

HISTORICAL CONTEXT



Map showing the contemporary Bronx River Watershed including the Kensico Reservoir Watershed that serves as the source of the river.

Natural History

Shoelace Park sits within the Bronx River watershed, which is fed by tributaries in the Bronx and Westchester County. The Bronx River runs for approximately one-and-a-half miles or twenty-three city blocks along the park. The river is the central natural feature of the park and is ecologically unique in the New York City landscape as the only remaining freshwater river within the city limits.

In total, the Bronx River runs for twenty-three miles from its source at the Kensico Reservoir in upper Westchester, through the Bronx, to its mouth at the East River/Western Long Island Sound. Approximately eight miles of the river run through the Bronx and the remaining fifteen are in Westchester County.

More than 150 million years ago, the waterway began carving a channel for itself through the bedrock, shaping the landscape. The meandering river created deep gorges, one of which is a scenic spot at the New York Botanical Garden.¹

At Shoelace Park, the river has been significantly altered from its meandering shape over time by myriad adjacent developments, such as the construction of the Metro-North railroad line and the development—and subsequent expansion—of the Bronx River Parkway.

Pre-Colonial Period

The Bronx River was called *Aquehung* or “River of High Bluffs” by the Siwanoy Native Americans that lived in the area.² The river held spiritual significance for the tribes, and the water was used for ritual baths. The river was also an important source for sustenance including fish, wildlife and drinking water. The Native American tribes of the area hunted in the woodlands along the river’s edge. The morphology of the river was greatly impacted by the large presence of dam-building beavers, which led the Native Americans to call the river valley *Laophawachking* or “Place of Stringing Lakes.”³

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The abundance of beaver attracted European settlers to the area around the Bronx River, and in 1639 Jonas Bronck, a Swedish immigrant, purchased 500 acres of land from the Native Americans west of the river.⁴ Following Bronck’s death, his land was sold off, but the river that abutted it kept the name “Bronck’s River.” Over time, the name transformed to “Bronx River”, and the borough was subsequently named after the river. Throughout the 18th century, the Bronx River was the source of power for many types of mills including snuff, paper, pottery, and barrels.⁵ During this time the Shoelace Park area and adjacent neighborhoods were part of Westchester County, one of the original twelve counties of the Province of New York created in 1683.

Westchester County and the Bronx River were strategically important during the American Revolution. The area was an important thoroughway between New England and Manhattan. The Old Boston Post Road crossed at William’s Bridge [currently East Gun Hill Road]. After the British gained control of Manhattan, George Washington and his troops were forced to the north in White Plains. The Bronx therefore became a strategic position on the route back to New York City. There were loyalist strongholds in the southern part of the Bronx. The northern part of the Bronx was not held by either party, and was called the “Neutral Ground.” The site was subject to constant raids and skirmishes by bands known as “Cowboys” (the British sympathizers) and “Skinners” (the American revolutionaries).⁶

