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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BATTLE OF PELL’S POINT: MYTH AND REALITY

Lloyd Ultan

During the American Revolution, many engagements between the forces of Great Britain and the American colonies were recorded. One of them began in today’s Pelham Bay Park in The Bronx. Ask people what they know about it, and most would reply that they never heard of it. Even most lovers of history and professional historians overlook it or give it short shrift. Yet historians of The Bronx and Westchester County have studied the engagement in some detail and have insisted that it was a military encounter of great significance for the course of the Revolution and for the fate of the future United States.

As such, there is controversy about the importance of that military encounter. Even the name is in dispute. Most Westchester County historians refer to it at the “Battle of Pelham,” the “Battle of Pelham Manor,” or the “Battle of Pelham Bay.” Bronx historians prefer the “Battle of Pell’s Point.” Some historians insist that it should not even be given the status of a “battle,” but instead be referred to as a mere “skirmish.”

Therefore, we ought to examine this military encounter to try to determine what was at stake in it, what happened, what was its result, and what was its ultimate importance. To do so, we have to return to the month of October 1776.

During that month, the British forces were on the move. The strategy of their commander, General Sir William Howe, was to try to trap George Washington and his rag-tag collection of Continental soldiers augmented by local militia units, to capture them all, and to put an end to the pesky rebellion that had so disrupted the mighty British Empire.

Since August, with a combination of skill and a large dose of good luck, Washington had eluded Howe’s grasp. The first time, in August, the American commander successfully evacuated his men from Long Island to Manhattan under the providential cover of a thick fog that obscured their movement. Following that, whenever Howe’s troops landed behind him along the East River’s Manhattan shore, Washington again was able to maneuver quickly enough to scamper his men up the west side of Manhattan to the northern end of the island and the mainland.

Nevertheless, the American commander had cause to be exasperated with the conduct of most of his men. Whenever the British marched on their positions, the American defenders too often fled in panic and ignored
Washington’s exhortations to stand and fight.\(^1\) When Washington stationed
units along the mainland shoreline in an attempt to determine where the
British would land next, one soldier assigned to Morrisania, along the narrow
Bronx Kill, fraternized with a British sentinel on Montressor’s Island (now
Randall’s Island) by giving a bite of his chewing tobacco on request.\(^2\)

On October 12, 1776, a British fleet of eighty or ninety ships sailed
through the treacherous waters of Hell Gate in the inky darkness of the night
and landed at Throggs Neck. The British troops intended to march across a
wooden causeway over the swampy land, cross Westchester Creek to the
center of the town of Westchester (now Westchester Square), continue
westward toward the vicinity of the King’s Bridge, cut the American supply
line from Connecticut, force Washington’s troops to abandon the bridge, and
thus bring them into action.\(^3\)

Fortunately, Continental Major General William Heath, who was in
immediate command on the mainland, foresaw this possibility and had placed
defenders at the western side of Westchester Creek and at the pass at the
creek’s headwaters (about where Pelham Parkway is today). After taking up
the planks of the bridge over the creek to halt the British march, the
Continental troops—hiding behind defenses of piled cordwood and a tidal
mill—raked the British soldiers with accurate and withering fire, forcing them
to retreat. A British attempt to use the pass at the creek’s headwaters was
similarly thwarted. While the British troops established a camp at Throggs
Neck and were resupplied and reinforced by forty or fifty more ships, both
sides continued to exchange fire across the swamp lands and Westchester
Creek.\(^4\)

On 14 October, Heath and the generals under his command observed
the British positions on Throggs Neck and spread out to determine other
possible landing sites along the eastern shoreline that the enemy could use.
Meanwhile, even more sloops and boats went up the East River to resupply
and reinforce the British army.\(^5\)

On the same day, Continental Major General Charles Lee joined
George Washington at his headquarters. Lee had formerly been an officer in
the British army and was considered at the time to have greater military
insight and ability than he actually possessed. In reality, Lee was more of a
prima donna and freely criticized Washington’s decisions behind his back.
Because of the esteem Lee then had, Washington placed him in command of
all the American forces above the King’s Bridge, but permitted him to take a

\(^3\) Peter Force, ed., *American Archives: Consisting of a Collection of Authentick Records, State Papers, Debates,
and Letters, and Other Notices of Publik Affairs*, 5th series, Containing a Documentary History of the United
States of America from the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776 to the Definitive Treaty of Peace with
Great Britain, September 3, 1783, 3 vols. (Washington, DC: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1848–1853),
3:922.
day or two to get acquainted with the lay of the land before he assumed actual control. Characteristically, Lee took his own sweet time. He delayed taking command of the area for much longer than the one or two days he was given. Thus, there was no general in charge of the area above the King’s Bridge at the time when the British were on the move.

On 16 October, the American generals reconnoitered Pell’s Point (now Rodman’s Neck in Pelham Bay Park). They worried that the left (east) flank of the Continental Army would be turned by the British unless the American defensive lines were moved immediately to a more northerly position.

Consequently, four Continental regiments from New England were moved to a hill (now in Mount Vernon) that had a commanding view over the well-wooded and relatively flat lands to the south, including Pell’s Point. Colonel John Glover of Marblehead, Massachusetts, commanded one of the regiments and was also placed in temporary overall command of the other three. Glover, who had advanced himself from shoemaker to fish seller to inn keeper to wealthy merchant, now nearing his forty-fourth birthday, had some military experience as an officer in his local militia regiment, of which he had been a part since 1759. Glover’s unit was taken into the Continental Army in 1775. On August 29, 1776, he gained recognition for organizing and supervising the successful evacuation of 9,000 besieged American troops with their equipment, horses, and cannon at night in a thick fog across the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

Despite Glover’s deployment to the hill overlooking today’s Pelham Bay Park, Washington realized his own army was in a potentially perilous position. After a council of war, orders were issued to the American army to evacuate. The retreat to White Plains began on 18 October.

The British began their maneuver the same day. A body of troops from Throggs Neck marched toward the American lines at Westchester Creek. Heath, expecting this was an attack in force, ordered other units to reinforce those defending the causeway and the headwaters of Westchester Creek. Before they got there, Washington rode up and told Heath to order those units to return but to continue to defend the positions at Westchester Creek while keeping an eye on Morrisania—in case the British should attempt another landing there.

The British maneuver toward Westchester Creek turned out to be a feint to divert attention from their real purpose. With fresh winds blowing

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6 Heath, Memoirs, 63.
7 Heath, Memoirs, 63.
9 Billias, General John Glover, 114.
10 Heath, Memoirs, 64.
from the southwest, the British fleet moved to the northern side of Throggs Neck where the troops embarked and set sail under the cover of night for the cove west of today’s Rodman’s Neck (then called Pell’s Point). \(^{11}\)

Arriving with a large force at five o’clock in the morning of October 18, 1776, their landing was unopposed. With over one hundred ships of varied sizes in a rather small cove, it would take a great deal of time for each ship to lower rowboats filled with soldiers, cannons, horses, and supplies to bring all ashore. The landings were led by General Sir Henry Clinton and General Earl Cornwallis. Cornwallis was in charge of the force that was to march up the eastern portion of the property known as the manor of Pelham to cover the flank of the main army. Clinton’s troops began moving a mile and a half from the shore northward along a road flanked by stone walls on the west side of the manor of Pelham well before the disembarkation was completed. \(^{12}\)

Colonel John Glover stood on the hill now in Mount Vernon to survey Long Island Sound using his spyglass. He was astounded seeing the might of the enemy army in the process of landing its forces from so many ships amassed at the shoreline. The only American defenders opposing the enemy troops were the four regiments over which he was in nominal command. Glover’s experience in combat was limited. As a Massachusetts militia colonel now in the Continental Army, he had never been responsible for grand strategy but carried out orders from the general above him. He had familiarity in tactics and organization, however. Nevertheless, he anxiously wished to have some experienced general take command in the unexpected situation in which he found himself. Glover immediately sent Major William R. Lee with a dispatch to General Charles Lee apprising him of the situation and urging him to come and take command. General Lee, as was typical for him, could not be found. Glover was on his own. \(^{13}\)

Without waiting, Glover thought of his own strategy to engage units of what was then considered the best fighting force in the world. Noting the roughness of the land, he realized that it would take too much time to drag his three cannons down and deploy them effectively. He left them behind, guarded by the men of his own regiment. He then led the other three regiments he commanded south to meet the oncoming enemy forces. \(^{14}\)

On the way, the Americans unexpectedly encountered a small advance party of about thirty enemy skirmishers. Glover detached a captain and forty men to engage them while he deployed the rest. The site he chose to take his stand was along the narrow dirt road flanked by stone walls, the remnant of which can still be seen west of the golf courses in today’s Pelham Bay Park. The terrain on either side of the road was well wooded. The site was alongside the Split Rock, a large bolder split in half by a tree growing in its middle.

\(^{11}\) Heath, Memoirs, 64.


\(^{13}\) Force, American Archives, 2:1188.

\(^{14}\) Force, American Archives, 2:1188.
Behind the wall on the east side of the road, Glover stationed the regiment of Colonel Joseph Read. Further to the north behind the wall on the west side of the road crouched the regiment of Colonel William Shepard, a veteran of the French and Indian War. Colonel Laommi Baldwin, a civil engineer later noted for the propagation of the Baldwin apple, led his regiment stationed still further north behind the wall flanking the east side of the road.15

Glover then rode up to the men he sent to engage the enemy skirmishers. The forty Americans advanced within forty yards when the enemy opened fire, not hitting a single man. The Americans returned fire, hitting four of their opponents. Five rounds were exchanged in which two Americans were killed and several wounded while the enemy advanced to thirty yards from the American line. Glover, fearing the weakening of his own small force, ordered a retreat. Seeing this, the enemy gave a shout and advanced along the road.16

When the advancing skirmishers came within thirty yards of Colonel Read’s forces hidden behind the stone wall on the road’s east side, the Americans rose up from their crouch, firing all their muskets at once. Stunned at his unexpected development, the skirmishers broke and headed toward the

16The most complete contemporary account of the battle can be found in a letter written by John Glover a few days later. The account of the engagement rendered here is taken from this letter, which can be found in *Force, American Archives*, 2:1188–89.

The Importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point

The Split Rock in Pelham Bay Park, black and white print, c. 1890. On the road near here the first action of the Battle of Pell’s Point began. Courtesy of The Bronx County Historical Society Research Library, Randall Comfort Collection.
main body of British troops marching northward on the road.

After an hour and a half had passed, the main body of the British army, along with seven cannons, advanced within fifty yards of Read’s regiment. Once again, the Americans rose up from behind the wall all firing their muskets at once. The British halted their advance and returned fire with muskets and cannon balls. After discharging seven rounds from their muskets, Read’s regiment retreated to a point behind Shepard’s regiment.

At this development, the British shouted and advanced to the point where Shepard’s men were crouched behind a double stone wall on the road’s west side. The Americans then rose up and fired at the enemy soldiers in grand divisions. While one group fired their muskets, another was reloading theirs, thus keeping up a constant barrage for seventeen rounds. This caused the enemy to retreat several times. At one point, they retreated so far that one of Shepard’s men was able to jump over the wall and take the hat and canteen off a dead enemy officer.

Glover knew that he was facing a far superior force than his own. To preserve his men, he ordered Shepard’s regiment to retreat to a point behind Baldwin’s. Unfortunately, Baldwin’s men were on the downward slope of a hill that enabled the opposing army to occupy a commanding position at the top. While the same tactic of rising up and firing from behind a stone wall was used, it was not as effective.

One reason for the lack of effectiveness this time was that the British were now familiar with Glover’s tactic. Another was that the British force to the east under the command of Cornwallis heard the sound of battle and turned westward to attack the American flank. As soon as Cornwallis’s men appeared on the scene, Glover ordered a retreat across the narrow Hutchinson River to meet the men of his own regiment and the three cannons he left with them. 17

At this point, the British halted their advance. Noting that the Americans were not retreating but standing some distance away, the British started firing their cannons at them. The Americans then aimed their own artillery and returned the enemy’s fire. The damage inflicted by both sides was minimal. The constant cannonade lasted for the rest of the afternoon until the onset of night. Under the cover of darkness, Glover then withdrew his men toward the west, leaving his baggage behind.

Clinton did not pursue but kept his army in place and consolidated his position for the next few days. Meanwhile, Washington had the time to complete the withdrawal of the main American army from what is now the western half of The Bronx and to regroup at White Plains. 18

The Battle of Pell’s Point was over. Since then, the “battle” among historians to determine its significance has been waged.

The first to examine the engagement at Pell’s Point in any great detail was Henry B. Dawson. A naturalized American citizen who had emigrated

17 Franko, Pelham Manor, 36.
from Great Britain, Dawson earned his living as a newspaper editor and by publishing *The Historical Magazine* from his home in the town of Morrisania, now part of The Bronx. In this journal, he printed documents he and other antiquarians and historians found that illuminated aspects of American history. Dawson earned a national reputation for his work and Dawson Street in The Bronx bears his name.

In the 1880s, Dawson agreed to the request of J. Thomas Scharf, a prolific author of books chronicling the history of several towns and counties across the nation, to write a chapter on “Westchester County, New York, During the American Revolution.” This appeared as chapter 6 in Scharf’s two-volume *History of Westchester County, New York*, published in 1886.

Dawson cites several previous historical accounts that mention the military encounter at Pell’s Point in passing. He readily faults these accounts for neglecting it. Dawson, indeed, tells a fuller story behind the encounter than any of his predecessors. Nevertheless, this acclaimed historian refers to the entire incident as a mere “skirmish.” He does, however, credit Glover with “acting with admirable skill and with a deliberate coolness which would have done honor to a soldier of larger pretensions.”

After a careful analysis of the numbers, Dawson accepts Glover’s estimate that he faced about 4,000 enemy troops that landed at Pell’s Point. He concludes that Glover’s own forces added up to under 800 men but believes that the colonel’s estimation of commanding only 750 soldiers during the fight is probably accurate.

Dawson also examines the number of casualties reported on both sides. Glover stated that six of his men were killed and twelve men and one officer wounded. The wounded officer was Colonel William Shepard. The British losses at Pell’s Point were reported by General Sir William Howe to Lord George Germain. The official figures counted as casualties three men and one officer, Captain William Glanville Evelyn of the Fourth Regiment of Foot. Twenty British soldiers and one officer, Lieutenant Colonel Musgrave, commander of the First Battalion of Light Infantry, were wounded.

Dawson does note that there was no mention of any Hessians counted in the British casualty report. The British government had paid the rulers of a few of the small independent sovereign states located in a disunited Germany to have contingents of their soldiers fight the American rebels. No matter which German state’s soldiers were hired, they were referred to alike as “Hessians.” Dawson notes that the Hessian casualty lists would not be included in the British account. They would be sent to the sovereign ruler of the German state whose soldiers were involved. Dawson notes that these archives have never been opened on this matter. Thus, no accurate accounting of Hessian losses at Pell’s Point can be made. Dawson does believe, however, that the Hessian losses were “very severe.”

In 1901, William Abbatt, a Westchester County resident who had

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previously published a work on the crises in the American Revolution, issued a pamphlet, *The Battle of Pell’s Point (or Pelham)*. In it, he tries to pinpoint the precise location of each encounter. As the title suggests, Abbatt obviously does not agree with Dawson that this military action was only a “skirmish.”

Abbatt, however, does follow Dawson in noting the lack of a record of Hessian casualties, again pointing to the supposedly closed archives that might contain such information. Despite the lack of precise numbers, Abbatt similarly asserts that the “enemy’s loss was mostly among the Hessians.”

Abbatt notes that enemy deserters coming behind American lines for several days afterward were questioned about their side’s losses. Their testimony added up to about 800 to 1,000 dead and wounded, more than the total number of the American forces participating in the battle. Moreover, these figures would have equaled more casualties than the British suffered at the battles of Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Germantown.

In trying to assess the importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point, Abbatt points to letters by Washington and General Charles Lee. Washington and Lee alike both praise the professional way Glover and his men conducted themselves and the good order they displayed in their withdrawals, holding them up as examples for their comrades in arms to follow.

In 1926, when the nation celebrated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Republic, the Westchester County Historical Society published *Westchester County During the American Revolution, 1776–1783* by Otto Hufeland, a professional engineer and respected local historian. Since Abbatt’s account appeared, a much more accurate contemporary map of the engagements at Throggs Neck, Pell’s Point, and White Plains than was available to Abbatt was discovered in the Library of Congress. Using that map, Hufeland was able to correct several errors in Abbatt’s attempt to pinpoint the exact places where events surrounding the Battle of Pell’s Point occurred. However, he agrees with both Dawson and Abbatt that the number of enemy casualties had to be more than what was found in the British official report.

It was not until 1960 that another historian took a fresh view of the battle, this time in the form of a biography of John Glover. George A. Billias’s *General John Glover and His Marblehead Mariners* vividly recounts the course of the military engagement and then tries to ascertain its significance.

Billias notes that General Sir Henry Clinton in his report thought he had faced a superior American force of over 14,000 men instead of only 750. This obviously attests to the psychological effect that Glover’s strategy and his men’s execution of it had on the British commander in the field that caused him to halt his advance.

In calculating that the total number of combatants on both sides was 4,750 men, Billias asserts a total larger than those engaged in the more well-known Revolutionary War battles of Trenton, Bennington, Stony Point, King’s

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22 Abbatt, *Battle of Pell’s Point*, 20–22 and accompanying notes.
The Importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point

Mountain, or Cowpens.

In attempting to determine the total enemy dead and wounded, Billias repeats the view of his predecessors that the British report does not include the Hessian casualties. He restates that such numbers would have been reported to each of the German sovereign princes whose troops were engaged. He asserts that, since the Hessians constituted three quarters of the invading force, their casualties must have been far higher than those of the British. Billias also reports the estimation of enemy deserters that they suffered heavy losses in the battle amounting to 800 to 1,000 men.

Billias bolsters this claim by noting that Glover’s troops fired more than twenty-five volleys at close range along a narrow roadway while protected by stone walls. Colonel Laommi Baldwin estimated that 200 of the enemy were slain, which is a higher number of opponents killed than at the battles of Long Island, Harlem Heights, White Plains, and Princeton.

The true significance of the engagement at Pell’s Point in Billias’s view was its strategic consequences. The daylong battle gave Washington enough time to escape General Sir William Howe’s encircling maneuver and to regroup at White Plains.24

Only three years after Billias’s biography of Glover appeared, Alfred M. Franko, the Mount Vernon City Historian, published a 67-page pamphlet, Pelham Manor: The Forgotten Battle of the Revolution. Using many more contemporary sources, both British and American, than any of his predecessors, Franko presents a very detailed and exhaustive account of the battle, the events that led to it, and what ensued.

Franko believes that the battle had such an adverse effect on the British commanders that they failed to pursue Glover and even waited for several days before resuming their march. This gave Washington the valuable time he needed to evacuate his stretched-out forces from northern Manhattan and The Bronx and to redeploy his men at White Plains.

In assessing the number of casualties, Franko maintains that three-quarters of the troops under Sir Henry Clinton’s command were Hessians. He also believes the high number of enemy killed and wounded estimated by British deserters and Americans in the vicinity could only have come from the Hessian ranks. In addition, Franko notes that there is a relatively large number of Hessians who were interred in the graveyard of St. Paul’s Church Eastchester (now in modern Mount Vernon) soon after the battle.25

The authors who have examined the Battle of Pell’s Point are in general agreement on many factors. They agree, first, that Colonel John Glover’s quick and decisive action to deploy his men to meet the oncoming enemy immediately despite the lack of direction from superior officers was decisive. His men conducted themselves in such a cool and professional manner that it gave General Sir Henry Clinton the impression that he faced a much larger force than he actually did. The total number of troops involved in the

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25 Franko, Pelham Manor, 39–53.
fighting, these historians further claim, was as large or larger than was the case in several more well-known Revolutionary War battles, and Pell’s Point, consequently, should be included among them. These historians also agree that the number of enemy casualties was far larger than the official British report. It is impossible, they unanimously assert, to know the exact number of killed and wounded in the encounter because most of the enemy combatants were Hessians. Besides, the relevant archives bearing this information have never been opened. Finally, these historians are in agreement that the Battle of Pell’s Point caused the British to delay their forward movement, which enabled Washington to escape entrapment and to continue the fight until the United States secured its independence.

