

High on a Hill: Fort Tryon Park's Past

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Although William Tryon had a distinguished army career in the mid-eighteenth century even being the last British governor of colonial New York, today's visitors seemed interested in learning the history of Fort Tryon Park as well as enjoying the scenery.

"It (Fort Tryon Park) was given to New York by John D. Rockefeller. The name Tryon comes from an English general. Actually he was an English governor of New York," said Jason Donovan, a 26 year-old registered nurse at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Donovan who has lived in the Washington Heights area all his life called the park "sacred grounds," adding that he visits the park "sometimes religiously every Sunday."

Accompanying Donovan was 26 year-old Daniel Elsmore who was visiting New York for the first time from England. Although he did not know the history of Fort Tryon Park, Elsmore was getting a history lesson from friend Donovan. Elsmore said, "I love it. The actual architecture looks very English, the windows, the stonewalls. We have a lot of English heritage castles that are built very similar."

Built in the summer of 1776, Fort Tryon was seized in the fall of the same year by the Hessians, a German army aiding the British during the American Revolution. From 1775 to 1783, American colonists fought for independence against Great Britain. Located at the highest natural elevation of Upper Manhattan, Fort Tryon Park starts at about 181st Street and ends at Dyckman Street. The park offers views of the lowlands of the Hudson Valley and across the Hudson River to the New Jersey



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Palisades. Broadway binds the park on the east, the Hudson River on the west, Riverside Drive on the north and Overlook Terrace on the south.

William Tryon (1729-1788) was born at Norbury Park, England. In 1765 he was appointed governor of North Carolina. Tryon was unpopular with the colonists because of his rigorous suppression through government administration. He was detested for the inhumane treatment of revolutionary prisoners but mostly for his destruction of Danbury, Fairfield and Norwalk in Connecticut. In 1771 Tryon became the governor of New York. After the outbreak of the American Revolution, which began in 1775, he was forced to remain on a British ship docked at the harbor fearing his life was in danger. After defeating the Continental Army, which fought in defense of the colonists, the British renamed "Fort Washington" in honor of their Major

General and last British governor of New York, Sir William Tryon.

In 1909, oil mogul John D. Rockefeller, Jr. purchased the sixty-two acres of land for \$1.7 million. In 1931, Rockefeller donated the property to New York in an exchange for a plot of land between 64th and 68th Streets on the easternmost portion of Manhattan, which were to become home to Rockefeller University. Mr. Rockefeller then spent another \$3.6 million improving Fort Tryon Park.

The Olmsted brothers, Frederick Jr. and John Charles, sons of the co-designer of Central and Prospect Parks were hired by Rockefeller to do the architectural work on Fort Tryon Park. Around 1930 the brothers designed the plans and in 1931 they began working on the park. The Olmsted brothers spent the next four years transforming the site's rocky land and thin soil into the brilliant scenery enjoyed by many today.

Opened to the public in 1935, Fort Tryon Park received good reviews from writer Lewis Mumford, best known for his column in *The New Yorker* called "The Skyline." According to Mumford's review published on November 9, 1935, "...this site gives one of the most magnificent views in the world.... I know no landscape near a big city that takes the breath away more completely." The *New York City Guide* of 1939 listed Fort Tryon as "one of the most beautiful public parks of America. The views from its heights are perhaps the finest Manhattan offers...."

In 1938 after purchasing sculptor George Barnard's collection of medieval art, Rockefeller opened The Cloisters Museum. Located at the northernmost hill of Fort Tryon Park paralleling a pathway called Margaret Corbin Drive, the museum contains the remains of several cloisters or courtyards from actual French medieval monasteries. Margaret Corbin was a hero of the American Revolution who stood firm against the British abetting Hessians on one of the hills of the park. When her husband was killed, Corbin took his gun and continued firing until she too was badly wounded. The Cloisters, a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was designated an official landmark in 1974.

Heriberto Torres, a 33 year-old auto parts manager in Yonkers who was strolling along the park with his girlfriend said the place, "has a lot of great history if one takes the time out to read up on it."

"Who would have thought that the park still bears the name of a British general in spite of the fact that we (The United States) won and claimed our independence from England? I feel it should be named Rockefeller Park, after all he donated all of the land and invested all of his money," added Torres.



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