

The community that developed on the ridge around the Jerome Park Reservoir and Van Cortlandt Park should be thankful for the early pioneers who found a grand vision on the land we call home. Looking at an old map, one could only imagine what it looked like, how the landscaped developed, and other things for the interested mind. In what could only be describe as the growth of the conservationist environmentalist era, two men, John B. Jarvis (1775-1885) and Frederick L. Olmstead (1822-1903), had a great influence on development in the country, state, and city. For our area, their foresight and talent had no bounds. But it took fifty years of planning and building.

Surveying streets cut out of the same topography with curves instead of straight lines (1876). Building railroads to go north by the “country” (1880). Connecting parks for the enjoyment of the new settlers (1884), and by discovering that the land at Van Cortlandt Estate was much more beautiful and natural than Central Park (1888). When there was not enough water for the thirsty city, by adding the New Croton Aqueduct to the Old Croton Aqueduct system to enable growth (1890). By opening the first municipal golf course for recreation in Van Cortlandt Park (1895). Importantly, knowing to choose the site of the old Jerome Park Race Track as the site for a reservoir because it was on the high ridge, on an area with soft ground for ease in digging, and topographically configured to enable gravity to continue to bring water to a thirsty city (1906). Finally by auctioning the sale of the extra land from the Van Cortlandt Estate (1912). Building the IRT #4 subway (1918) to complete the future Van Cortlandt Village. Development that followed included the vision of the Amalgamated Housing Corporation where every day people worked cooperatively to live together (1927). Soon development would extend to Bedford Park and Kingsbridge Heights.

## BACKGROUND

### Old and New Croton Aqueduct: John B. Jervis 1842

On October 11, 1836, John Jervis was appointed the Chief Engineer for the Old Croton Aqueduct, and in 1882 he was consulted about the New Aqueduct.<sup>1</sup> In 1842, John Bloomfield Jervis, Esq., the Chief Engineer of the Croton Aqueduct, penned the “Description of the Croton Aqueduct / by John B. Jervis. Jervis, John B. (John Bloomfield), 1795-1885.”<sup>2</sup> It is really a fascinating description of the land and the water ways by a fascinating man who started out as a farmer.

### Bronx Parks System: Frederick Law Olmstead 1870

In the 1870s, landscape architect [Frederick Law Olmsted](#) envisioned a [greenbelt](#) across the Bronx, consisting of parks and parkways that would align with existing geography.[\[5\]\[6\]](#) In 1876, [Frederick Law Olmsted](#) was hired to survey the Bronx and map out streets based on the local geography. Olmsted noted the natural beauty of the Van Cortlandt estate, comparing it to [Central Park](#) which he designed, and recommended the city purchase the property.[\[49\]\[50\]](#)<sup>3</sup>

### New York and Putnam Railroads 1880

In 1880 while the new park was being planned, the New York City & Northern Railroad, later the [New York and Putnam Railroad](#), was built through the center of the park.[\[60\]](#) It had two stops in the Bronx: one inside the Van Cortlandt Park, and another to the south at [Kingsbridge](#). South of Kingsbridge, the railroad merged with the present-day [Hudson Line](#) of the [Metro-North Railroad](#).[\[61\]](#) The tracks were used for passenger use until 1958, and were used by freight trains until 1981.[\[38\]\[2\]](#) A [shuttle train](#) was operated by Yonkers Rapid Transit Railway between Kingsbridge

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<sup>1</sup> The Water-supply of the City of New York. 1658-1895, By Edward Wegmann, page 37 and 237.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=duIgAAAAAAAJ&dq=croton%20dam&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false>

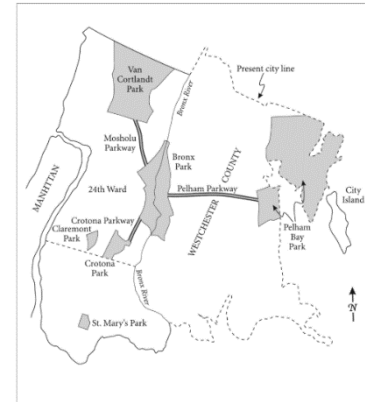
<sup>2</sup> <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044044828309&view=1up&seq=7>

<sup>3</sup> Albert Fein, Landscape into Cityscape (1981). Describes Olmstead’s entire vision for north Bronx.

and [Yonkers](#). It ran off the main New York and Putnam Railroad line immediately north of the Van Cortlandt station.<sup>[45]</sup> Service began in March 1888 and ran until 1942 (see [§ Former railroads](#)).<sup>[38]</sup>

