

# WALK HISTORY'S PATH

**R**ome, capital of the ancient world, drew its lifeblood — its water — from its great stone aqueducts. Likewise, New York, capital of the modern world, grew to greatness on the might of its aqueducts. Yet the story of New York's first great water channel, the Old Croton Aqueduct, and the central role it played in transforming the city into a world-class metropolis, is largely forgotten.

Fortunately, there is a tangible reminder of this historic legacy: the oldest extant bridge to Manhattan, the graceful and lofty High Bridge, a Roman-style aqueduct-cum-footpath spanning the Harlem River.

Sadly, however, though it was declared a city landmark in 1970, the bridge has been sealed up for decades, off limits to the people of a city whose greatness it helped forge. It is time — long past time, actually — to reopen the High Bridge and capitalize on its wondrous promenade and panoramic skyline vistas.

An engineering marvel in the mid-19th century, the span was a tourist attraction in its day, and it could be so again. All that's required is to extend the Old Croton Aqueduct Trailway state park from its current end in Yonkers, across the High Bridge and into Manhattan along the route of the original conduit.

As important to city history as the Erie Canal, the aqueduct brought pure water south from the Croton River 41 miles away to a city so plagued by cholera that even children were drinking alcohol to escape disease. Completed in 1842, the system was designed to carry 90 million gallons a day. Yet in a few decades, a skyrocketing population had made it obsolete. A second Croton Aqueduct was finished in 1890. But by 1955, the old system had outlived its usefulness and was discontinued.

The trailway — which covers the original brick-lined water pipe — has been a state park since 1968 in Westchester, where it is a mecca for walkers, joggers and cyclists. But in the city, the route has been mostly abandoned.

Making it a history trail through the Bronx and along city streets to the aqueduct's terminus at what is now the New York Public Library at Fifth Ave. and 42nd St. would be simple and relatively inexpensive.

And the benefits would be enormous.

In Boston, to cite one example, the red-brick Freedom Trail linking Revolutionary War sites is a boon to both tourism and economic development. A similar trail could produce the same results for New York.

And what a trail it would be.

In the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park, the path, though bisected by the Major Deegan Expressway, is still visible;

farther south, it becomes a mall in the middle of University Ave. Starting from the north, walkers on the route would pass Lehman College, whose gym provided the first meeting place of the United Nations Security Council. Nearby is Kingsbridge Armory, the world's largest,

which is being renovated by the city. Not far away is Bronx Community College, with its elegant domed library, designed by Stanford White when the site was owned by New York University, and its notable Hall of Fame for Great Americans, an outdoor colonnade of busts by world-class sculptors.

The route would continue south across the High Bridge into Manhattan, through High Bridge Park, noted for its soaring, landmarked tower, and on to the Morris-Jumel Mansion, one of George Washington's Revolutionary War headquarters. And — sports fans, take note — along the way, a crumbling stairway at 158th St. and Edgecombe Ave. marks the last surviving relic of the famed Polo Grounds, where the New York Giants' Bobby Thomson's shot was heard 'round the world 50 years ago this October.

Blocks away is Hamilton Grange, the one-time home of Alexander Hamilton. Then come City College, Columbia University and the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, the world's largest Gothic cathedral. Farther south are Central Park and the world-renowned museums: Natural History, the Metropolitan, the Frick and MOMA.

The final jog, down Fifth Ave., passes such great religious institutions as Temple Emanu-El and St. Patrick's Cathedral and ends at the library, where the imposing reservoir once stood.

Any one of these sites is worth celebrating. Together, they tell an epic tale of the world's greatest city and its people. All these institutions would benefit by being linked, and all could be expected to support and sustain the trail.

Creating this engaging walk would require little more than printing maps and posting explanatory markers at the sites. Except, of course, for revitalizing the High Bridge. That, no doubt, would cost millions. But, after inquiries by the Daily News, the city has put out a contract for inspecting the span with an eye toward reclaiming it. And tomorrow, a coalition that is forming to support the bridge's restoration will have its first public meeting at Yeshiva University's Bellferrer Hall at 6:30 p.m.

**C**learly, there is a will; now the city and the state must find the way.

The reasons for closing the bridge — rampant crime and vandalism — no longer exist, thanks to the heroic work of the NYPD. High Bridge Park, once a dangerous dumping ground for stolen cars, has been rejuvenated, thanks in part to Bette Midler's group, New York Restoration. And with the 33rd Precinct stationhouse going up next door, security on the historic span will no longer be a problem.

Since the state already runs the successful Westchester part of the trail, the new Bronx/Manhattan portion could be a state or city park — or the governments could share the cost.

New York would then have a link to sites famous and forgotten — parks, museums and schools; poor areas and rich. Our past and our future.



## DAILY NEWS

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## HIGHLIGHTS ALONG OLD CROTON TRAIL

- Bryant Park/New York Public Library
- Rockefeller Center
- St. Patrick's Cathedral
- Museum of Modern Art
- Central Park
- Temple Emanu-El
- Frick Collection
- Metropolitan Museum
- Central Park's Great Lawn
- Seneca Village
- American Museum of Natural History
- Frederick Douglass Houses
- Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine
- Columbia University
- Morningside Park
- Grant's Tomb / Riverside Park
- General Grant Houses
- 125th St. / Harlem
- City College
- Riverbank State Park
- Hamilton Grange
- Trinity Church Cemetery
- Audubon Terrace
- Coogan's Bluff / Polo Grounds
- High Bridge Park
- Morris-Jumel Mansion
- Yeshiva University
- High Bridge Tower
- The High Bridge
- Harlem River
- Bronx Community College / The Hall of Fame for Great Americans
- Kingsbridge Armory
- Jerome Park Reservoir
- EDUCATION ROW  
Walton High School  
Lehman College  
Harris Park  
Bronx High School of Science  
DeWitt Clinton High School
- Van Cortlandt Park