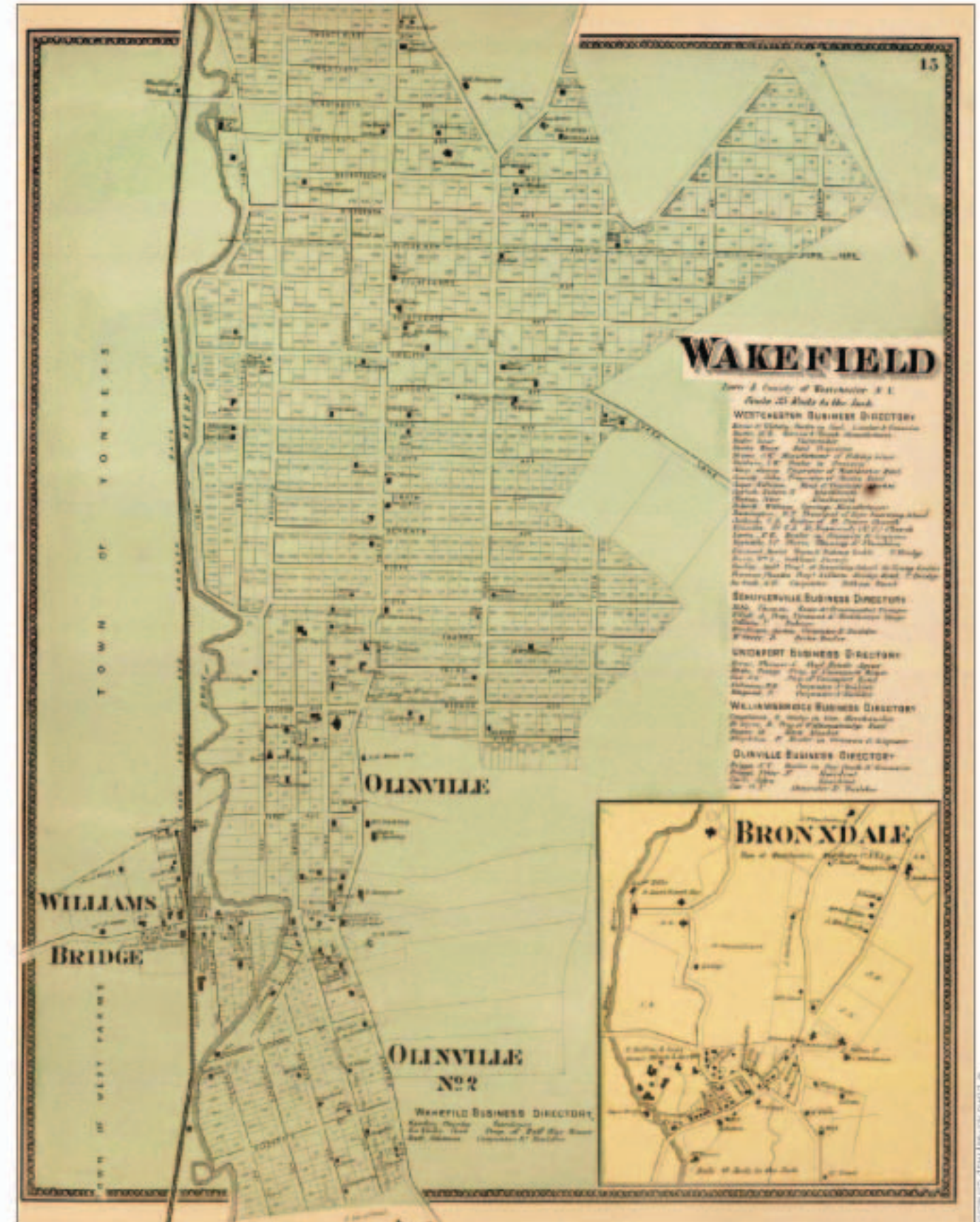
The Nineteenth Century

The areas along the Bronx River remained sparsely populated through the mid-nineteenth-century until the construction of the New York and Harlem Railroad in the 1840s. The new railway spurred rapid expansion into the area and the creation of an industrial corridor. As part of the Rural Cemetery movement, Woodlawn Cemetery was established in 1863.⁷ Located directly across the Bronx River and Bronx River Parkway from today's Shoelace Park, the cemetery was used as recreational pleasure grounds by New Yorkers. A passenger stop was added on the railroad at East 233rd Street to serve mourners arriving for funerals and burials from Manhattan, as well as those visiting the cemetery for pleasure. The Woodland stop on the Metro-North line at East 233rd Street still serves the area.

The New Parks Act of 1884 funded city acquisitions of large tracts of land for parklands and preserved and protected natural areas from development. Bronx Park, just south of Shoelace Park was initially formed in 1888 with an amalgam of 640 acres, some of which had been part of Jonas Bronck's 500 acres. Additional open space acquired during this period include the areas currently known as the New York Botanical Garden, the Bronx Zoo, Van Cortlandt, Pelham Bay, Crotona, and Claremont Parks.⁸ This acquisition of parkland set the stage for the future formation of the Bronx River Parkway and today's use of the land around the Bronx River as public park. Largely as a result of the parkland acquisitions of the 19th century, today nearly one quarter of the Bronx is parkland.

In the nineteenth century, several small settlements emerged in the vicinity of Shoelace Park. The area to the west of the Bronx River was known as Williamsbridge and the area east of the Bronx River below 222nd Street was known as Olinville. This settlement was named in the 1840's after the author, professor, and Methodist bishop, Stephen Olin (1797-1851), known as one of the most powerful and fervent preachers of his day.⁹ North of 222nd Street along the east side of the river was known as Wakefield, named after the Virginia plantation where George Washington was born.¹⁰ In 1874, the area to the west of the Bronx River and south of Yonkers became part of New York City. In 1895, the villages to the east of the Bronx River were also transferred into the City of New York from Westchester County. Following the incorporation of Wakefield and Olinville into the Bronx, the street naming system changed to conform to the numbering systems west of the river. First Avenue in Wakefield became 215th Street and subsequent streets to the north were numbered accordingly.