### New Park Act signed Olmstead's vision 1884

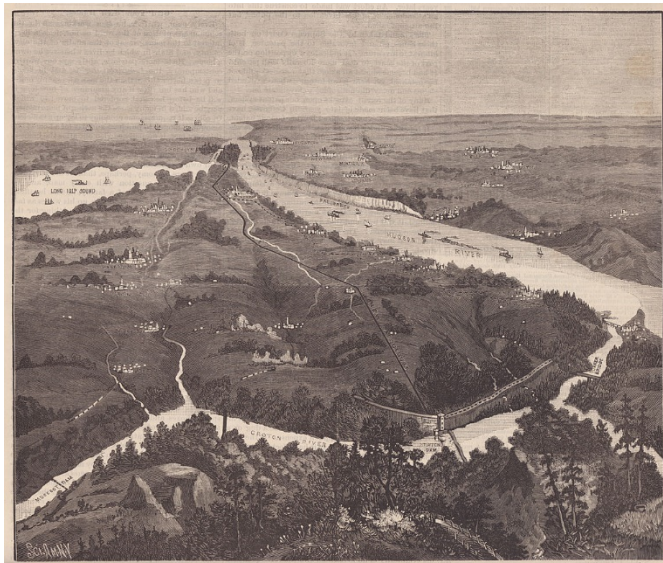
In June 1884, Governor [Grover Cleveland](#) signed the [New Parks Act](#) into law, authorizing the creation of the park system.<sup>[9][10][12]</sup> The system consisted of three parkways and six parks, with [Bronx Park](#) at the center of the system. Bronx Park was connected to [Van Cortlandt Park](#) in the northwest via Mosholu Parkway; to [Pelham Bay Park](#) in the east via [Pelham Parkway](#); and to [Crotona Park](#) in the south via Crotona Parkway.



MAP 3.1 Parks and Parkway in the Bronx, 1884

### Van Cortlandt Park sold to City 1888

The Van Cortlandt family property was sold to the [City of New York](#) and made into a public parkland in 1888.<sup>[10]</sup>



### New Croton Aqueduct opened 1890

The New Croton Aqueduct opened on July 15, 1890,<sup>[2]</sup> replacing the [Old Croton Aqueduct](#). It runs from the [New Croton Reservoir](#) in [Westchester County](#) to the [Jerome Park Reservoir](#) in [the Bronx](#).

Water flows then proceed toward the Croton Water Filtration Plant for treatment. Treated

water is then distributed to certain areas of the Bronx and [Manhattan](#). The engraving (Left) is from Scientific American in 1887 that shows the New Croton Aqueduct in solid line comparing to the

Old Croton Aqueduct in dotted line, looking south from Putnam County with Manhattan on the far side.<sup>4</sup>

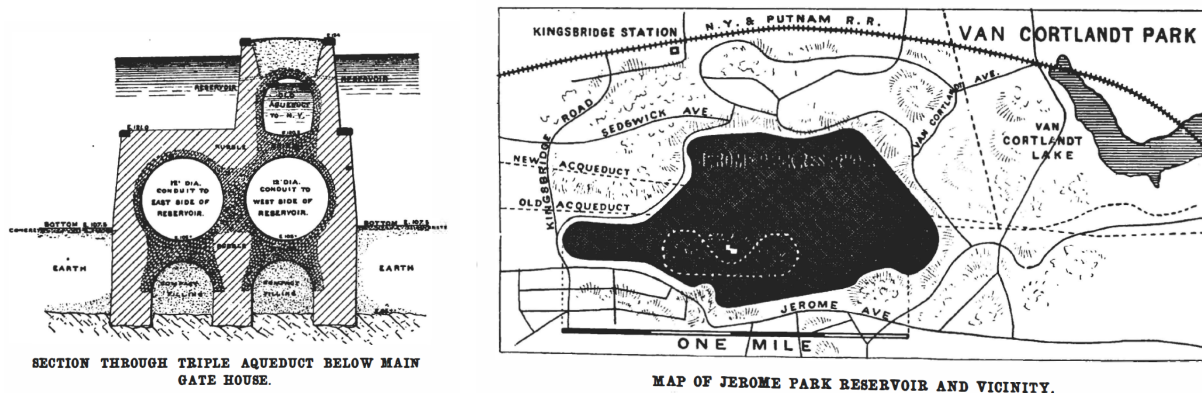
### Van Cortlandt Golf Course 1895

The nine-hole Van Cortlandt Golf Course opened on July 6, 1895,<sup>[71][72]</sup> as the country's first and oldest public golf course.<sup>[73][74]</sup>

### Jerome Park Reservoir 1906

The Jerome Park Reservoir was built in 1906 to serve the [New Croton aqueduct\[2\]](#) as part of the [New York City water supply system](#).<sup>5</sup> It took the place of the Jerome Park Racetrack, named after Jenny Jerome, the mother of Winston Churchill. This outstanding example of a landscaped reservoir-park reflecting the “New Parks” movement.

Photos are from the Scientific America, June 1, 1901, page 359.