How true are these claims? What is the importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point?

The standard by which a battle is determined to have been won or lost is which side possesses the field at the end. By this rubric, the Battle of Pell’s Point was clearly a British victory and an American defeat. Glover and his men were driven from the field and fled the scene under the cover of night.

It must be remembered that the encounter at Pell’s Point was only a small part of a much larger military campaign that had started in August 1776. Washington’s objective was to hold New York City and its hinterland and prevent the British from occupying them and dominating the lower Hudson valley. The British objective was to capture Washington and his entire army to end the rebellion quickly. The campaign went through several phases, including military action at Long Island, Kip’s Bay, Harlem Heights, Throgs Neck, and Pell’s Point. In the end, neither side attained its objective.

Moreover, Washington considered the one-day encounter at Pell’s Point a skirmish, not a battle. Even Henry B. Dawson, the first historian to examine the encounter in any great detail 110 years later, uses the word “skirmish” to describe it. The first person to take pains to try to elevate the event to the status of a “battle” was the local historian, William Abbatt, in 1901. All subsequent historians followed his lead.

In part, the case for calling the action at Pell’s Point a battle rests upon numbers. The accepted number of combatants comes from Glover’s account. He stated that he commanded 750 men and that 4,000 enemy troops were landed from their ships. This total of 4,750 troops is asserted to be as much or larger than several decisive or more well-known battles in the Revolutionary War.

Yet if we follow the course of the military action, it is impossible to support the idea that so many men were engaged in the fighting at Pell’s Point. First, a large portion of the 4,000 men Glover saw landing at Pell’s Point were placed under the command of General Earl Cornwallis to form the force

flanking the main army under General Sir Henry Clinton, and they did not join in the fighting until the end, when the action was substantially over. Clinton marched the rest of the men northward along a narrow dirt road flanked by stone walls in the midst of a wooded area. Unlike the usual pattern of European battles of the time, troops were not arrayed along a long line in an open plain or in cultivated farmland. At most, perhaps ten men, more or less, marched shoulder to shoulder in the front row with the rest of the soldiers following behind them in the same numbers row by row. Only those marching at or near the front of the column were exposed to American musket fire. The vast majority of the troops under British command marched with Cornwallis or were far behind the scene of action and could not have played a role in the

Enlarged view of the landing of the British fleet and route of the British army at Pell’s Point, from Charles Blaskowitz, A survey of Frog’s Neck and the rout[e] of the British Army to the 24th of October 1776, pen-and-ink and watercolor map manuscript, 1776. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
fighting.

An allied argument for the importance of Pell’s Point concerns the number of casualties. Glover reported that he had a total of nineteen men killed or wounded while Howe counted a full amount of twenty-five casualties on his side. Beginning with Dawson, historians have pointed to the complete absence of any casualty returns for the Hessians who took part in the action. The figures, they assert, are hidden in the closed archives in Germany.

To fill the gap, these historians cite much higher estimates circulating at the time. The one that seems the most credible is provided by Laommi Baldwin, the colonel of the third regiment posted by Glover along the road used by the British. His account is the only one besides Glover’s written by an American participant. He claims, “In the fight we lost six men and about 20 more wounded in the whole 3 regiments.—The enemy must have lost at least 200 dead in the field, I judge from what I saw myself and good information from which it cannot be any other way.”

How much can we rely upon Baldwin’s estimate? His account of American casualties differs from Glover’s in totaling twenty-six to Glover’s nineteen. Moreover, his number of enemy killed and wounded comes to 200, far above Howe’s figure of twenty-five. As with other high casualty estimates, historians would argue that Baldwin’s large numbers reflect the losses incurred by the Hessians who were engaged in the fighting.

Yet Baldwin admits that his numbers do not come completely through personal observation. Additionally, his view of the action was limited. On the morning of October 18, 1776, he was ill, suffering from the flux. His regiment left with Glover before him and he caught up with it just about the time it was posted to its position on the road. That position was located downhill from William Shepard’s regiment on top of the hill. He could not have seen any of the action involving Joseph Reed’s regiment or any of the enemy casualties along the road in front of Shepard’s men. When the enemy troops marched on the road toward him, General Earl Cornwallis’s flanking troops arrived and he had to quickly retreat. He did not have time to survey the entire field and count the enemy dead and severely wounded himself. Thus, Baldwin’s numbers have to be taken with a grain of salt.

Similarly, we have to take estimates of others not present at the battle with more than a dose of skepticism. The British deserters who pegged their side’s losses at Pell’s Point at 800–1,000 men were interrogated at Fort Washington in northern Manhattan and at Fort Lee in New Jersey. It is not clear that they were even at the scene of the action. They could have been repeating guesses of others. Even if they were present, they were not officers and not in a position to have made an accurate account of casualties.

The weapons used by each side have to be taken into consideration as well. Both sides were armed with single-shot, muzzle-loading, smooth-bore muskets. The inside of the barrel of such muskets did not have the spiral grooves found in more modern rifles, which spin the ball as it is fired and thus

28 Quoted in Franko, Pelham Manor, 40.
increase accuracy and range. Once the more primitive musket was fired, gunpowder had to be poured down the muzzle and a musket ball had to be located, dropped into the muzzle of the barrel, and rammed down with a metal rod before it was ready to fire again. This took precious time that could not be used in firing at the enemy. Moreover, Glover’s account of the battle makes it clear that the two sides began each phase of their encounter by as much as fifty feet apart and neared to as close as thirty feet from each other. This means that all of the action occurred in a range thirty to fifty per cent the length of a modern American football field. This is certainly not point-blank range, and it provides enough distance to make the musket fire on both sides highly inaccurate, producing a relatively low number of casualties.

Yet most historians since Dawson claim that the number of casualties must have been larger than those stated in the official accounts because there are no casualty returns of the Hessian dead and wounded. This brings up the question of whether any Hessian troops actually took part in the Battle of Pell’s Point.

If we compare the casualty accounts of both Colonel John Glover and General Sir William Howe, both mention the incident at a lull in the fighting when a soldier in William Shepard’s regiment jumped over the wall to take the hat and canteen from a fallen officer. Thus, Howe’s version of events is validated by Glover’s. Howe also names the regiment in which that officer served, as well as the regiment of another officer who had fallen in the same area. They were Captain William Glanville Evelyn of the Fourth Regiment of Foot and Lieutenant Colonel Musgrave, commander of the First Battalion of Light Infantry. Both units were part of the British army. Another account found in a Revolutionary War diary kept by British Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Kemble, then serving as Adjutant General of the British Army, 60th Foot, adds that Lieutenant Rutherford of the 22nd was wounded, but not dangerously.29 Here we have three British units specified as taking part in the action along the narrow rural road flanked by stone walls, each suffering at least one casualty. Obviously, these three British units were placed in the vanguard of Sir Henry Clinton’s advancing troops. Thus, they were the ones who were exposed to the rounds of musket fire by the Americans. Hemmed in by stone walls and hampered by the wooded terrain beyond them, the only way the small number of men arrayed in cramped narrow rows could escape was by fleeing back to their own advancing column, which they did several times.

Where were the Hessians? In 1863, the German historian Max von Elking wrote The German Allied Troops in the North American War for Independence. He names three Hessian units that landed at Pell’s Point and engaged the Americans. Later, he notes, another Hessian brigade was brought up and the Americans retreated.30 How the Hessians were engaged in the fighting is not detailed but it appears they were not in the vanguard along the narrow road with the British troops. Most likely they would have advanced to

the scene of action when Glover and his men retreated across the Hutchinson River and exchanged canon fire with the enemy troops. This phase of the battle produced little or no damage to either side. Moreover, von Elking does not mention any Hessian casualties in this battle. This is affirmed by Stephen Kemble’s diary. Kemble notes the presence of Hessian troops in all military encounters where they were deployed, both before and after Pell’s Point. He notes the British losses that day but has nothing to say about Hessians taking part in in the battle or any of their killed or wounded.

Moreover, the British always seemed to be in the vanguard of advancing troops in the action on the mainland. When the sentry on Montressor’s Island (Randall’s Island) asked an American soldier on the shore of the Bronx Kill defending Morrisania for a piece of chewing tobacco, it is obvious they spoke the same language, that is, English. After the enemy landing on Throggs Neck, the troops marching on the causeway toward Westchester Creek were British, not Hessians. At Pell’s Point, British troops marched along the walled rural road ahead of the rest of the column.

Taking into account the documentary evidence and the terrain where the Battle of Pell’s Point was fought, we must conclude the Hessians had little or no part in the action, except toward its end, and that they suffered absolutely no casualties. Thus, the inflated estimates of Hessian losses must be considered a myth. It may have arisen from the several rounds of musket fire that could be heard throughout the day. Perhaps, it came from the cannon fire in the afternoon that resounded far and wide over the otherwise quiet countryside. These unusually long sounds of battle, especially the cannon fire, likely convinced people far away that the fighting produced hundreds, or even thousands, of casualties. The conjecture that the Battle of Pell’s Point is important—because the high number of Hessian losses raises it to the level of other major Revolutionary War battles—holds no water.

Yet how can the presence of Hessians buried at St. Paul’s Churchyard in Mount Vernon be explained? On 23 October, only one week after the engagement at Pell’s Point, Colonel John Glover and men, mostly from his own regiment, were out on patrol when they encountered a party of Hessians. In the skirmish that followed, twelve enemy troops, including one officer, were killed and three were taken prisoner. Since the churchyard was relatively near the site of this engagement, it would be natural to inter the dead Hessians there. Similar skirmishes in the vicinity during that week likely added to their number. Thus, the Hessians buried at St. Paul’s did not come from the Battle of Pell’s Point but from small firefights in the area that occurred immediately afterward.