Williamsbridge Road is currently East Gun Hill Road. First Avenue is 215th Street. Hotel Gorbets and the Williamsbridge Tapestry Works were located at the corner of Elliot Road and Williamsbridge Road (now East Gun Hill Road and Olinville Avenue).



Historic Map of Williamsbridge and Olinville, c. 1863



Williamsbridge Tapestry Works building (formerly Hotel Gorbets), 1913



Development along the banks of the Bronx River, c. 1900



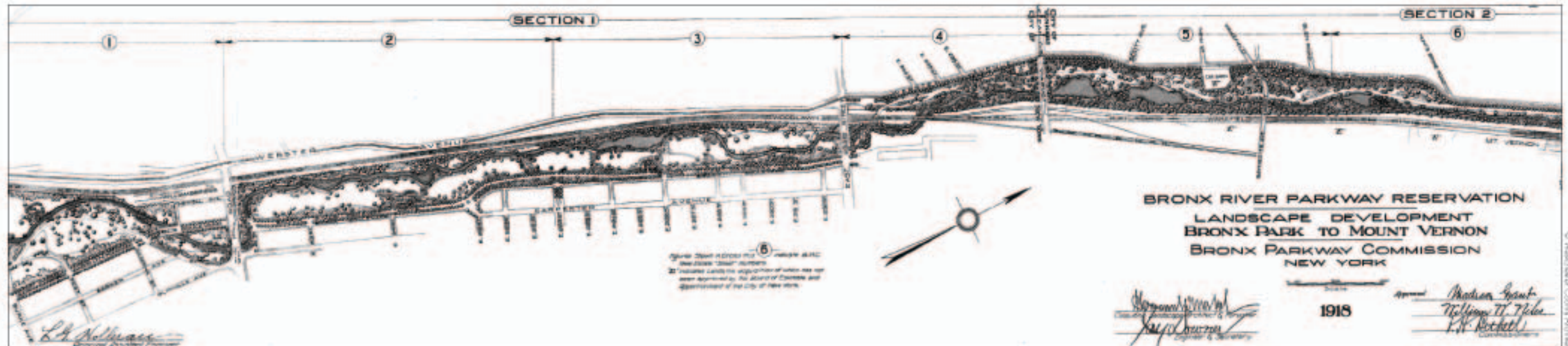
Development and billboards in the location of the present-day park, c. 1900

The area along the Bronx River near East Gun Hill Road, currently Fort Knox Park, was known for its French settlements and silk weavers from Aubusson, France. An inn, Hotel Gorbets, and a renowned French restaurant, The Hermitage, were located where East Gun Hill Road crosses the Bronx River at a picturesque meander in the river. Hotel Gorbets was popular with cyclists and Bronx River boaters who visited the Bronx for leisure. The Hermitage, owned by Baudoin Laguerre, was a popular spot with artists and writers during the 1860's. Notable diners at the restaurant included Henry James, Mark Twain, and Bret Harte. Guests could enjoy outdoor dining and rent rowboats for an unhurried boat ride. The restaurant, its owner and his "velvet eyed" daughter are chronicled in a book titled *A Day at Laguerre's and other Days Being Nine Sketches* by F. Thompson Smith which was published in 1892.¹¹ Bellevue Park, a picnic park and dance hall, opened in 1874 in the area of Fort Knox on the east side of the river at Magenta Street.¹² The Bronx River, re-routed with the construction of the Bronx River Parkway, currently flows over this site.

In 1893, the Hotel Gorbets was converted into the Williamsbridge Tapestry Works, the first tapestry works in the United States.¹³ The owner, William Baumgarten, brought expert tapestry weavers from France to work for him who had trained at the Gobelins Tapestry Works in Paris. Baumgarten located the Tapestry Works at the former Hotel Gorbets because of the area's reputation as a French settlement and Baumgarten himself had enjoyed meals there. The site of the Williamsbridge Tapestry Works is described as a "vine-covered manor house" on the banks of the little Bronx River. The water of the Bronx River was also found to have ideal properties for use in the dyeing of the tapestry threads. As tapestry making in the United States was a novelty, it was covered by the *New York Times*, and it was also documented in *Tapestries; Their Origin, History, and Renaissance* published in 1912.