### IRT #4 Elevated “El” Subway 1918

During the extension of the [IRT Lexington Avenue Line](#) north of 42nd Street–Grand Central Terminal, shuttle elevated trains served the [IRT Jerome Avenue Line](#) (which at the time was only between East 149th Street–Grand Concourse and Kingsbridge Road) starting June 2,

<sup>4</sup> <https://crotonhistory.org/2013/08/31/birds-eye-views-of-the-croton-aqueduct-1879-1887/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://crotonhistory.org/2013/08/31/birds-eye-views-of-the-croton-aqueduct-1879-1887/>

1917.<sup>[4]</sup> **On April 15, 1918, shuttles were extended to Woodlawn.** This provided mass transit access to the Jerome Park Reservoir. A second shuttle, using subway cars, from 149th Street–Grand Concourse to Grand Central started on July 17, 1918. On August 1, 1918, the entire Jerome and Lexington Avenue Lines were completed and the connection to the [Broadway–Seventh Avenue Line](#) at 42nd Street was removed. Trains began running between Woodlawn and Bowling Green.<sup>[4]</sup> On December 11, 1921, Lexington Avenue–Jerome Avenue subway trains began running north of [167th Street](#) at all times, replacing elevated trains, which ran to Woodlawn during rush hours, but from then on terminated at 167th Street during non-rush hours.<sup>[5]</sup>

## MORE PEOPLE ARRIVED

(The following information was found in the Fort Independence Cultural Resource Survey Report, December 2011 referred to below. Recently we found the sales book which made it clearer to read.)



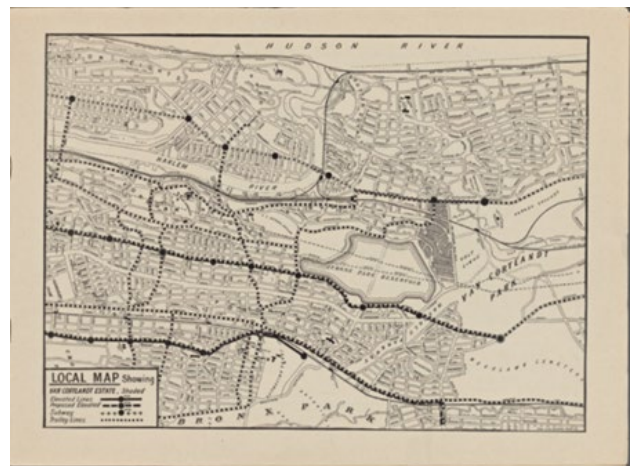
The Van Cortlandt Estate was auctioned on June 8, 1912 at the premises of Broadway and 238<sup>th</sup> Street. It was described as the Van Cortlandt Park South, Jerome Park Reservoir and adjacent streets and avenues.<sup>6</sup>

According to the New York Times, *Crowd of Bidders Turns Sale of Van Cortlandt Estate Into a Country Picnic*, New York Times, June 9, 1912 p. 6<sup>7</sup> this was a big success and historic opportunity for

developers that was recognized as such at the time. The success of the sale was due to the desirable, strategic location of the parcels between Van Cortlandt Park and the Jerome Park Reservoir. This could only be described as Heaven for those who were living in the squalor of the lower east side housing.

*“New York saw the last of the famous Van Cortlandt estate yesterday, when the remaining part of the 50,000-acre farm, acquired by the Van Cortlandt’s by royal grant and by purchase from the Indians, went under the auction hammer, to be divided up into building lots. ... Purchasers and those attracted by curiosity came with their luncheon baskets, and the grounds resembled more the gathering place of a party of picnickers than the rallying point for bidders at a real estate sale.*

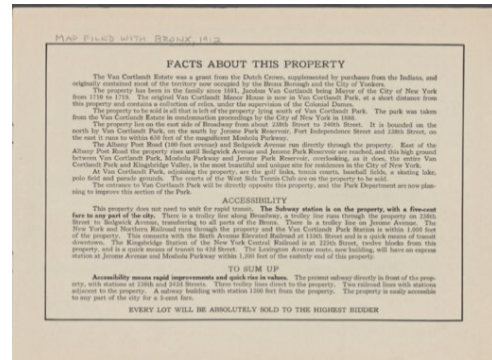
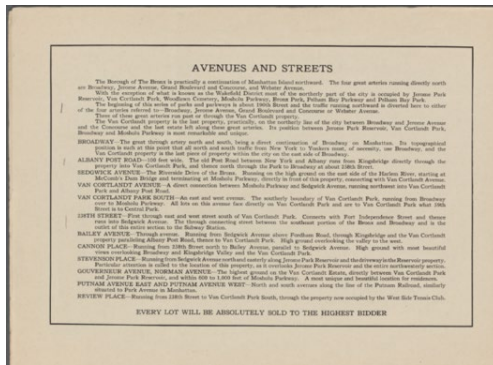
*Not in years has New York seen so large a sale of property in one tract as that which was held yesterday.... This tract, between Van Cortlandt Park on the north and the Jerome Park reservoir on the south, was the last section retained by the heirs of the Van Cortlandt estate.”*