Therefore, if the number of combatants and the casualty count cannot provide Pell’s Point with importance, what can? It has to be the effect that the battle produced.

The historians examining the engagement at Pell’s Point note that the

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31 Franko, *Pelham Manor*, 51.
British commanders failed to pursue Glover once his troops abandoned the field after sundown. They did not even press forward the next day to engage Washington’s strung-out forces as they were abandoning their positions in northern Manhattan and the western Bronx on their way to White Plains. If only Howe, Clinton, and Cornwallis had taken the initiative and pressed ahead, they could have defeated the scattered American troops easily and thereby ended the Revolution. That they chose not to do so, previous historians assert, was the consequence of the action of the Continental Army at Pell’s Point. General Sir Henry Clinton was convinced that he faced a force he estimated at 14,000 men, a number far larger than his own army. Therefore, he halted for several days, thus allowing Washington to escape from the trap in which Howe planned to ensnare him.

While Clinton’s overestimate of the number of Americans he faced may have played a part in the decision to halt, there were other, and far more pressing, reasons for the British holding in place just after the battle. The objective of this stage in the pursuit of Washington was to cut the American supply line from Connecticut. Several times the American commander wrote to Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull impressing upon him how vital it was for the Continental Army that continued provisions and other supplies be sent from his state as quickly as possible. If the British could cut that supply line, it would make any subsequent military encounter with Washington’s army much easier to win.

A further consideration was the disposition of small American forces, both Continental and local militia, in Westchester County north of today’s Pelham Bay Park. If the British army were to move westward immediately to engage the strung-out American troops moving to White Plains, its north flank and rear would be exposed to attack. To prevent that from happening, it was necessary to halt for a while and send out military units to flush out those men and eliminate them as a potential menace to the British objective of entrapping Washington.

Another consideration involved augmenting the British forces in the field with additional Hessian troops. A total of 3,910 Hessians had arrived in New York on 18 October, the same day the Battle of Pell’s Point was fought. After some rest, they embarked on ships that took them to New Rochelle, where they landed on 23 October. The British spent the days before their arrival clearing the area of enemy forces and the days afterward coordinating the Hessians’ deployment. This also prevented the British from attacking Washington’s forces immediately after Pell’s Point.

Therefore, it cannot be contended that the Battle of Pell’s Point was the only, or even the major, reason why the British halted their advance and why they did not capture Washington’s army. We are still left with the

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question: What was the importance of Pell’s Point?

Considering the fact that the previous engagement at Westchester Creek halted the British army’s advance and prevented it from getting behind Washington’s lines, does this mean that the encounter there on October 12, 1776, was more important than what happened at Pell’s Point? After all, the British never dislodged the American forces from their position at Westchester Creek. Washington’s army retained its hold of northern Manhattan and the rest of the mainland. It was the British who quit the field of battle to redeploy elsewhere. By the usual standard, the action at Westchester Creek could be considered an American victory and a British defeat, even though the American position there was abandoned soon after the British departure.

Yet it was not American arms that caused the British to leave the field. The causeway near the center of the town of Westchester was defended by Colonel Edward Hand and his Delaware Continentals who were armed with the more accurate and longer-range rifles. It is true that their fire caused British casualties but it was the swampy terrain, which hampered the ability of the enemy to maneuver, that was decisive. The picking up of the boards of the bridge over Westchester Creek created a barrier that prevented further British advance. The Americans could easily fire at the enemy while remaining behind the safety of a mill and piles of cordwood. The only way the British could move was back to Throggs Neck, where they could eventually redeploy at Pell’s Point.34

The British landing at Pell’s Point was unopposed, the road inland was solid and dry, and no natural or manmade barrier existed across the roadway—all of this made it easier for the royal army to march and to bring up its cannons and supplies. Another force of British and Hessians was able to march along solid terrain flanking the main army. Strategically, they were nearer its two immediate objectives of cutting off the American supply line from Connecticut and of engaging Washington’s forces. The redeployment of the Continental Army to White Plains on 18 October was not really anticipated but the fact those troops were not completely settled and behind defenses was a positive factor for the British. The narrowness of the road on which Sir Henry Clinton’s men marched and the flanking stone walls proved to be a detriment, but at first no major opposition was expected. Moreover, John Glover did not become aware of the British landing until it was well under way, thus giving the British time to land and arrange their advance.

After examining all the relevant factors and dismissing as myth most of what previous historians have asserted to be the importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point, we are left with only two factors that form the real significance of the engagement.

The first rests on the action taken by Colonel John Glover. Faced with an overwhelmingly superior force of what was considered the best army in

34 Christopher L. Ward, The Delaware Continentals 1776–1783 (Wilmington, DE: The Historical Society of Delaware, 1941), 76–78.
the world, Glover did not abandon his position and flee, nor did he falter or hesitate. Having no experience with higher command and doubting his own ability to handle the situation, his first thought was to try to obtain his immediate superior, General Charles Lee, to direct the American forces. Surveying the rapidly unfolding situation, however, Glover acted on his own initiative to advance and meet the enemy forces. Glover’s quick strategic deployment of his small number of troops and his instructions to them were so brilliant that he convinced General Sir Henry Clinton that the number of Americans faced was far larger than the total he commanded.

The second factor constituting the battle’s importance was the performance of Glover’s troops. Unlike other American soldiers who fled in panic before advancing British regiments, Glover’s men held their position. In fact, it was the British who fled when utterly surprised by the first volley of musket fire aimed at them from Colonel Joseph Read’s men popping up from behind the stone wall on the east side of the road. It took the British an hour and a half to regroup and be reinforced before they slowly and carefully ventured forward. When Colonel William Shepard’s men rose up from behind the wall on the west side of the road, the British fled again. When it came time for each American regiment to withdraw, they did so in good order and in a professional manner. In the final phase of the battle, the American troops coolly held their ground in the midst of a British cannonade and fired back.

All of this came to the notice of both General Charles Lee and General George Washington. On 19 October, the day after the battle, Lee wrote in his orders to the men he commanded, “General Lee returns his warmest thanks to Col. Glover and the brigade under his command, not only for their gallant behavior yesterday but for their prudent, cool, and soldierlike conduct in all respects.” Washington, after attending to all the details involved with the redeployment of his army, wrote in his General Order of 21 October that Glover and his men deserve his thanks for their “merit and good behavior” in the battle and added that he hopes “that every other part of the Army will do their duty with equal duty and zeal whenever called upon; and that neither danger, difficulties, or hardships will discourage Soldiers engaged in the Cause of Liberty and contending for all that Freemen hold dear and valuable.”

Here we find the real importance of the Battle of Pell’s Point. The action and behavior of Glover and his men are extolled as the example of how everyone in Washington’s army should act. The American soldier should be gallant, prudent, cool, soldier-like, act with zeal, and not be discouraged by danger, difficulties, or hardships. Certainly, if Glover and his men acted in this manner in facing the might of Great Britain in the form of its vaunted military, then all American soldiers fighting for Liberty could do so too. What happened at Pell’s Point was used to promote American military morale. The British were not invulnerable. All Americans could act the way Glover and his men did, and that would ensure the triumph of the American cause.

35 Quoted in Franko, Pelham Manor, 50.
36 Washington, “General Orders.”
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284 Alexander Avenue, exterior shot showing sign for office of Dr. Ernst Wilkins. Courtesy of Sandra Eaton.
284 ALEXANDER AVENUE: 

GEMÜTLICHKEIT

Sandra Eaton

Gemütlichkeit is an untranslatable German word that implies emotional warmth, comfort, good cheer, camaraderie; festivity with food, drink, and friends; kindliness, and community. This is the word that comes to my mind when I remember my great grandparents’ home, 284 Alexander Avenue, in what is now the Mott Haven Historic District in the South Bronx.

My great grandparents, Dr. Ernst and Hermine Wilkens, and my great aunt, Margaret Wilkens, owned this brick townhouse on Alexander Avenue from 1901 to the early 1970s. This area saw tremendous change during that time. I best remember it from the 1950s and ’60s, when outside the house much was changing but inside time had stopped—except for a very few additions, such as a portable television set with a large shawl on top.

My great grandfather was a scientist first and foremost, which led to his professional passions—pharmaceutical science and medicine—and his great personal love—photography.

His daughter Margaret, my great aunt, told me that he loved to figure out how things worked and would take things apart to learn about them. He loved technical progress and owned an early automobile, a Velie, before World War I. Over his entire life he photographed his house, his family, his trips home to Germany, and many social events in his house with friends and relatives, including the annual Christmas celebration.

Ernst was born in Watenstadt in the Duchy of Braunschweig in June 1865. His father Heinrich was a Lutheran minister and his mother Agnes cared for her ten children. He studied the sciences and history at the Carolo-Wilhelmina Technical College of Braunschweig, graduating in 1881. In August 1881 he emigrated to New York, which required an Emigration Certificate from the Braunschweig government. It appears from his photographs taken in Germany that the family was comfortably

Dr. Ernst Wilkins with his Velie. Courtesy of Sandra Eaton.
middle class. However, Ernst and three of his brothers—Bernard, Emil, and Wilhelm—followed four of his uncles to America, where I assume their opportunities were many more than in Braunschweig.

It is likely that he had help getting settled in New York by his two uncles, who had already emigrated and were well established in the horsehair industry in downtown Manhattan, and his friends from Braunschweig. My mother told me that people from the area kept up their acquaintance when they settled in New York. Indeed, Ernst met Hermine because their families knew each other in Braunschweig.

Ernst graduated from the New York College of Pharmacy, among the top ten in his class, after four days of grueling exams, which he described in a letter to his mother. He then worked for the Louis Eickwort Pharmacy at 712 East Tremont Avenue in The Bronx.

Subsequently, in the 1890s he owned his own pharmacy, or apotheker, at 154 Vernon Avenue in Long Island City. While owning that pharmacy and working days with one assistant, including one six-month period with his brother Emil, Ernst attended Medical School at the University of the City of New York at night. He received his medical degree on April 4, 1893. Ernst and Hermine Louisa Kessel were married on May 2, 1893. They lived in a room behind the pharmacy, while Ernst sought a long-term home for his family and his medical practice. The Wilkens family, including baby Alfred, born in 1894, moved to The Bronx, where they rented 588 East 141st Street, three blocks east of the present Mott Haven Historic District.