At this time, a wooden footbridge was located just south of Gun Hill Road. The bridge was used by Mr. John Lazzari, part owner of the Hotel Gorbets, and the tapestry workers to cross the river without traveling up to the bridge at Gun Hill Road.¹⁴

By 1895, unregulated growth and industrialization transformed the Bronx River from natural idyll into an open sewer. Adjacent neighborhoods dumped effluent directly into the once picturesque river and its tributaries, and houses and stables were built very close to the river. Large numbers of billboards were also haphazardly erected along the river to attract the attention of railroad passengers. By the turn of the century, the Bronx River was described as "dismal land stripped of all natural beauty, and a foul ill-smelling and uncontrolled stream spreading its polluted waters and refuse upon adjacent lowlands."¹⁵



Today, Shoelace Park and Fort Knox Park are located within Sections 1, 2 and 3 of this 1918 record drawing.

Early Twentieth Century

The Bronx River Parkway Reservation

It was not until the early twentieth century that steps were taken to regulate pollution of the Bronx River. In 1906, the Bronx Parkway Commission (BPC) was appointed to reclaim the river and create a fifteen-and-a-half mile linear park connecting Bronx Park and the Kensico Dam and reservoir. As part of their work the BPC installed sewer pipes, monitored water quality, and convinced neighboring towns to use the piped sewage system rather than dump into the river. The BPC also pursued legal action against companies that were dumping and piping industrial waste into the river. The Bronx River Parkway Reservation project began as a sanitation, environmental restoration and park initiative and eventually grew to include an automobile road for pleasure driving through the reservation. With the addition of the roadway, the Bronx River Parkway was one of the first parkways constructed in America and became an important precedent for modern roadway development surrounded by scenic parklands. Hermann Merkel, the superintendent of maintenance at the New York Zoological Society, was hired as the landscape architect and forester for the parkway project. He played an instrumental role in designing the parkway and ensuring that the revitalized river could be balanced with safe motoring as well as traditional park amenities. Merkel noted that many of the native species that once populated the banks of the river had been eradicated by development. Merkel worked to return native species to the Bronx River but recognized that the landscape could not realisti-

cally be restored to its original condition after years of impact of agriculture and industry. Merkel instead advocated creating a civic amenity that would have a picturesque appeal with considerable ecological and recreational benefits without a comprehensive ecological restoration. Merkel created a series of planting types that would be more compatible with the recreational use of the park: restored woodlands, picturesque plantings, and grassy meadows. In many areas where the river had been straightened for the railroad, including areas near the Bronx Zoo, Merkel insisted on restoring its meanders. Merkel also advocated for the creation of manmade lakes for recreation activities, reinforcing the naturalistic, picturesque re-creation of the Bronx River.¹⁶

The project did not receive funding for land acquisition and river clean-up until 1913. Sources of pollution were identified and offenders were required by law to stop dumping. By 1914, the BPC had organized a systematic cleaning of the river. Debris and garbage were removed in such great quantities that they were used as fill for low spots when creating the Parkway. The dredging was also part of an engineering measure to reduce flooding and enhance the recreation appeal of the river. Dredging allowed boating, as well as the creation of small lakes for scenic value. A forestry program was instituted during the planning process and provided vegetation for the newly created open space. The project was considered important because of the public health improvement provided by eliminating the "open sewer" and for the recreational opportunities created by a linear park.



PS 31 school groups planted victory gardens in the park



Bronx River Reservation River Improvements, Early 20th Century



View looking south at the original parkway



Bronx River Parkway Reservation shortly after completion

The project faced several challenges that slowed progress, including the First World War, and problems securing funding. Construction was suspended during the war years and parkway lands were even used as victory gardens. After WWI, war department surplus machinery was purchased at reduced costs for use on the project, helping it move forward.

During the creation of the parkway the Kensico Dam was completed in 1915. The dam had a significant hydrological effect on the river corridor, and it resulted in a reduction of one quarter of the water volume in the river.¹⁷

An important feature of the Parkway was the elimination of at-grade crossings. The commission insisted that bridges and viaducts harmonize with the Parkway's natural appearance, and they favored the use of graceful arched bridges, many of which were designed by the architect Charles W. Stoughton. Stone roadway markers and rustic cedar light poles were designed specifically for the Parkway to further the picturesque aesthetic of the design. The rusticated stone bridges of the Parkway can be seen in Shoelace Park today at the northern banks at 233rd Street and in the south at East Gun Hill Road.

