

The Scene on the Green

Van Cortlandt Park attracts many visitors, many of whom are unaware of the important roles it has played in the past

ALEJANDRINA BELLO
Bronx Journal Staff Reporter



PHOTO: JOSÉ GRISALES

Van Cortlandt Park is one of the city's largest and most visited recreational places, yet many of its frequent users do not know the remarkable history of this place, or even how the park got its name.

"It's probably named after someone, but I really don't know," replies Raul Herrera, a 47 year-old salesman who has been using the park for more than 25 years. Mr. Herrera, a resident of the Van Cortlandt neighborhood for nearly 12 years, now prepares to run the famous cross-country course (running the flats of the park).

"It's a challenging workout and it feels fantastic," he adds. Although Mr. Herrera has lived for many years close to this "huge" and "beautiful" park, as he calls it, he does not know much of the past history and present facts of the park. Mr. Herrera believes Indians were the first people to live on the land and that at one time it served the United States Army and Marines for training, but he does not know for which war. In fact, most of what Mr. Herrera recalls is from the historical signs posted around the park's grounds.

Like Mr. Herrera, there are other people who know little or nothing of the history of Van Cortlandt Park. This is the case of

Hannah Granholm, a 27 year-old Physical Therapist from Finland. Whenever Granholm comes to visit her boyfriend here in New York, she takes some time and comes to the park to run, walk and enjoy the weather. Although Granholm has not had the chance to use facilities in the park other than the grounds, she remarks, "It's a piece of nature I haven't found in any other place in New York."

Granholm has come to the park for about ten times and read some historical signs in her past visits, but she can not recall who the Van Cortlandts were. "I don't remember, but it would be interesting to know the rich history of this park," she adds.

Located on Broadway and 242nd street, Van Cortlandt Park with 1,146 acres is New York City's third largest park. It was once a prosperous plantation of the late 1600s established by a wealthy family, the Van Cortlandts, after whom the park is named. In addition, several historical events took place on this land. It served as headquarters during the American Revolution and similarly, occupied by the United States Army for combat training during World War I.

The Lenape Native Americans were the first inhabitants of the land. As years went by, the land developed into farms and plan-

tations, and then it was acquired by several private landholders including the Van Cortlandts. This colonial Dutch family was one of the earliest mercantile and trading families of the 17th century. In addition, some of the family members held important political offices, such as mayor and city clerk of New York.

Oloff Stevenson Van Cortlandt was the first member of the family to settled in New Amsterdam (renamed New York in the 1660s). Oloff was one of the wealthiest men to own large areas of land, and he became mayor of New Amsterdam in 1654. His son, Jacobus Van Cortlandt was actually the first of the Van Cortlandts to own part of the land that presently belongs to the park. A very successful man, Jacobus also served as mayor of New York from 1710 to 1719. Later on, he purchased several acres of land from his neighbors, and he became the chief owner of the present Van Cortlandt Park.

The Van Cortlandt estate grew into a prosperous plantation. Jacobus' son, Frederick Van Cortlandt, built the family's burial ground, Vault Hill and the Georgian-style house that today is a museum. In general, the family lived on the land throughout the 1880s, donating the property to the City of

New York as a public park on December 12, 1888. However, the park was not available to the general public until 1902, and in 1913, it was officially named Van Cortlandt Park to honor its past proprietors.

Various historical events took place in what today is Van Cortlandt Park. At some point during the American Revolution and prior to the battle of White Plains in October 1776, General George Washington along with 5,000 troops assembled in the Van Cortlandt grounds and used the house, which sat near or behind enemy lines, as his headquarters. In addition, in 1917 when Van Cortlandt Park was already public parkland, the grounds were briefly occupied as headquarters by the National Guard for the United States Army as a training camp during the last years of World War I.

Van Cortlandt Park consists of woodlands and wetlands. Its forest is one of its many attractions, and it is home to various animals like raccoons, skunks, rabbits as well as some of North America's most colorful birds. The ground's surface and pathways have facilitated the development of many playgrounds and recreational facilities such as baseball diamonds, soccer and football

Continued on next page