In March 1901 Ernst purchased 284 Alexander Avenue for $6,350 from the Estate of Maria Smith Keyser. The original home, a brick townhouse of four floors including the basement, was built around 1863, and an extension to the rear of the first floor, which later held Dr. Wilkens’s office, was added in 1886.
The home was divided into formal, public spaces and informal private areas. The long parlor was at the front of the house, entered from the hallway. It featured two large mirrors: one over the fireplace and a tall one between the two tall street-side windows. Here festive family and community get-togethers were held. Behind the parlor was the sitting room, a more private space where letters might be written, opera listened to on the radio in later years, or children play. Opening off the sitting room was Dr. Wilkens’s medical office. I assume and may have heard that the sitting room was used as a waiting room.

The house had a high stoop at the top of five steps before the front door. In hot weather chairs were brought out after the sun went behind the buildings in the west, ice chunks might be chewed on, and friends greeted as they passed. There was also a three-by-five-inch space—we called it an “area”—a few steps below street level next to the front steps with a door into the basement hallway. This allowed for deliveries, storage of trash cans, and so on.

When the get-togethers involved a meal, the group moved to the dining room downstairs, which featured a wall of built-in cabinets with glass doors, a large heavy dining table, as well as a sideboard and china closet stuffed with cut-glass bowls, china, hand-painted dessert plates, sets of wine glasses, and serving pieces. There was a butler’s sink in a small space between the dining room and the kitchen. The kitchen was a family space where we as children ate meals when we visited. In the ’50s and ’60s there was a gas stove for cooking as well as an old wood stove, probably original, in which crackers and cookies were stored. The kitchen was very dark, as one of the windows

Photo left: Left-to-right: Barbara Graefenecker Eaton, her grandmother Hermine Kessel Wilkens, Sandy, and Bonnie Eaton in the “area” at 284 Alexander Avenue, c. 1951. Courtesy of Sandra Eaton.

Photo above: Family party in living room, showing Wilhelm, Bernhardt, Emma, Marie (Margaret), and Dr. Ernst Wilkens, siblings, c. 1902. Courtesy of Sandra Eaton.
opened into the Boiler Room at the rear of the house and the other into a yard shadowed by buildings.

My mother often spoke of how fun-loving her grandmother Hermine was. Both Hermine and Ernst doted on their grandchildren, according to my mother Barbara Graefenecker Eaton, the oldest grandchild. My mother as a child often spent long periods at 284 Alexander Avenue in the summers, when her Aunt Margaret would travel and Grandmother Hermine wanted company. Barbara wrote of playing cards with Hermine “before they made the beds! Going to the movies in the afternoon—often! [her exclamations] On a nice day we would take a trolley ride, maybe to the end of the line—the Battery—and watch the Staten Island Ferry go back and forth... We rode it once or twice... just for the ocean voyage." This was in the 1920s. She also told of the time Hermine was playing the piano and got so caught up in the music she was unaware that a fire was being fought just down the street. The entire family loved opera, and Margaret as an adult regularly attended the Metropolitan Opera. WQXR’s Saturday opera broadcast was a must listen at 284.

Ernst passed away in 1932 and life became quieter at 284 until we great grandchildren arrived. When my family visited my great grandmother and great aunt in the ’50s, we were fascinated by the house, especially the bathrooms. The toilets on the second floor and in the utility area behind the kitchen were tall thrones with a pull-chain flush, possibly original to the house. The second-floor bathroom was elegant with a marble sink and floor and a giant bathtub. It could be entered from the master bedroom at the rear or the hallway. It was often quite cold in there, though the house certainly had central heat.

Also on the second floor, aside from the three family bedrooms, was a little built-in sleeping cubby in a short passage between the middle bedroom and the front bedroom. We marveled at this cozy spot and wondered who
slept there, though we never asked. Now I wonder if a maid slept there, as the U.S. census shows a maid of Irish parentage living at 284 Alexander Avenue in 1910 and also at 588 East 141st Street with the Wilkens family in 1900. It is also possible that the maid lived on the top floor, although my great-great grandmother Christiana Bremer Kessel Kieselbach and her second husband Alfred lived there from the time the Wilkens moved in.

The home’s small back yard, in my mother’s memory, was not much used. The family owned a bungalow, as it was called, on Pelham Bay and

Mirror above fireplace at 284 Alexander Avenue decorated for return of Alfred Wilkins from World War I. Courtesy of Sandra Eaton.
gathered there many weekends with the grandchildren in the 1920s.

One other joy of our visits was the El Station at 138th Street and Third Avenue. It was a behemoth of an old wooden station with long flights of stairs to reach the platforms. We rode the El into Manhattan with my mother and aunt as young children in the late '40s and early '50s, wearing white gloves and craning our necks to peer out the windows. Later my Great Aunt Margaret enjoyed taking my sister and me to foreign restaurants in Manhattan—Korean, Swedish, German (in Yorkville, a very German neighborhood as it then was). She took us on the Staten Island Ferry too, just as her mother had taken my mother. She introduced us to Alexander’s Clothing Store a short walk up Third Avenue, and we often bought school clothes there as teens.

Eleanor and Margaret both graduated from Barnard College in Manhattan, and became school teachers. Alfred Wilkens served in Europe during World War I. My mother spoke of how important it was to the Wilkens family and other Germans in the neighborhood to show their loyalty to the U.S. In 1918 the Christmas tree was decorated with U.S. flags and there may have been one in the front window. Neither did Ernst speak German in the home.

Eleanor and her family met her future husband, Michael Graefenecker, in the neighborhood. He and his family lived at 247 Willis Avenue on the block directly behind 284 Alexander Avenue in what may have been the family bakery. Michael and Alfred Wilkens served near each other in France during World War I. Alfred was gassed in France and spoken of in the family as “never the same afterwards.” He was a quiet, gentle man who lived at 284 Alexander Avenue for a few years with his two children after his first wife died from a problem after goiter surgery. He later remarried and moved to New Jersey. Eleanor and Michael married in 1922. He became an engineer at AT&T, and the family moved to Tuckahoe.

Margaret continued to live in the home even after both parents had died. She taught math at Evander Childs High School in The Bronx. She was a passionate photographer as was her father, and she traveled often. She went to see her relatives in Germany at least twice that we know of, including in 1938. She said the atmosphere was so fraught with fear there in 1938 that she could only talk to her aunts if they walked in the countryside. She was an intrepid woman but after she was mugged twice on Alexander Avenue in the early 1970s, she sold the house and rented an apartment on Briggs Avenue, near the Grand Concourse.
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## Roots of the Republic Series

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<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Presidents of the United States (Lloyd Ultan)</td>
<td>$20.00</td>
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<td>Absorbing character outlines of the first 41 men who have held office; essays on the origins of the Presidency and the electoral college.</td>
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<td>(George Lankevich)</td>
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VISIT THE BRONX

The Bronx County Historical Society’s Museum of Bronx History, open to the public since 1968, is in the historic landmark Valentine-Varian House. The museum’s long-term and changing exhibitions are often drawn from The Society’s extensive collections and focus on the history and heritage of The Bronx and its people. The Museum of Bronx History provides a venue for cultural and educational programming for public and school audiences, as well as for an extensive Museum Store.

Isaac Valentine, a prosperous blacksmith and farmer from Yonkers, built this vestige of Colonial New York about 1758 along the post road that was once the only land route between New York City and Boston. The house survived the Revolutionary War, occupied throughout the conflict by both British and American forces. But the war caused financial ruin for Valentine, who was forced to sell his home and the 260-acre property. Isaac Varian, a successful butcher and farmer, bought the holding in 1792. The Varian Family kept the house for three generations; one of Isaac’s grandsons (also named Isaac) served as New York City’s 63rd Mayor (1839–1841). With increasing urbanization, William F. Beller acquired the fieldstone farmhouse in a 1905 auction, and his son, William C. Beller, donated it to The Society in 1965, when it was moved to its present location by Williamsbridge Oval Park. It is operated as a museum by The Bronx County Historical Society and is a member of the Historic House Trust of New York City.

DIRECTIONS:

Subway: Take the D train to Bainbridge Avenue & East 205th Street in The Bronx. Walk north on Bainbridge Avenue.

Take the Lexington Avenue-Woodlawn 4 train to Mosholu Parkway in The Bronx. Walk north, then east on 208th Street to Bainbridge Avenue. The Museum of Bronx History is located across the avenue, on the right.

Bus: Use Bronx bus lines #10, #16, #28, #34, #38 and MTA express bus BxM #4 from Manhattan.
Strengthening Communities

WE PROUDLY SUPPORT THE
The Bronx County Historical Society
The Bronx:
An Academic Powerhouse

Patrick J. T. Curran

For those of us who were raised in The Bronx in the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s, we had the opportunity to receive the best education possible. The Bronx had fine elementary and secondary schools as well as numerous institutions of higher learning, including New York University (until 1973), Fordham University, Manhattan College, and the Maritime College, which led to the name “Borough of Universities.” Be they public or private, these institutions were staffed with dedicated religious or lay teachers and professors who not only knew how to teach but cared deeply for their students. I am proud to say that I was one of those students and lived a rich and rewarding life thanks to that education.

My experience began with Sister Ambrose Marie in Holy Spirit School’s first grade. That amazing nun had all of her forty students reading, writing, and knowing numbers as well as religion by June. At that time, another name for elementary schools was “grammar schools.” When we graduated, we knew the parts of speech, how to diagram sentences, rules for reflexive verbs, and more, and in my professional writings, including my doctoral dissertation, my educators never found a mistake in grammar—but my spelling was another thing. In grade eight, we had to take the New York State Elementary Regents Examinations. These exams, each three hours long, were given in English, History, Geography, and Arithmetic. If we passed them, in addition to our school diploma, we received a New York State Diploma.

