



SIX
TO CELEBRATE


HISTORIC DISTRICTS COUNCIL


A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

VAN CORTLANDT VILLAGE
THE BRONX





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six historic New York City neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.

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A BRIEF HISTORY

Located in Kingsbridge, Van Cortlandt Village is characterized by its hilly terrain, winding street plan and its distinctive early-20th-century housing stock, which includes freestanding houses, row houses and large apartment complexes. Most of the neighborhood's modest two- and three-story, one- and two-family houses were designed in the neo-Tudor, neo-Georgian and neo-Federal styles, with some buildings accented by Mediterranean tiled roofs and intricate brick and stonework.

Kingsbridge was a significant location in the defense of New York City during the American Revolution due to the presence of Fort Independence, one of a series of major fortifications constructed to control passage between New York City and the mainland. In today's configuration, the fort stood roughly between Giles Place and Cannon Place to the south of West 238th Street. Possible remnants of the fort are extant along Cannon Place. Upon the discovery in 1915 of cannons buried in the ground east of the fort site, a small park was constructed nearby called Fort Independence Park.

Van Cortlandt Village is fortunate to have retained its Frederick Law Olmsted–designed street plan, of which very little survives throughout the rest of The Bronx. Despite the fact that New York City was not fully consolidated until 1898, the city expanded into the west Bronx in the 1870s and continued the Manhattan street grid, even as Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island had developed their own independent street systems. As a reaction to this imposition, the Bronx Park Board's president, William R. Martin, insisted that The Bronx have a system of streets that would correspond better to its hilly terrain. Olmsted was hired in 1875, and he drew plans on a neighborhood scale consisting of business districts, suburbs, compact housing, parks, parkways and transit routes. While construction was underway, political management of the Parks Board changed and Olmsted was discharged in 1878. As a result, Olmsted's layout only survives in a few neighborhoods in The Bronx, including Van Cortlandt Village.

With the opening of the subway station at Broadway and 238th Street in 1908, development pushed northward into the upper reaches of The Bronx. A great surge of development occurred in Van Cortlandt Village during the first three decades of the 20th century with the construction of great apartment houses and small private homes throughout the neighborhood. The new residents of the area were of modest income and were mostly Irish immigrants. With the construction of the Shalom Aleichem Houses in 1926–1927, Eastern European Jews began to move in, having relocated from the Lower East Side.

The rich mix of early-20th-century architecture and the retention of the Olmsted street plan give Van Cortlandt Village its distinctive character. In recent years the neighborhood has struggled with major development projects encroaching on the historic built environment. In 2011, the neighborhood was deemed eligible for listing on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. At the time of this publication, an official nomination is in the works.

I. WEST 238TH STREET STAIRWAY

This “stair street,” of which there are several throughout the west Bronx, was constructed as a result of the dramatic topography of the area and recalls the use of the stairway device in medieval European cities constructed on hilly terrain. West 238th Street is a major thoroughfare throughout The Bronx, but the steep hill in Van Cortlandt Village forces a break in traffic flow. The stair accommodates pedestrians and allows West 238th Street to continue at the top of the hill.



Garden Houses—with Garages” and were meant to evoke English country cottages with white stucco and green tiled roofs. All 12 are extant today, but with some alterations to their original appearances, especially the removal of their original stucco.

2. 3805, 3811, 3815, 3819, 3823, 3827 ORLOFF AVENUE 105, 111, 115, 119, 123, 127 WEST 238TH STREET

Hoppin & Koen, 1922

Built by Thomas T. Hopper, Co. and designed by Hoppin & Koen, architects of the former New York City Police Headquarters Building in Little Italy, these 12 houses were advertised as “New



3. 3801, 3803, 3805, 3807, 3809, 3810, 3811, 3815, 3823, 3827, 3829, 3831, 3839 CANNON PLACE

Ca. 1950

Beginning at the top of the West 238th Street stairway and stretching northeast along Cannon Place stands a concentration of 13 post-war houses. These modest houses were designed and built in

the neo-Georgian style. They are all constructed of brick, and some feature gabled entrance porches and slate tile roofs.

4. 3868, 3870, 3872, 3874

CANNON PLACE

Solomon Pomeranz, 1933

These four houses were designed by Solomon Pomeranz, a New York architect of Russian descent who was very active in The Bronx. Nos. 3868 and 3870 were inspired by the Spanish Mission style, with tiled roofs and arched windows on their upper level. Nos. 3872 and 3874 were designed in the neo-Tudor style, with half-timbering and patterned brickwork.



5. 3835, 3845 SEDGWICK AVENUE and 3519 ORLOFF AVENUE 1956–57

In 1955, State Senator MacNeil Mitchell and Brooklyn Assemblyman Alfred A. Lama proposed a law to the New York State legislature that would provide low-interest loans and realty tax abatements to private developers and cooperatives for the construction of urban middle income housing. After the law was passed, the resulting housing was referred to as Mitchell-Lama housing. The Park Reservoir complex in Van Cortlandt Village is one of New York City's first Mitchell-Lama cooperative apartment houses.



6. 3826, 3828 SEDGWICK AVENUE

James F. Delaney, 1926

3868 SEDGWICK AVENUE

Ca. 1930

The adjoining homes at 3826 and 3828 were built in 1926 and feature multi-colored brick façades with Gothic ornaments, slate tile roofs and their original wooden doors and multi-paned glass windows. The imposing four-story house at No. 3868 was built circa 1930 and features a rustic stone façade on its ground level, stucco and half-timbering on its upper levels, slate tiles and multiple gables on its roof, and original wooden entry and garage doors. These three homes stand out for their architectural beauty, integrity and contribution to the neo-Tudor character of the neighborhood.



