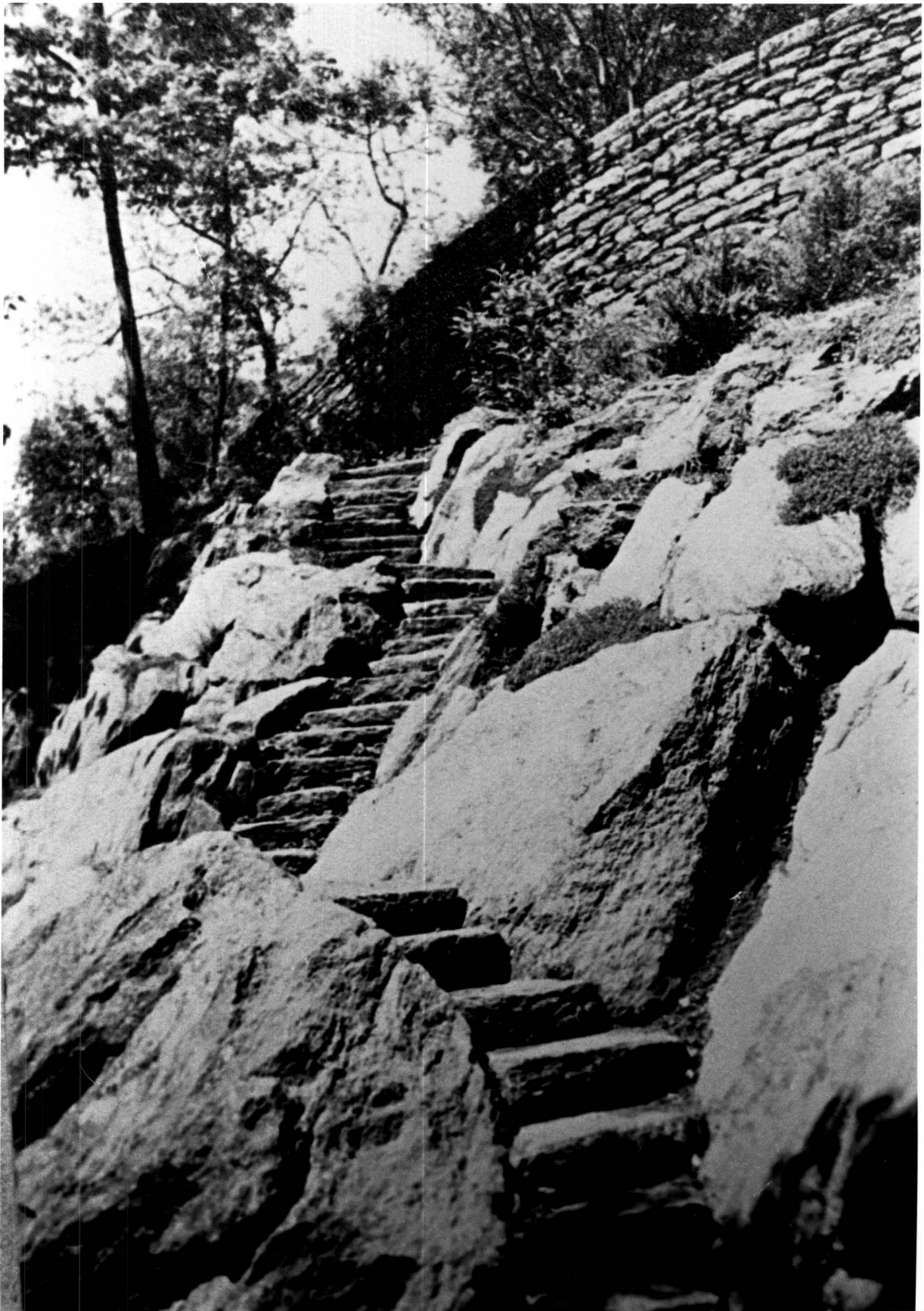
Arch over rock cut
Fort Tryon Park, 1933

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Promenade and Heather
Garden, Fort Tryon Park
1937

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Alpine Garden
Fort Tryon Park, 1936

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site



Concessions Building
Fort Tryon Park, 1936

Credit: F.L. Olmsted
National Historic Site



Playground
Fort Tryon Park, 1934

Credit: F.L.Olmsted
National Historic Site