At Cardinal Hayes High School, I had priests and bothers of various religious orders as teachers. It was there that Father Nugent inspired my love of History and Government and Brother Conrad, C.F.X., taught me the logic of the law. Again, we had Regents Exams and upon graduation we received two diplomas.

Being a child of immigrants, I did not have funds available to me to attend university full time. Fordham had an evening program at its downtown Manhattan location with classes on the Bronx campus on Saturday mornings. Thus, I was able to work full-time and pursue a university degree simultaneously. While taking history courses, I found out that by also taking some education courses I would be qualified for a license as a social studies teacher upon graduation. In my last term at Fordham, I quit my job with the Aetna Casualty Insurance Company and was assigned as a student teacher at Walton High School, back in The Bronx. The public high schools in New York
City were usually co-educational but each borough had one school for boys and one for girls. Walton was the all-girls high school for The Bronx.

The principal of Walton was Marion Heffernan and she ran a “right ship.” She wanted the best teachers who not only knew their subject but could impart that knowledge to the students. The result was a very orderly school with high academic achievements. The students referred to Walton as “St. Mary’s on the reservoir.” As I was finishing up my assignment as a student teacher, one of the teachers told me that her husband, a vice principal in a junior high school, was looking for a history teacher for the fall term. That led to my wonderful teaching career at Macomb’s Junior High School.

Macomb’s, also known as J.H.S. 82, was located in the West Bronx, close to the corner of Tremont and University Avenues. The families in the catchment area of the school were predominantly second- or third-generation Jewish or Irish. While the children of these neighborhoods played together, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, there was segregation when they went to school. The majority of the Irish students were Catholic and attended either Holy Spirit or Sacred Heart, while the Jewish students attended P.S. 26 and then P.S. 92. On the Jewish High Holidays, out of a class of thirty, a teacher might have only five in attendance. Regardless of which school their children attended, most of the parents were involved in their children’s education and were supporters of the school. On “open school nights” a teacher could count on seeing the vast majority of students’ parents.

When I joined the faculty in 1955, Macomb’s was preparing to celebrate its 30th Anniversary. By that time, it was rated as one of the top academic schools in The Bronx, a rating which it continued to hold well into the ’70s. Even the title of the school’s yearbook, The Scholarship, tells you the aim and belief of the administration. For many years, the principal was Harry Flaum, ably assisted by the vice principals Joe Horn, Hanna Eager, Grace Canary, and George Dunbar. Mr. Flaum visited each classroom every Monday morning to express his hope that the teacher and students had had a good weekend. On Wednesdays he made quick visits to each class, just to check that all was going well. On Fridays he again paid a short visit to each class to wish all a happy weekend. Seldom would you see Harry Flaum sitting in his office during the school day. He was out walking the halls, chatting with teachers as they stood by their classroom doors, and insuring orderly change of classes between periods. He was also on the front steps welcoming the faculty and students upon arrival and seeing them off at the end of the school day. While it was the job of the vice principals to do the formal visits and evaluations of the teachers, they knew from his visits which teachers needed help within their classrooms. Only strong academic people with good classroom control received tenure at Macomb’s.

Reading through issues of The Scholarship, one sees that there were usually fourteen or fifteen homerooms of thirty students in each grade. In the seventh and ninth grades, two homerooms were “SP homerooms”—that is, classes of boys and girls that covered the three years of junior high school in
two years. With my 7SP class, I was expected to cover the ten-month English and Social Studies course of study in less than six months and do half of the Eighth Grade by the end of June. These students could keep up with the pace and receive honor grades while doing so.

Another column in *The Scholarship* was called "Newsettes," and it included honors received by alumni as well as current classmates. *The Scholarship* regularly received a First Place Certificate from the Columbia University Scholastic Press Association as well as accolades from the National Scholastic Press Association.

When one reads through the prose and poetry written by these early teens, you realize that these students were truly gifted and that they received plenty of encouragement to develop these gifts.

The second half of each issue contains a class picture of every homeroom. The boys and girls alike wore white shirts but the boys also donned ties. The boys in the ninth-grade pictures wore jackets as did all of the male faculty members.

On the back pages of *The Scholarship* are printed the school’s Honor Roll. I doubt there are many schools in the country that would have over ninety per cent of their students on it, as was the case at Macomb’s.

In the spring of my third year at J.H.S. 82, I notified Mr. Flaum that since I would be getting married the following December and moving to Long Island, I would be resigning in June. That fall I began teaching History in the Islip Public Schools and later became an adjunct professor of Government at Suffolk County Community College, retiring in 1987.

During my years, I had many opportunities to visit different school on Long Island but never came across one that could match the academic standards of Macomb’s.

Just before Eileen and I moved to New Mexico, I met with three of my former students from Macomb’s for lunch in Manhattan. All were now grandparents, and we chatted about our lives and families. After lunch, we took the subway up to The Bronx to see the old neighborhood. There, next to the building that had been the Park Plaza Theatre, the school building was still standing but the name and number were gone. It was a quiet trip back to Midtown.
The Bronx Afghan

50” x 65” 100% Washable cotton.

Depicts attractive scenes of beloved Bronx institutions.
Valentine/Varian House Museum of Bronx History, Edgar Allan Poe Cottage,
The Bronx Zoo, Van Cortlandt House, Wave Hill,
Lehman Center for the Performing Arts, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Orchard Beach,
Hall of Fame for Great Americans, Bartow-Pell Mansion,
New York Botanical Garden and old Yankee Stadium.

$50  www.bronxhistoricalsociety.org  $50
We started out in the East Bronx, moving there in 1911 when I was ten years old. Our first apartment was at 960 Kelly Street, between Westchester Avenue and 193rd Street. It was part of a new development, a string of flats as they called them in those days. Milton was four, my brothers Frank and Jack were in between, and my sister Rose was born the next year. Living in The Bronx in those days was like living in the country. The air was clean. It was beautiful up here.

Out at Clason Point, there was an amusement park. Many a time I took the trolley car out there from Westchester Avenue and Southern Boulevard; I grew up there practically. There were no houses along that trolley line, only farms. Frank and Jack and I, we’d go out there and pick tomatoes and cucumbers; I don’t remember if we were stealing or not.

The New York, New Haven, and Hartford Line went to Hunt’s Point. Down near the tracks, a pipe came out of the ground with spring water. Just came out, nobody knew from where. It was great water, and people lined up to get it. Kids in the neighborhood would fill five-gallon bottles and delivery them to people for two cents. Pulling a red card with two-three bottles. That’s the way kids made a few pennies.

Life was very different then. If a man was making $17 or $20 a week, he was a big shot. But it was a carefree type of life. My father would come home every night from work, and all the kids would run up and surround him. “What did you bring home for us?” we’d yell, and we’d go to his pocket. You see, at every subway station they had vending machines with penny candy, and he’d always bring some home for us. Friday night was a big deal in the summer time. He’d bring home a big bottle of cream soda; it costs a dime. We’d all sit in front of the house and have a drink—a big celebration for us.

In the neighborhood the kids hung around the candy store, like they do today. Not everybody had a telephone in those days. To get a call, you gave out the store’s number. If someone called, they’d shout up to you and you came running down.

We had a lot of interesting people in the neighborhood. About two doors from where we lived on Kelly Street, number 966, was one of the world’s greatest writers: Sholem Aleichem. He was known as the Jewish Mark Twain. He died in 1916. The entire block was jampacked with people the day of his

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This reminiscence was written by Phil Berle in 1992, when he was 91. This is the first time it is being published. Phil Berle died on January 2, 1999, in Tampa, Florida, just weeks before his 98th birthday. His brother, Milton, died in 2002.
funeral.

Another well-known person in the neighborhood was Leach Cross, the boxer. He used to train by running through the neighborhood every morning. I remember him wearing a white turtleneck sweater, running. He also had another profession; he was a dentist. People used to say he would knock teeth out in the ring and then have them fixed at his office. There were probably many other interesting people I don’t even remember, and they became big people. It was a great place to live, The Bronx.

Our movie theater was on Simpson Street, near Westchester Avenue. They never advertised names of pictures or starts. When they did advertise, it was something like: “We’re showing 7,000 feet of film today.” Then Loew’s opened the Southern Boulevard Theater, where you could see vaudeville acts and motion pictures for fifteen cents. Some grocery stores gave out rebate tickets that could get you in for a dime. And there was a theater on Dawson Street—I think it was called The Victor, something like that. I used to take my brother Frank by the hand and take him to the show. Five cents to get in, and they gave you a rebate ticket for a piece of candy.

There was a place on Westchester Avenue between Kelly Street and Tiffany Street that had an “open air” theater in the summer, on the roof right over the closed theater. That was 1912, and there was no air-conditioning yet. About that time, that same theater experimented with “talking pictures.” They made a recording of the dialogue in the picture and played it backstage, but they could never get it in sync.

On Southern Boulevard there was the Cecil Spooner Theater, which showed plays. They changed plays every other week. It was a very popular place. There was also a place called Hunt’s Point Palace, like a dance hall. Across the street from it, at the corner, was a baseball park. Semi-pro baseball was played there. We kids played baseball, too. When I was around thirteen, we had a team called the Bison Juniors. We played at a place we called the Castoria Lot. On a building near the lot there was an advertisement for Castoria medicine, which “worked while you slept.”

One day our catcher was sick and he didn’t show up. I volunteered to catch, without a mask. I got hit in the nose with the backswing of a bat and wound up at Morrisania Hospital with a broken nose. That was the end of my catching career.

When that happened, we were living at 957 Tiffany Street, a block away from our first apartment on Kelly Street. It was just after we moved there that my brother Milton started his career. He wasn’t much past four, a very precocious kid.

He took some of my father’s pants and tried to make himself up as Charlie Chaplin, who was the rage at the time. They had Charlie Chaplin contests all over the country. Milton cut some hair out of an old muff of mother’s to make a mustache. He went out on the street doing Charlie Chaplin, and after a while there was a crowd following him. A man knocked at the door and said he was a theater owner from Mount Vernon, that he was having a
Chaplin contest, and would it be possible to bring Milton up there: he looks so great.