The Parkway was completed in 1925 and was an immediate success. The Parkway was popular as both a pleasure drive and commuter road. The Parkway designers intended the road to be used as a pleasure drive connecting the city with the country, and the road was designed for speeds of 25-30 m.p.h. By the time the Parkway was completed, advances in automobile design rendered the

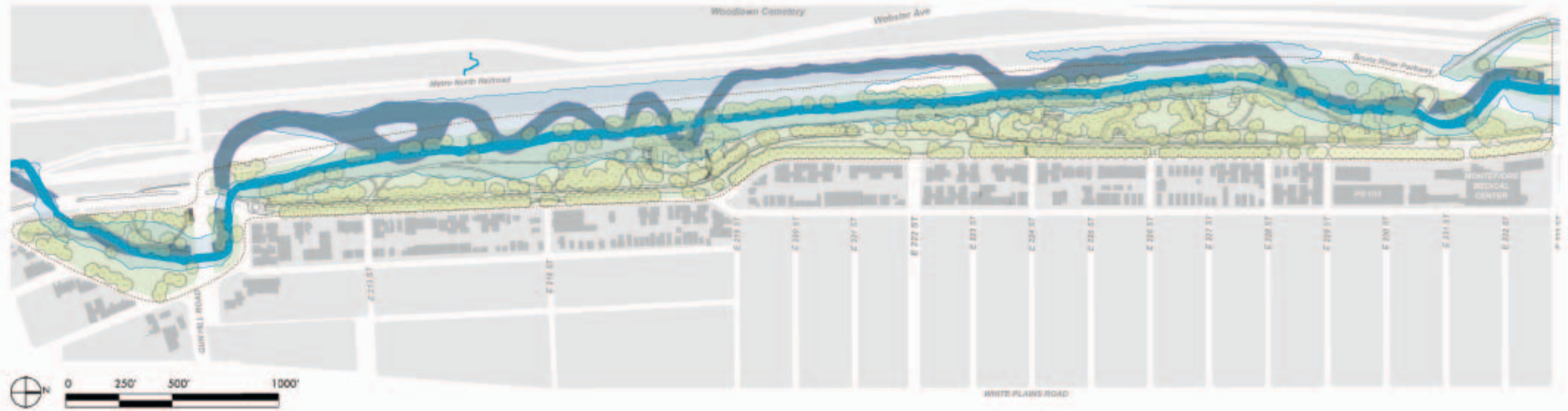
Parkway somewhat obsolete for automobiles. It was too narrow and curving for higher speeds and lacked a shoulder for disabled cars. The Parkway did, however, serve as a catalyst for a building boom along Bronx Boulevard and several multi-story apartment buildings were built between 1927 and 1933.

Moving the Parkway

By 1950, the portion of the Bronx River Parkway south of Bronxville was relocated approximately 300 feet to its current location west of the Bronx River and extended south to Bruckner Boulevard. The road was straightened and widened to six lanes to meet the needs of an increasing number of commuters.

The unused road-bed currently located along the eastern edge of Shoelace Park was near the original southern terminus of the Parkway at the Bronx Zoo. At 233rd Street, the Parkway crossed the river and railroad and continued north along the west side of the river to Westchester. Today, this unused forty-foot-wide, tree-lined historic road-bed is a reminder of early 20th century parkway design. Currently, it serves as a bike/walking/jogging path and a general recreational area.

When the Bronx River Parkway was relocated in the mid-twentieth century, the meandering course of the river along Shoelace Park was dramatically straightened to accommodate the relocated roadway. This move eliminated automobile traffic inside the area that is now Shoelace Park.



Mid to Late Twentieth Century: The Creation of Shoelace Park

In 1960, there was some debate about re-opening the abandoned Bronx River Parkway in the Shoelace Park area as a local road and parking area. By this time, local residents had become accustomed to using the road-bed as a park and playground area, but there was a group of local constituents who were interested in using the area for parking. Highway engineers examined the road in 1960 and determined that, since the road had not been used for more than ten years and was badly dried out and pot-holed, it would need significant repairs and resurfacing in order to become a functioning road. Finally, the Bronx Borough President's Office and the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation agreed that the abandoned road-bed should be considered parkland and that the entire park should be programmed.¹⁸

In 1973, the New York Times reported on the opening of a newly named park along the abandoned road-bed of the Bronx River Parkway. The article states that "five city agencies worked together in the creation of Shoelace Park, from 212th to 229th Streets, the brainchild of a park foreman."¹⁹ (Schumach, 1973) The park was officially opened July 7, 1973, and Mayor Lindsay, the Parks Commissioner, and Members of the Wakefield-Edenwald Office of Neighborhood Government attended.²⁰

However, though there was interest in the river as open space, by the mid-twentieth century the river was increasingly abandoned in favor of industrial and highway development. During the 1960's and 1970's, the Bronx struggled with deteriorating housing stock and flight to the suburbs. Robert Moses' major highway and housing initiatives divided neighborhoods and often separated people from the river. South of the New York Botanical Garden and the Bronx Zoo, the river was polluted and abused, and its banks were bulkheaded and largely barricaded by industrial uses. The channel itself was repeatedly altered along the length of the river. The portion of the Bronx River in the Bronx became once again a polluted dumping ground.