<sup>6</sup> Complete sales announcement is here <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/4d284800-69cb-0131-b6fb-58d385a7bbd0/book#mode/2up>

<sup>7</sup> Fort Independence Cultural Resource Survey Report prepared for the Fort Independence Park Neighborhood Association, Kingsbridge, Bronx, New York Report Prepared by Anthony W. Robins, Thompson & Columbus, Inc., December 2011, page 16

# ENGINEERING PARADISE – THE HISTORY OF THE JEROME PARK RESERVOIR COMMUNITY



## Amalgamated Housing Corporation (1927)

(This information was found at Columbia University in a collaborative effort to keep the co-op history with a discussion club. Although dated 1957, much of the wording below was taken from old documents found in celebratory anniversary booklets included at the end of this paper. This series include Reading # 1 - Co-op History/Discussion Club, dated July 12, 2009.) The Amalgamated is eligible for the State and National Register.

Partial version of the actual reading. Photos are added.

## The Birth of the Amalgamated Housing Corporation, by Abraham Kazan, 1957<sup>8</sup>

After a titanic struggle which had lasted four years, World War I came to an end in 1918. The effects of this struggle in the field of housing only began to be acute in subsequent years. The cessation of construction during the war years was not immediately felt due to the fact that large numbers of the population were engaged in combat and fewer marriages were taking place. On the return of the men from the armed forces, the demand for housing grew; the shortage was soon evident and the cost of rent began to increase.

*“A site adjoining Van Cortlandt Park, the largest public park in New York City, was chosen as the spot where the housing community would be built. Van Cortlandt Park to the north, Moshulu Parkway to the east, and the Jerome Park Reservoir to the south made this an ideal location.”*

In the City of New York, the strong demand for housing resulted in a wave of real-estate speculation. City inhabitants living in multiple buildings found at the end of almost every month that ownership had changed hands. With new ownership came an increase in the rentals, based on the new price placed on the property. Tenant-protest groups were organized; a wave of rent strikes resulted. The courts were busy hearing claims of non payments of rent. The housing situation for a

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/amalgamated/history/1/>

large segment of the population became desperate. No constructive proposals were being made to alleviate the problem.

The New York State Legislature and Governor Alfred E. Smith took notice of the drastic shortage of shelter. To stimulate the construction of additional housing the Legislature reduced the taxes on new housing to the extent of \$1000 per room for a period of ten years. In 1926, the governor was responsible for the introduction of a new housing act, providing a state-controlled bank to finance low-rental housing. This bill, greatly watered down, was finally passed. It set up a State Board of Housing consisting of five members appointed by the governor; it permitted municipalities of 1,000,000 population or more to grant partial tax abatement on the new housing improvements for twenty years, in return for which the sponsors would agree to limit the rental to \$12.50 in Manhattan, \$11 in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, and \$9 in Richmond. The sponsor also had to limit his return to 6% and agree to have the project under the control of the State Board of Housing.

At about this time, a group of members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union were meeting to find a solution to their immediate housing problems. The gathering point was the Amalgamated Credit Union office. Here, most of them met once a week to approve the applications that were made for loans by members of the Credit Union. Gradually, they learned that they could be their own bankers. What they did not know at that time was how to be their own landlords. They knew that it takes a large sum of money to own a big house and to be the landlord of thirty, forty, or fifty tenants; none of them had much money. From their discussions, they concluded that perhaps thirty, forty, or more people, jointly, could put together that much money, and become their own landlord. They could also see that those who were willing to join, but could not raise their share of the money, could borrow the funds from the Credit Union. The cooperative idea took root. The A.C.W. Corporation was organized for the purpose of finding a way to build housing for all those who wanted to join without the risk of having the rent increased beyond the ability of the tenants to pay and without the risk of being evicted.

A committee was selected to study the matter. Various ideas were considered. Some wanted to see two family houses built; others saw only the possibility of buying an old house and converting it for the use of the members. Still others wanted to see a new development built to meet the requirements of the member-cooperators. Some wanted the new development in one borough; some in another. However, there was agreement that the new location had to be so situated that it

would be near the open spaces, parks, and trees where their families could enjoy plenty of fresh air, and generally convenient to places of employment.

A site adjoining Van Cortlandt Park, the largest public park in New York City, was chosen as the spot where the housing community would be built. Van Cortlandt Park to the north, Moshulu Parkway to the east, and the Jerome Park Reservoir to the south made this an ideal location.

### *Initial Planning and Financing*

The group managed to put together \$5000 to pledge as a deposit on the land. The initial plans called for the building of 303 units. Undertaking the construction of a development of this size, involving a cost of approximately \$2,000,000, was not a simple matter. At no time did anyone in the group expect to be able to pay for the entire cost of his apartment. A mortgage was to be secured to provide the greater part of the construction cost. The questions were who was going to lend such a group such as this a million dollars or more on a venture that had not been tried; what would happen if construction was started and there were not enough funds to finish the project; what if the costs were eventually much higher than anticipated; and what if the carrying charges turned out to be too high for the members to pay. The pioneers of this group spent sleepless nights going over these problems. A way had to be found to give this new organization financial standing in the community.