7. SHALOM ALEICHEM HOUSES

Springsteen & Goldhammer, 1926–27

In its early years, the Shalom Aleichem Houses were also known as the Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft. Unlike other cooperative housing complexes of the era, they were developed independent of government subsidies by members of the Workmen's Circle who wished to create a housing complex for residents with an interest in and concern for the preservation of secular Yiddish culture. Shalom Aleichem was the pen name of famed Ukrainian Yiddish writer Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich, whose works include *Tevye the Milkman*, on which *Fiddler on the Roof* is based. Shalom Aleichem Houses was devoted to its cultural mission, and

included artists' studios, an auditorium for lectures and performances and cafeterias for functions. The complex, which has survived largely intact over the years, is made up of 15 five-story buildings comprising 229



apartments. Its neo-Tudor style was apparently unrelated to the values of the cooperative, but was a popular choice for residential architecture at the time. One of its most distinctive characteristics is the presence of beautifully landscaped inner garden courtyards.

8. 3438, 3440, 3442, 3444, 3446
GILES PLACE

Benjamin Driesler, 1936

3432–34 and 3426–28 GILES
PLACE

Benjamin Driesler, 1933

This row of five attached homes and two detached homes was designed in the neo-Tudor style. All of the houses were constructed of brick with half-timbering on the upper levels. The earlier homes are more exuberant in their detailing, with red clay tile roofs, patterned brick chimneys, fieldstone accents on their façades and turreted entry porches. The later homes have slate tile roofs and less ornamental detail on their façades. The location of these structures directly across from the neo-Tudor Shalom Aleichem Houses creates a stylistically uniform and contextually elegant streetscape.



9. 3435 GILES PLACE

Former site of the Giles mansion
and approximate site of Fort
Independence

While it is currently occupied by Fort Independence Hall, an apartment building dating to 1960, the site holds much significance. Prior to its demolition in 1957, it was the site of the Giles mansion, which was constructed in 1853 by William Ogden Giles (architect unknown). The mansion was a magnificent structure with a large central tower that commanded hilltop views of the region. The site had previously been the approximate location of Revolutionary War–era Fort Independence. During the construction of both the Giles mansion in the mid-19th century and Fort Independence Hall in the mid-20th century, many revolutionary war artifacts were unearthed here.



Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox
and Tilden Foundations

10. 3330 GILES PLACE

Dwight James Baum, 1922

3332 GILES PLACE

Charles A. Newburgh, 1922

3336 GILES PLACE

Ca. 1922

3338, 3340, 3344 GILES PLACE

James Wells, 1923

Along Giles Place, south of the Cannon Place intersection, stands a series of cottage houses constructed in the early 1920s. No. 3330 was built for P. Robert O'Connor, the brother-in-law of Bronx Congressman Charles A. Buckley.

No. 3336 is believed to be a Sears Roebuck catalog house, though this is not confirmed.

Nos. 3338 and 3340, which are identical in form but not materials, have symmetrical façade layouts with central gabled entry porches. No. 3344 (not pictured) is most distinctive in its architectural details. Designed by the same architect as Nos. 3338 and 3340, the house is made of brick with a Mediterranean tiled roof and features an enclosed porch with a fenced balcony above and arched windows on both levels.



II. 3403 CANNON PLACE

Captain Lawrence V. Meehan, 1921

This modest freestanding house was designed and built by Captain Lawrence V. Meehan, who, as superintendent of construction, repair and supplies of the Kingsbridge Armory, oversaw the construction of the Kingsbridge Armory, which was the largest in the world at the time of its construction. Captain Meehan's house has undergone some changes, including the replacement of its shingles with vinyl siding and the redesign of its Cannon Place façade.



12. 3411, 3413, 3415, 3417, 3419, 3421 CANNON PLACE

Solomon Pomeranz, 1932

This row of five attached houses was designed in the neo-Tudor style and features brick and stucco façades with stone accents, half timbering on the upper levels, and gabled entryways.

13. 3440, 3442, 3444, 3446 CANNON PLACE

Manough Exerjian, 1925

Built in 1925, one year before the construction of Shalom Aleichem Houses, this row of four attached houses was among the neighborhood's first neo-Tudor architecture. The houses were designed by Manough Exerjian, a Turkish architect who immigrated to the United States in 1914 and based his practice in Great Neck, Long Island.



I4. FORT INDEPENDENCE REMNANTS

Ca. 1776

Fort Independence was constructed under orders by General George Washington and under the direction of Colonel Rufus Putnam in 1776 to protect the American army and defend the line of the Harlem River. The fort was surrounded by an entrenchment that was 10 feet wide and three and a-half feet deep, and commanded far-reaching views of the whole area. Led by Sir Henry Clinton, British troops destroyed the fort in 1779. This stone wall is believed to be the only extant physical trace of Fort Independence. The fort once stood between Giles Place and Cannon Place to the south of West 238th Street, making these stones the remnants of the fort's western wall.



I5. 3480, 3482, 3484, 3486, 3488, 3490, 3492, 3494 CANNON PLACE

Matthew W. Del Gaudio, 1915–16

This row of eight houses is the earliest extant housing in the neighborhood. The row is broken up into two groups of four houses. The first group, Nos. 3480 to 3486, was constructed in 1915 of red brick, and the second group, Nos. 3488 to 3494, was constructed in 1916 of beige brick. Both are adorned with diamond-shaped brickwork and simple wooden porches on their front façades. They were designed by Cooper Union graduate and Bronx-based architect Matthew W. Del Gaudio, who served as the president of several prominent New York architecture societies. This row pays particular attention to the hilly terrain of the neighborhood, as each house is raised above a garage on the street level, affording views to the west.

VAN CORTLANDT VILLAGE