Being the oldest, I went with Milton and my mother by trolley car to Mount Vernon. Milton won the contest and was awarded a twenty-five-cent silver cup. And it cost us fifty or sixty cents to get there and back. Anyway, there was somebody in the audience who was making a picture and he hired Milton for it. His first job was to sit under a tree and eat a box of candy. He wound up in a Charlie Chaplin picture, working with Chaplin and Marie Dressler, and from that point on it was in the blood.

My career in the entertainment business started in The Bronx too. During one summer vacation from school, I became a prop boy—there were no unions yet—for a motion picture company on Wilder Avenue. The first picture I worked on was called Lena Rivers, which was re-made many years later, I think with Greta Garbo. They had a scene I’ll never forget. It was supposed to be a drawing room, with the backdrop of a garden behind it. During the shooting, one of the carpenters walked right across the stage, between the backdrop and the front, and they left it in the picture.

After that, I worked for Biograph Studios in The Bronx. I worked on most of the pictures Marion Davies made, like When Knighthood Was in Flower, Little Old New York, and Yolanda.

While we were living on Tiffany Street and Milton’s career was getting started, my mother was a store detective in John Wanamaker’s, downtown in Manhattan. I went there every day after school and walked the floors with her, watching for shoplifters. Sometimes she had to go to night court, and being the oldest, I went with her and then back to The Bronx. Many years later, Milton used to do a gag on stage: “My mother was a store detective, and they made it easy for her by putting her in the piano department.”

One thing happened to Mom that Milton didn’t joke about. Whenever he had a book in Manhattan, my mother and my sister Rose would go down to Dave’s Room, a rendezvous for people in the theatrical business. The same cab driver who drove them down from The Bronx would

Publicity photograph of Milton Berle, Phil’s brother, c. 1940.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress.
take them back. This time, Milton was to open at the Paramount Theater in a week. One night, after Mom and Rose left Dave’s, the cab driver taking them home stopped for a red light on Central Park West. A man ran up, put a gun to his head, pulled him out of the cab, jumped in, and started away.

The cops chased him and started shooting, not knowing there was anybody in the cab. Rose grabbed my mother, pushed her down in the cab and threw a coat over her—just after one of the bullets grazed her head. They finally caught the guy running down the subway steps and took him to the 47th Street Precinct. When I got home, Mom was propped up in bed with a bandage on her head being quizzed by all the newspaper people. When the cops located Milton and told him, he ran right to the 47th Street stationhouse. The first thing he did was whack this guy in the jaw, right from nowhere, a beautiful right cross.

Everybody thought it must have been a publicity stunt, because Milton was going to open at the Paramount. But when headlines came out the following day — “Milton Berle’s Mother and Sister Kidnapped”—and they saw she was hurt in bed, people knew it was no publicity stunt. Milton jammed the place when he opened.

It was when Milton’s career began to flourish that the family moved from the East Bronx. I remember our West Bronx apartment house was a classy place with a canopy and a doorman—right across the street from Morrisania Hospital where, during the night, you could hear the screams of women having their babies. We stayed in The Bronx for quite a while, and when I got married, I couldn’t get The Bronx out of my blood, so I moved to Gerard Street off 167th.

I’ve been in California for fifty six years now, but I’ve always been a genuine Bronx boy. I loved it when I lived there, and I’ll never forget it as long as I live. When I reached ninety years of age last year, they threw me a big party.

Is there anybody still out there who knew me in those days? You might remember me under Berlinger or Berle. Maybe from P.S. 23, which was at 165th Street and Union Avenue; I graduated from there in 1915. Write to this paper and they’ll forward your name to me. I’d love to hear from you.
About the Authors...

Phil Berle

Phil Berle, or Phil Berlinger, was born in New York City in 1901 and was the oldest of five children. The Berlingers shortened the family name to “Berle” when Phil was five and moved to the East Bronx in 1911 when Phil was ten. Phil and his siblings, one of whom would go on to become the famous Milton Berle, grew up in The Bronx. Phil and Milton also both entered show business in the borough, as it was then home to multiple movie studios. While Milton went on to become a famous comedian, Phil worked more behind the scenes as a business agent, talent manager, television producer, and movie extra. Phil died on January 2, 1999, at the age of 97. Milton died three years later in 2002.

Patrick J. T. Curran

After retiring from teaching, Dr. Curran and his wife moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, where he got involved in local politics. In 1994 he ran for State Magistrate Judge for Dona Ana County. He was elected and served two four-years terms. He then retired and was appointed by the State Supreme Court as pro-term magistrate. He served for ten more years in that position until his wife’s failing health caused them to move to Dartmouth, Massachusetts, to be near their daughter.

Dr. Curran’s first article, about growing up in the West Bronx, appeared in *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, vol. 24/1 (Spring 1987). For this article, he was awarded the Halpern Memorial Award in 1988. Dr. Curran’s second article, which reflected on revisiting The Bronx after a long absence, appeared in *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, vol. 29/1 (Spring 1992). His third article, which recounted his experiences as a student in The Bronx during World War II, appeared in *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*, vol. 53 (2016).

Sandra Eaton

Sandra Eaton writes about her great-grandparents and their home in the historic Mott Haven district of the south Bronx.

Lloyd Ultan

Lloyd Ultan is the official Bronx Borough Historian, a well known lecturer and tour leader. Professor Ultan was a founder of *The Bronx County Historical Society Journal*.
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Ted Merwin’s cultural history of the Jewish deli is the first of its kind. Until recently, as Merwin mirthfully bemoans, “historians have given the towering deli sandwich—and the place in which it was consumed—surprisingly short shrift” (p. 13). While a book-length treatment of smoky, spicy deli fare might instantly appeal to gourmands, Merwin stresses the wider relevance of his study from the first page: “The pickled and smoked meats sold in storefront Jewish delicatessens starting in the late nineteenth century became a part of the heritage of all New Yorkers. But they were, of course, especially important to Jews; the history of the delicatessen is the history of Jews eating themselves into Americans” (p. 1).

Nevertheless, the central thesis of Merwin’s book—that the Jewish deli at its apex represented a kind of way station along American Jews’ upward path to a firmly middle-class existence—is less palatable. For starters, Merwin sometimes muddles this thesis. According to Merwin, that is, the Jewish deli is not solely a relic of how Jews dreamed of impending prosperity in the mid-twentieth century U.S. As Merwin simultaneously maintains, during its heyday the Jewish deli also served the role of a “third place,” a term coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg to name spaces “that level social distinctions among...
patrons, foster civic engagement, and provide a platform for mutual emotional support” (p. 8). Indeed, as Merwin recognizes, the Jewish deli was distinctive insofar as it brought together people from various social classes, nationalities, and religious and political persuasions—Jews and goyim. Could the delicatessen have been both an index of American Jewish longing for middle-class inclusion and a radically democratic “third place” at the same time? Did economically ascendant Jews carry the egalitarian spirit of the delicatessen with them into their comfortably bourgeois lives? Or was something singular lost when Jews began to leave deli life behind?

Understandably, Merwin wants to have his babka and eat it too. Merwin speculates that since the 1960s, other institutions have increasingly begun to function as “third places” for Jews in the U.S., though the few examples he offers, mostly religious in character, do not convince, considering their lack of appeal to non-observant or consciously secular Jews. Are such minimally- and non-religious Jews so thoroughly integrated into mainstream American culture that they no longer are able to constitute recognizably Jewish “third spaces” of their own? Merwin is correct to note the general dearth of “third places” for such Jews today, but this is arguably the case for people of every creed and ethnicity in many parts of the U.S. Given the difficulty Merwin has in producing persuasive examples of contemporary “third places” among religious Jews, such dearth presumably obtains no matter religious affiliation. It would appear, therefore, that a vital aspect of deli culture was in part relinquished as Jews—regardless of their religiosity—progressively embraced middle-class values and habits. If true, the deli was not so much an inevitable springboard to American Jewish embourgeoisement as its casualty.

Here, in point of fact, is where I disagree most sharply with Merwin. By inserting the delicatessen within an unbending narrative of American Jewish upward mobility, he partially covers over the specific proletarian culture that made delis so unique. As Merwin at times acknowledges, the Jewish deli came into its own only within the partially secularized, working-class culture of yiddishkayt, which left its mark on so many aspects of Jewish life in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century but was especially prominent in The Bronx and Brooklyn. Undoubtedly, Merwin sheds vital light on the early years of the delicatessen in Manhattan, when it was more a new-immigrant tribute to American prosperity than an established Jewish cultural institution. But Merwin construes the over-the-top ethos of these first prominent delis as more or less enduring as the delicatessen proliferated among Jews in New York’s outer boroughs and elsewhere in the U.S. For Merwin, for example, the only thing that set delis in The Bronx apart from the more ostentatious delis he prioritizes was that the former tended to be “smaller, storefront-type” operations (p. 79).

Tellingly, Merwin devotes very little space to such workaday delis. Throughout the book, Merwin has occasion to name only a few Bronx institutions—Schlachter’s, which was on 176th Street, Schweller’s, which was
on Jerome Avenue, and Liebman’s, which, thankfully, is still operating in Riverdale—even though The Bronx at one point had one of the largest, if not the largest, number of Jewish delis per capita of any U.S. locale. The evidence itself, no doubt, is partially to blame. The photos and memorabilia of the larger, flashier delis of Manhattan and elsewhere were more likely to be preserved for posterity. On the surface, most Bronx delis would have appeared perfectly unremarkable—small bastions of Jewish life that catered to mostly working-class patrons and served fairly standard fare. Nevertheless, the true genius of the delicatessen—its propensity to bring together a range of people, eating together as *equals*—stemmed from the very unceremonious nature of these familiar, familial haunts.

Indeed, The Bronx offers many instances of the Jewish deli’s peculiar tendency to gather an unexpected mix of people. For example, the Palace Deli was a bastion of kosher cuisine within the Fordham Road shopping district for decades. At one point in the 1980s, a substantial portion of its business came from the local Black Muslim community, which has dietary stipulations that align closely with *kashrut*. Merwin’s historical narrative, no doubt, would have gained further texture through a sustained consideration of such evidence.