In 1974, local residents, under the leadership of Ruth Anderberg, founded Bronx River Restoration. The grassroots organization mobilized to remove tons of debris from the shoreline in the 180th Street/West Farms area and also undertook significant clean-up projects, removing thousands of tires, broken appliances, car parts and even an antique wine press from the river.²¹ In 1980 Bronx River Restoration collaborated with the design team of The Stein Partnership to create a master plan for the entire length of the Bronx River. Due to the recession of the early 1980s, many potential funding sources for implementation of the master plan vision were cut.

Bronx River Alignment

Legend

- Project Boundary
- Bronx River - current alignment
FEMA FIRM September 5, 2007
- Bronx River - 1939
NYCDPR Survey September 20, 1939
- 100-Yr. Floodline



While the economic downturn of the 1980s left many of the goals of the master plan unrealized, the work of Bronx River Restoration continued under the leadership of Nancy Wallace (Ruth Anderberg's successor) and was the foundation for a new generation of local activists who embraced the reclamation of the river in the late 1990s as an element of a broad struggle for environmental justice. Brought together under the umbrella of the Bronx River Working Group, an initiative of Partnerships for Parks, sixty-five community organizations rallied around the common goal of claiming the river as a resource and, by 2001, had raised \$33 million to restore the river and develop the Bronx River Greenway. This history led to the incorporation of the Bronx River Alliance.

Twenty-first Century

In 2001, the Bronx River Alliance was created as a public-private partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation (NYCDPR), with a mission "to serve as a coordinated voice for the river and work in harmonious partnership to protect, improve and restore the Bronx River corridor and greenway so that they can be healthy ecological, recreational, educational and economic resources for the communities through which the river flows."²²

The Bronx River Conservation Crew and the NYCDPR's Natural Resources Group (NRG) have developed several restoration projects in Shoelace Park to curb erosion, stabilize the stream banks, and re-establish native plant populations. The Conservation Crew and NRG also constructed a boat launch at 219th Street, the first in decades on the river and one that has since enabled hundreds of paddlers to explore the river. The success of this initial effort led to the completion of a second boat launch at Fort Knox in 2006.

Completed in 2004, the *Bronx River Design Guidelines* is a document that establishes a consistent design vocabulary for the then emerging greenway. Building upon this initial effort, the Bronx River Alliance published the *Bronx River Greenway Plan* in 2005, which provided the larger framework for an eight-mile linear city park along the Bronx River with bike and pedestrian trails connecting to trails in Westchester County. This initiative envisions a continuous trail system for the length of the Bronx River from the mouth of the river in the South Bronx to its sources at the Kensico Reservoir. The Bronx River Greenway will also be part of the East Coast Greenway, a 3,000-mile-long path running from Canada to Key West. The following year the Bronx River Alliance and the NYCDPR completed the *Ecological Restoration and Management Plan* for the Bronx portion of the Bronx River. This major planning project addresses the environmental health of the lower Bronx River, sets overall restoration goals, and creates a context for evaluating future restoration projects and strategies. In addition, the Bronx River Alliance and the NYCDPR are partnering with Westchester County to develop a Bronx River Intermunicipal Watershed Management Plan that will affirm a shared vision for watershed management integrating the objectives and priorities identified across the two counties, and encourage a unified approach to watershed management. In 2007, the *Bronx River Greenway Signage Master Plan* was completed. This document builds upon the recommendations put forth in the *Bronx River Design Guidelines* and further refines the graphic identity and wayfinding systems that define the Greenway. Finally, NYCDPR, the Bronx River Alliance and the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) are developing a *Bronx River Riparian Invasive Plant Management Plan* that identifies priorities for riparian and aquatic habitats, describes control strategies, provides a simple routine for coordination and documentation, encourages adaptive management, and identifies monitoring sites and research areas. The *2010 Shoelace Park Master Plan* coordinates with the goals of all of these efforts.



Construction of the Fort Knox Boat Launch, 2006



Swimming area north of Gun Hill Road, c. 1925

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