

Lesson 8: Field Trip: Exploring Inwood Hill Park

Background for Educators

[Information taken from <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/inwoodhillpark>.]

Inwood Hill Park is a living piece of old New York. Evidence of its prehistoric roots exists as dramatic caves, valleys, and ridges left as the result of shifting glaciers. Evidence of its uninhabited state afterward remains as its forest and salt marsh (the last natural one in Manhattan), and evidence of its use by Native Americans in the 17th century continues to be discovered. Much has occurred on the land that now composes Inwood Hill Park since the arrival of European colonists in the 17th and 18th centuries, but luckily, most of the park was largely untouched by the wars and development that took place.

Inwood Hill Park contains the last natural forest and salt marsh in Manhattan. It is unclear how the park received its present name. Before becoming parkland in 1916, it was known during the Colonial and post-Revolutionary War period as Cock or Cox Hill. The name could be a variant of the Native American name for the area, Shorakapok, meaning either "the wading place," "the edge of the river," or "the place between the ridges."

Lenape Presence

Human activity has been present in Inwood Hill Park from prehistoric times. Through the 17th century, Native Americans known as the Lenape (Delawares) inhabited the area. There is evidence of a main encampment along the eastern edge of the park. The Lenape relied on both the Hudson and Harlem Rivers as sources for food. Artifacts and the remains of old campfires were found in Inwood's rock shelters, suggesting their use for shelter and temporary living quarters.

Using artifacts recovered in the late 19th and early 20th century, archaeologists date human settlement in Inwood Hill Park to prehistoric times. Local historian William L. Calver first discovered Native American tools and middens (heaps of shell and refuse) in Inwood Hill Park in the 1890s. In 1895, Alexander Chenoweth uncovered caves in the park that had once served as dwellings, evidenced by pottery and carbonized food found under beds of ash. While the land was being considered for a possible park site, Reginald Pelham Bolton began extensive research on the Native American life in the area. Alanson Skinner continued the project in the 1920s. In recent years, the artifacts that had been unearthed in Inwood Hill were put on display in the Museum of the American Indian in downtown Manhattan.

Although the majority of the native population left the area by 1715, several of these native New Yorkers continued to live in the Inwood Hill area until the 1930s when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses (1888-1981), using Works Progress Administration (WPA) money and workers, initiated a massive reconstruction of the park. Parks created this playground bordering the 35-acre lawn that dominates the southeast portion of the park, which provides recreational facilities such as baseball fields with bleachers, walking paths, and picnic areas.

Indian Road, which runs through Inwood Hill Park, was a trail used by the Rechgawawanc clan of the Weekquaeskeek tribe of American Indians. They traveled from upstate locales to the city in order to trade furs with the European settlers during the 17th century. The road may have connected to the Spuyten Duyvil Creek, facilitating trade between the settlers of the Harlem and the Hudson River banks.

Topography

Inwood Hill Park now contains the last natural forest and salt marsh in Manhattan, but the land once lay beneath a huge sheet of moving ice. The most recent ice age began about 1.5 million years ago, at the advent of the

Pleistocene Era, and lasted until around 10,000 years ago. At the beginning of the Pleistocene, global temperatures dropped dramatically. Huge masses of snow and ice formed in the Arctic, sometimes as thick as two miles. The tremendous weight and pressure of the ice sheet caused the snow underneath to solidify, providing a surface on which glaciers could travel. During the Pleistocene Epoch, there were four glacial advances - the most recent being the Wisconsin ice sheet, which had the greatest impact on the land beneath New York City.

The Wisconsin ice sheet began its southward journey from the Arctic around 100,000 years ago, reaching what is now New York roughly 50,000 years later. By this time, it had lost some of its bulk, although it was still 300 feet thick and stretched from Massachusetts to Montana. As the glacier moved through this region, it deepened the bed of the Hudson River, carved out such geologic features as the Great Lakes and the Finger Lakes basins, and left its mark on the Adirondack mountains. The glacier also deposited tons of gravel and pebbles, moving boulders from the Palisades to Central Park, plowing up topsoil, leveling the earth, and filling in depressed areas with glacial till. This glacial activity sculpted the characteristic terrain of Inwood Hill Park, with its dramatic caves, valleys, and ridges.

Revolutionary War History

In the summer and fall of 1776, New York was the primary battlefield of the war for America's independence. At stake were the City's strategic harbor and inland waterways, especially the Hudson River. By controlling the Hudson Valley, the British hoped to prevent the armies of New England and the South from combining into a unified force.

Among the many forts built in New York by the Continental Army, three were located on the heights of northern Manhattan that overlook the Hudson River, allowing the army to direct their cannon fire at enemy ships below. The largest of the three was Fort Washington, which stood atop the highest point on Manhattan Island, at today's 184th Street. Situated to the north of Fort Washington were two of its outworks, Fort Tryon and Fort Cockhill. Fort Cockhill stood on this hilltop in today's Inwood Hill Park, overlooking the mouth of Spuyten Duyvil Creek at its confluence with the Hudson. It was a small, five-sided earthen structure equipped with two cannons. On the morning of November 16, 1776, Fort Cockhill was attacked and captured by a battalion of Hessian (German) Grenadiers that served in the British Army. After taking Fort Cockhill, the Hessians hauled heavy guns and a howitzer to the top of the hill and fired on the American defenders at Fort Tryon. Fort Tryon was taken after heroic resistance by its greatly outnumbered defenders.

A short while later, the commander of Fort Washington, General Magaw, surrendered to attackers and the battle was over. The Americans were overwhelmed by the numerical superiority of the British-Hessian force and the effectiveness of their attack. It was a devastating defeat, in which the Patriots lost almost 3,000 troops, 2,800 of whom were taken as prisoners. Most of the captives died in prison as victims of deprivation and exposure. In July of 1781, Washington and his generals surveyed the forts of northern Manhattan from nearby points in the Bronx, apparently preparing to attack New York again and to reclaim their captured forts. By that time Fort Cockhill showed signs of neglect, as reflected in Washington's observation that "the fort on Cox's Hill was in bad repair and but little dependence placed on it. There is neither ditch nor friezing, and the northeast corner appears quite easy of access." This attack never materialized, but the preparations for it served to divert British attention and resources away from the upcoming battle at Yorktown, Virginia, the deciding battle of the Revolutionary War. While the British surrender at Yorktown on October 19, 1781 ended the active phase of the war, British military forces continued to occupy New York City until November 25, 1783. On that date, later known as Evacuation Day, General Washington was present to reclaim possession of the city he was forced to abandon in 1776. His reentry route from Inwood to the Battery took him past Forts Cockhill, Tryon and Washington, this time in triumph.