Merwin is certainly to be commended for his trailblazing cultural history of the Jewish deli. His piquant prose plays on delicatessen cuisine in sharp and surprising ways. Most importantly, *Pastrami on Rye* decisively lays to rest the popular notion that the delicatessen was a staple of *shtetl* life in Eastern Europe or even a fixture of the early twentieth-century Jewish immigrant culture of the Lower East Side. To be sure, Merwin tends to overlook the creative agency of working-class Jews in the full blossoming of the deli in The Bronx and Brooklyn, but he has provided an invaluable foundation for future work along these lines.

Steven Payne  
*The Bronx County Historical Society*  
*The Bronx, New York*
Edgar Allan Poe, one of America’s greatest writers, spent his last years (1846–1849) in what is today The Bronx, a part of New York City. The historic landmark Poe Cottage, built about 1812, is typical of the working-class homes that once populated the area. In this simple farmhouse, Poe wrote some of his most memorable works, including “Annabel Lee,” “The Bells” and “The Cask of Amontillado.”

Poe moved there in the spring of 1846 with his wife, Virginia, and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Maria Clemm. He rented the house, in the rural village of Fordham thirteen miles north of the city of New York, from its owner, John Valentine, for an annual $100 rent. He hoped the country air would help his wife, who was suffering from tuberculosis. She died in the cottage in 1847; Poe continued living there until his death on October 7, 1849, in Baltimore. Soon after news reached her, Mrs. Clemm left Fordham.

Within 25 years of his death, visitors to Poe’s home made it a literary landmark; individuals and groups such as the Shakespeare Society of New York pressured city officials to save the house from encroaching urbanization. In 1902, Poe Park was created and in 1913, New York City purchased the house and moved it into the north end of the park, opening it as a historic house museum.

Restored in 2011, Poe’s Cottage interprets Poe in 1840s New York and the community as it transformed from rural to densely urban. Poe’s enduring literary influence remains strong. It is owned by the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation and operated as a museum by The Bronx County Historical Society. It is a member of the Historic House Trust of New York City.

**DIRECTIONS:**

**Subway:** Take the D train to Kingsbridge Road in The Bronx. Poe Park is right outside the station.

Take the Lexington Avenue-Woodlawn 4 train to Kingsbridge Road in The Bronx. Walk east to Grand Concourse. The cottage is located across the boulevard, on the right.

**Bus:** Use Bronx bus lines #1, #2, #9, #12, #22, #28, #34 and MTA express bus BxM #4 from Manhattan.
In many ways, Parkchester reads as Jeffrey S. Gurock’s love letter to the Bronx community in which he grew up. Indeed, as Gurock admits, his laser-focused history of the Parkchester housing development and its environs aims to identify “the factors that have made this Bronx neighborhood attractive to successive groups of residents as its mostly working-class families for the most part found ways to live harmoniously” (p. 9). Throughout the book, Gurock expresses a pronounced appreciation for the affordable, safe, and bucolic living environment that Parkchester has provided for its primarily working- and lower middle-class residents since the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (MLIC), which built the development, accepted the first lessees in 1942. Gurock furthermore highlights the exemplary nature of the “get-along attitude” that has largely prevailed among the community’s shifting populations even since Parkchester’s infancy, when Jews, Italians, and Irish lived together without apparent incident. (Such, Gurock stresses, was not always the case in some parts of The Bronx.)

Yet if Gurock has love for Parkchester, his is a mature kind of love, which confronts the inherent failures and contradictions of the beloved neighborhood with resolve. He rigorously unearths the equivocal leasing policies and dog-whistle doublespeak that MLIC used to exclude, effectively, Blacks and Latinos from Parkchester for decades. Incisively, Gurock also teases out underlying ethnic and racial tensions between the diverse residents of Parkchester themselves—first as integration began to take place in earnest after 1968, then during the successive influxes of new ethnic groups in the later years of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

While artfully exploring such complex dynamics at a hyper-local level, Gurock simultaneously unsettles wider narratives about white flight during the post-war period. According to Gurock, “The story of choosing to live in Parkchester offers an alternative narrative to the oft-told tales of how long-time New Yorkers, almost all of whom were white, began exiting Gotham after 1945 for what was deemed a better life in suburbia, often also in segregated locales” (p. 5). By choosing to move to Parkchester, white Gothamites opted
for many of the purported boons of suburbia while continuing to reap the benefits of New York City life. Moreover, especially after 1968, “the Parkchester story highlights the largely unrecognized phenomenon of African American and Latino flight within New York City to better areas of Gotham during this same troubled period” (p. 6). As Gurock demonstrates, Parkchester thus offers a unique and underutilized case study for historians interested in the intricacies of urbanization, race, and class in the postwar U.S.

Chapter 1 illuminates the conception, planning, and construction of Parkchester by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, led by Frederick H. Ecker. The chapter draws fascinating attention to the utopian vision that initially inspired Parkchester, as an affordable and healthy housing solution for working people, while foreshadowing some of this vision’s ominous undertones. Chapter 2 delineates the ethnic and religious diversity of Parkchester in its early years and traces the at times surprisingly ecumenical efforts to establish various houses of worship in the community. Chapters 3–4, perhaps the best in the book, provide a thick description of life at Parkchester during the development’s first two decades. While MLIC presented itself as the quintessential “benevolent landlord” with marked success—indeed, some residents began referring to the company as “Mother Metropolitan”—Gurock enables readers to perceive the class tension that seethed right below the apparent placidity of Parkchester. During the first two decades of Parkchester’s existence, MLIC management attempted to assert increasing control over lessees’ lives. Residents faced the threat of eviction, for example, for playing music past a certain hour or for their children picking flowers from the company’s beds. Yet early Parkchester residents found creative ways to evade, and in some cases organized successfully against, the subtle domination of their everyday lives. Chapters 5–6 offer a piercing treatment of race at Parkchester. Chapter 5 first focuses on the early efforts by a handful of white residents of Parkchester to pressure MLIC to integrate the development. The chapter also pinpoints the various legal and public relations strategies that management employed to reject Black and Latino applicants during the first two and a half decades of the development’s existence. Chapter 6 hones in on what is presumed to be the majority of residents’ indifference towards integration throughout much of this period and susses out, as evidence allows, the mixed reception that new Black and Latino residents had in the immediate years after integration.

Chapters 7–8 chart the post-MLIC history of Parkchester, first under the blundering management of Helmsley-Spear, which bought the development in 1968, then under the more attentive care of the Parkchester Preservation Company (PPC), starting in 1998. According to these chapters, Helmsley-Spear brought Parkchester close to the point of ruin by the 1990s. Unlike MLIC, Helmsley-Spear not only failed to gain the trust of a majority of Parkchester’s residents but also engaged in what appeared to many as shady redevelopment schemes, foremost of which was the attempt to convert the development into condominiums. In contrast, PPC, or so it would seem,
managed to achieve the impossible: within a decade of its purchase of Parkchester, the housing development had again become a thriving, financially sustainable community—only now with the upgraded building infrastructure needed to sustain modern amenities like air conditioning. Chapters 9–10 concentrate on the waves of new immigrants that have called Parkchester home since the 1980s. Many of the racial and ethnic tensions that earlier chapters teased out resurface in these chapters in modified garb. All in all, however, the book concludes that the same amicable, ecumenical spirit that animated early Parkchester lives on today in a mature form, having passed through the growing pains of integration, displacement, and globalization.

Parkchester is without question a masterful history that analyzes complex, wide-ranging issues of U.S. capitalist society through a hyper-local focus on a single Bronx community. At times, Gurock glosses over cracks in the social fabric of Parkchester too readily, even as he brings to light the very evidence of these cracks. For instance, after spending a considerable portion of Chapter 5 narrating activist efforts to achieve housing integration in Parkchester during the 1950s, Gurock hastily minimizes these efforts’ popular appeal. Gurock reminds the reader multiple times that such anti-segregation activism stemmed from an exceedingly small number of residents, who received primary support from organizers outside the community. Gurock understandably fixates on the pronounced silence of the overwhelming majority of Parkchesterites during the period. But silence, as Gurock himself recognizes, is not always a measure of indifference. During a period when the forces of white supremacist reaction were emboldened throughout New York City and the country at large, the fact that such uncompromising attempts at integration not only appeared in Parkchester but also met no apparent opposition—except, of course, from MLIC—might serve rather as a tacit testament to the community’s egalitarian ethos. Without doubt, there were residents of Parkchester who were indifferent to the question of integration. As the sizable smattering of votes in the district for George Wallace in 1968 demonstrates, there were also Parkchesterites who were fierce defenders of the racist status quo. But the out-in-the-open existence of any radical movement, however small it might appear, is often indicative of a much wider base of support. Thanks to the meticulous scholarship of Gurock, we can now at least imagine a more hopeful, rebellious, and complicated past for Parkchester than initially might meet the eye.

Steven Payne

*The Bronx County Historical Society*

*The Bronx, New York*

A very nice book that discusses one of my favorite subjects—New York City.

From the first time Sidney Horenstein and I got into a heated exchange about The Highbridge and The Croton Water System, I’ve been beguiled by his breadth of knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of the systems that make a city run.

This book offers information on the city, its geological history, the early days of settlement on Manhattan Island, the real problem of clean fresh water, and the early development of the public rail system—all in the hope of solving environmental issues. A worthy read.

G. Hermalyn
*The Bronx County Historical Society*
*The Bronx, New York*


While this publication may be a short read—roughly forty pages—it’s not short on information. The authors take you on a chronological journey of the great northern borough of New York, walking you through major aspects of the borough’s historic past, from the settlers of Colonial Bronx to the popularity of hip-hop and breakdancing of the late twentieth century.

Charts of population growth, as well as many relevant photos, lead you through a decade-by-decade tour through the borough’s changing demographics and overall landscape. A must have for anyone who needs a quick reference guide to anything related to Bronx history.

Richard Legnini
*The Bronx, New York*
The Bronx County Historical Society
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THE BRONX COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Sigmund Balka

We Congratulate
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for the vital role it plays in defining and preserving for future generations the place in history of the life of the Bronx

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