The acute shortage of housing in New York City was little by little attracting the attention of some of the leaders of progressive labor unions. Conferences were held at the suggestion of a well-known architect; they were attended by the representatives of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union, as well as several other labor organizations including the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. At the request of Sidney Hillman, the president of the Amalgamated Union, the writer attended these conferences as an observer. He also attended the hearings in Albany on the proposed housing act. Not being fully satisfied with the constructiveness of these conferences, he reported his findings with the recommendation that the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union, as an organization, become the sponsor of the planned housing project at Van Cortlandt Park. He also suggested that the proposed cooperative take advantage of provisions in the newly-created State Housing Act. Before very long, it was decided that the A.C.W. Corporation remain as the construction company and the Amalgamated Housing Corporation, a new corporation, would take over the project when completed. This marked the entry of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers'

Union into the field of housing. The writer, then an employee of the Union and president of the A.C.W. Corporation, was placed in charge, as president, of the newly-organized Amalgamated Housing Corporation.



Figure 1 Photo from 75th Anniversary: Story of a Co-op Community – the First 75 years (Amalgamated Housing Cooperative – 1927, Park Reservoir Housing Cooperative – 1957), Page 2. Note the Jerome Park Reservoir is on the bottom of the photo, before there was a fence. You can see the pointed top of the North Basin and Gate House 2.

### *Financial Structure*

The State housing Act of 1926 provided that a limited-dividend company organized under that act must limit its financial structure to one mortgage paying not more than 5 % and not exceeding two-thirds of the cost of the project, or the appraised value, whichever was lower. Amalgamated Housing became the first limited-dividend company and had to comply with these regulations. Instead of the original investment of \$200 per room as we had intended, each cooperator was asked to invest \$500 (the estimated cost was \$1500 per room).

This created a serious problem for many of the prospective cooperators who were unable to supply the required equity. The Amalgamated Union and the Amalgamated Bank came to the assistance of these members. An arrangement was made to have the Jewish Daily Forward, a progressive labor newspaper in the city, pledge \$150,000 with the Bank as a credit fund. This

enabled the Amalgamated Bank to extend loans to prospective cooperators up to 50% of the total required-at a low-interest rate, and permitted them to repay this loan over a period of ten years. Some members were able to repay the loan in a short period by availing themselves of the opportunity to make loans through the Credit Union.

With one-third of the estimated cost of the project supplied by the member-cooperators it remained only to secure the mortgage loan. This, however, did not come about too easily. None of the insurance companies or savings banks were ready and willing to take a chance and lend \$1,200,000 to a group of 303 tenant-owners. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company finally granted the loan, but only after a great effort was made by President Hillman. To satisfy the mortgagee, the Union had to guarantee to the insurance company the completion of the project. This however did not end the financial problem of this housing cooperative! The estimated cost of land and buildings, as envisioned, was to amount to \$1,800,000. The actual cost, however, amounted to \$1,925,000. The Jewish Daily Forward again came to the assistance of the housing cooperative. A temporary loan was arranged and it took several years before it was completely repaid.

### *Completion of First Units*

November 1, 1927, marks the day when the first handful of tenants moved into the almost completed buildings 4 and 5. It did not matter that the stairs leading to the entrances of those buildings were not finished. The utility company was not quite ready to hook up its wires and there was no light. To make matters worse, a penetrating cold rain continued during the entire day and turned the soil all around the garden into a sea of mud. But all these inconveniences did not dampen the spirit of the member-cooperators. They had waited too long to postpone their taking possession of the apartments for another week, or even another day.

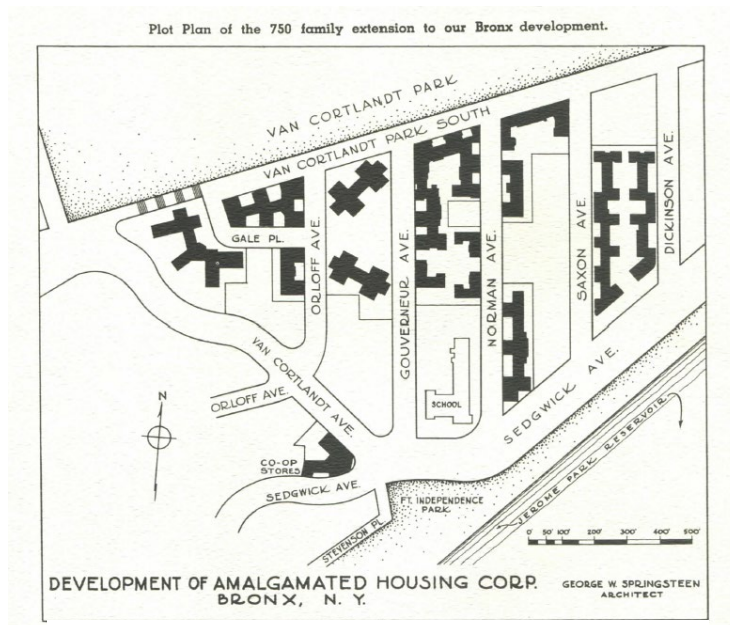


Figure 2 Photo from 75th Anniversary: Page 5 – The Jerome Park Reservoir and Fort Independence Park are on the lower right shown on the map of development.

During the long year, when construction was under way, most of the members spent every free day at the site watching the buildings rise. Similarly, this was a exciting period for those charged with the responsibility of seeing the project completed. Lacking the technical knowledge of construction, we had to engage the assistance of others. Within four months, all the 303 member-cooperators had moved into their new homes.

The first group of buildings of the Amalgamated cooperative community consisted of six buildings, five stories in height. Five of the buildings were grouped around a long city block bounded by Saxon, Sedgwick, and Dickinson Avenues. The sixth building was situated on the block front from Saxon to the present Hill-man Avenue. The buildings were designed by the late architects, George W. Springsteen and Albert Goldhammer.

(Three sides are:  
Van Cortlandt Park, Fort  
Independence Park and  
Jerome Park Reservoir)

***“With parks and open  
space on three sides,  
this development, after  
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In planning the development, it was our desire to provide cross ventilation in every apartment and to see that all the inhabitants had privacy. To accomplish this, twenty-nine separate staircases were provided. Each entrance led to either nine or fourteen apartments with two or three families on a floor. Most of the apartments had two exposures providing for plenty of sun and ventilation. Coverage by the buildings was restricted to 47.9%, thus leaving more than half of the land for gardens, walks, and open spaces. No elevators were provided; the restriction against multiple apartment buildings on the site was waived by the Radio Corporation of America<sup>9</sup>, an adjoining neighbor, only on condition

that no elevators be installed in the building up to the year 1955. With parks and open space on three sides, this development, after two to three years, looked like a group of buildings set in the middle of a large park and gave the impression of a college campus.

#### *Expansion Buildings 7 and 9*

The initial success of the Amalgamated Housing s venture was hailed by our friends as a bold stroke to solve the housing shortage. Editorially the New York newspapers gave a great deal of well-deserved credit to the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. The Union's pioneering efforts

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<sup>9</sup> Radio Corporation of America (RCA) site was on St. Patrick's land. Proximity of RCA site led to restriction of elevators on the first building site until 1955. See "30 Years of Amalgamated Housing Corporation 1927-1957" in the 75th Anniversary Book.

to assist the wage earner obtain decent housing at a reasonable price were widely acclaimed. The self-help characteristics and the advantages of cooperative housing were at first recognized only by a few. Eventually, however, the general public, caught in the acute housing shortage, began to understand that the Amalgamated Housing Cooperative demonstrated what could be done if a group of people learned to work together.

Before the first year's operation was completed, several hundred applicants registered for any possible vacancies. The low rental and the extremely attractive location appealed to a large number of people in need of housing.

Plans were immediately made to add another building. A parcel of land fronting on Van Cortlandt Park South between the present Hillman Avenue and Gouverneur Avenue was assembled. With no restrictions to contend with, this building was laid out in a fashion similar to the first block but with eight elevators. Some sections of the building were seven stories in height, others only six. Construction started immediately after Metropolitan Life Insurance Company agreed to supply the mortgage loan. With the assistance of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America a temporary construction loan of \$200,000 was obtained from the New York Trust Company.

Encouraged by the success accomplished thus far, the management of the project began to form plans for continued expansion. To avoid the possibility of any other organization being able to put up a building between our co-op buildings on the park side leading to Broadway, we acquired the contiguous land facing the park.

#### *Another Cooperative is Organized*

In 1929, news of the success of the Amalgamated development reached Franklin D. Roosevelt, then the governor of the State of New York. Aaron Rabinowitz, member of the State Board of Housing representing that body on the Board of Directors of the Amalgamated Housing

My friend leaned out of the window of our bedroom and gazed for a long while at the panorama spread out before his eyes. From the white tower of Manhattan College on the west to the heavily wooded area near Moshulu Parkway on the east the view was unobstructed, beautiful, breath-taking.

Since it was a clear day he could see the grey cliffs at the Palisades beyond the hills of Riverdale and Fieldston. At that moment a locomotive of the Putnam Division of the N. Y. Central R.R. was puffing across the little trestle over the Van Cortlandt Park Lake, heading north toward Brewster. In the background tiny human figures could be seen running around the athletic fields of the Parade Grounds.

In the foreground was the ancestral burial ground of the Van Cortlandt family. Directly in front of us was the giant oak tree, now in its autumn dress of russet and gold, spreading its protecting arms over the path below and showering the earth with acorns.

This was the scene which unfolded itself before my friend's unbelieving eyes as he was gazing out of my bedroom window. He turned to us and said, "This isn't just an apartment house; this is an *estate*!"

Figure 3 Photos from 75th Anniversary: Page 6, *The Peoples Estate* by Nathan Drift, Teacher at PS 121, describes the view from the buildings.

Corporation, reported to the governor, in glowing terms, of the new method used to solve a portion of the housing problem in New York City. At the urging of Roosevelt, the then Lieutenant Governor, Herbert H. Lehman, and Aaron Rabinowitz volunteered to assist with the financing -of a similar project in a slum area of the Lower East Side of the City. Sidney Hillman, encouraged by the results of the development in the Bronx, agreed that an example of cooperative housing on the East Side of Manhattan might pave the way for the rebuilding of the slums of the City by others. The Amalgamated Union therefore became the sponsor of the new cooperative.

A square block of 60,000 square feet was acquired and a limited-dividend company was set up under the name of Amalgamated Dwellings, Inc. Lehman and Rabinowitz agreed to help finance the construction until all the apartments were subscribed for. They also agreed to set up a fund to assist prospective cooperators who could only invest 50% or more of the required \$500 equity per room. The average carrying charges were set at \$12.25 a room per month. The development was completed in November 1930.

In the beginning, the project was rather disappointing. The early effects of the depression and the lack of understanding of the cooperative idea were obstacles almost too difficult to cope with. Gradually, however these difficulties were overcome and the building was fully subscribed and occupied.

During the time that Amalgamated Dwellings, Inc. was being built, the demand for more cooperative housing came from applicants who were interested in moving to the Van Cortlandt Park development. During this period, the cost of construction reached an almost all time low level, and the opportunity to erect another house with somewhat lower equity requirement was made possible. A plan was designed to erect a six-story building on the irregular block bounded by Gale Place, Orloff Avenue, and Van Cortlandt Avenue, to accommodate 115 families. The investment per room was set at \$425 instead of \$500. By

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A site adjoining Van Cortlandt Park, the largest public park in New York City, was finally chosen as the spot where the housing community would be built. Van Cortlandt Park to the north, Mosholu Parkway to the east, and the Jerome Park Reservoir to the south made this an ideal location.

Figure 4 Photos from 75th Anniversary: Page 10 In the beginning they found the ideal location – Jerome Park Reservoir is part of the decision.

the end of 1931, the number of cooperative apartments built stood at 856; 620 in the Bronx and 236 in Manhattan. ....

### **Shalom Aleichem Houses (Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft) 1927**

(Next came the Shalom Aleichem Houses (Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft), completed in 1927 by Springsteen and Goldhammer for 229 families on a site overlooking the Jerome Park Reservoir at Giles Place, West 238th Street, and Cannon Place.<sup>10</sup> The Shalom Aleichem is eligible for the State and National Register.)

This is Session 40, Co-op History/Discussion Club, Dec 16, 2012) and the full discussion follows:

#### The Early History of the Shalom Aleichem Houses

The political climate of the 1920s encouraged a number of interesting experiments with cooperative workers' housing built by labor and other organizations. Some used the benefits of the 1926 Limited Dividend Law - like the Amalgamated Housing Corporation, organized in 1927. Other collectives were developed independent of government subsidy, for example, the Workers Cooperative Colony and the Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft (Shalom Aleichem Cooperative).

Both date from 1926. All of these organizations built cooperative worker housing projects which served as important catalysts within larger socialist political movement. Most were located in the Bronx. Each cooperative had a well-defined ideology, related to the diverse currents in leftist Jewish politics.

The first and largest of the cooperatives was the United Workers Cooperative, which completed its first building, the Coops, in 1927, designed by Springsteen and Goldhammer. Located in the Bronx, the six-story garden apartment covered a block bounded by Britten and Allerton streets, facing the Bronx Park.

Next came the Shalom Aleichem Houses (Yiddish Cooperative Heimgesellschaft), completed in 1927 by Springsteen and Goldhammer for 229 families on a site overlooking the Jerome Park Reservoir at Giles Place, West 238th Street, and Cannon Place. The irregularly shaped

*“Next came the Shalom Aleichem Houses, .... on a site overlooking the Jerome Park Reservoir at Giles Place, West 238th Street, and Cannon Place. The irregularly shaped perimeter enclosed a hilltop site, with a central garden and large fountain overlooking the west Bronx, evoking the character of a lofty urban oasis.”*

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/amalgamated/history/40/Shalom\\_Aleichem\\_Houses.txt](http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/amalgamated/history/40/Shalom_Aleichem_Houses.txt)

perimeter enclosed a hilltop site, with a central garden and large fountain overlooking the west Bronx, evoking the character of a lofty urban oasis.

The origins of Shalom Aleichem membership focused on the Workmen's Circle, where a year or so before a small group had formed a cooperative, based on shared ideals related to the preservation of secular Yiddish culture. They took the name of the famous Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem who spent much of his life in the Ukraine but eventually lived and died in the Bronx as a symbolic reference to their concern for Yiddish culture. Compared with the United Workers, the organization was much less avowedly political in the normal sense of the word. Its genesis arose from issues associated with the condition of second-generation immigrant culture and with assimilation. Beyond housing, these organizations offered such additional services as cooperative grocery stores, schools and daycare. At Shalom Aleichem several artists' studios were incorporated into the design, in order to encourage working artists to join the cooperative. The sculptor Aaron Goodelman and the painter Abraham Maniewich lived there for years. There was an auditorium for lectures, concerts, and dramatic productions [and a] cooperative 'cafeteria', which served various functions, from banquets to teas. The cultural activities were extensive, in keeping with the strength of that particular mandate within the organization.

Shalom Aleichem like Amalgamated was placed on the urban periphery, among open fields and private single-family houses. A fundamental part of the cooperative's philosophy had to do with proximity and therefore lent itself to high-density living.

The choice of 'neo-Tudor' for the style of Shalom Aleichem, and other similar complexes, appears unrelated to the political or cultural values promoted by the cooperative. Instead, it appears to relate to the general taste for neo-Tudor in residential architecture of all kinds, and is matched by the style of many of the houses in the surrounding streets.

The Shalom Aleichem Houses experienced economic failure first, having passed into receivership of the bank in 1929. By 1931 it had been sold to a private landlord. Around June 1932 the tenants set up a rent relief fund and worked out a verbal agreement with the landlord to pay half of unemployed tenants' rents, with the remainder to be delinquent until each had found a job. In August, however, the landlord began evicting forty tenants anyway. One of New York City's most publicized rent strikes ensued. Within a week, forty of the tenants who refused to pay rent out of sympathy were also given eviction notices, and four tenants had already been removed from their

apartments. The tenants claimed gross injustice, citing the cooperative character of the buildings. They argued that unlike other buildings emptied by the Depression, theirs remained occupied.

They advertised for another building, threatening to move en masse. They picketed constantly while unsuccessfully taking their case to what they termed a 'capitalistic' municipal court. They fought the possibility of punitive loss of welfare assistance from the Emergency Home Relief Bureau because of their activities. The tenants were also addressed by Norman Thomas, Socialist candidate for President, who helped them fight a 'blacklisting' of the strikers, threatened to be circulated by the Bronx Landlord's Protective Association.

Following a number of eviction orders, an agreement was finally reached directly with the landlord, who reduced rents by 5 percent, and placed 2 1/2 percent of rent totals in a fund for unemployed tenant arrears, with abandonment of all eviction proceedings. With this agreement, a truce was begun which lasted with frequent difficulties, until 1949, when the building changed hands.

Like all of the cooperatives, the original communal ideals at Shalom Aleichem lasted through the differing economic circumstances until the founding generation began to fade. Over the years there were many crises, most prominently and inevitably ideological, between the socialist and communist factions. But the real political death knell came at the beginning of the 1950s, with the McCarthy-era political repression, when the elders of the cooperatives were old. Commitments of the second generation were tempered by the promise of the 1950s prosperity and by mainstream American values which by then had moved far from the urbane socialist vision in the Bronx. Like thousands of others, many moved to the new suburbs, which fit so well into this massive transformation of American culture. By the time of the third generation, there could be no question. By the late 1960s, those who could not make it to Westchester could leave for Co-op City, for an urbanism of very different ideological significance, and for a cooperative lacking ideology. At the Amalgamated, the economic advantages of cooperative life have somewhat survived, but the ideology has perhaps waned. All else of the other cooperatives has disappeared, except the buildings. At the Shalom Aleichem Houses, the Woman's Club was the last to go, having passed from the scene in 1979.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> [The sources for the above excerpts are A History of Housing in New York City by Richard Plunz, 1990 and Fort Independence Cultural Resource Survey, a 46-page report prepared for the Fort Independence Park Neighborhood Association. The report can be accessed at <http://www.fipna.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Final-draft-of-Fort-Independence-1-13-2012.pdf> ]

## Park Reservoir (1957)

Park Reservoir was named after the Jerome Park Reservoir. As Board Member Eli Axelbank (father of Gary Axelbank is still lives in Park Reservoir) stated in the Twenty Years of Park Reservoir that Cooperative living “was the promised and our goal.” The Van Cortlandt Chapter of the American Veterans Committee helped get the Park Reservoir built. They also helped Mutual Housing (across the street).

Post-World War II Mitchell-Lama moderate-income cooperative (This is excerpted from page 24-5 of the Fort Independence Cultural Resource Survey Report)

Cooperative living! That was the promise and our goal. We had building meetings with management, with Education Director Herman Liebman. Many of us had come from Amalgamated where we had considerable cooperative experience. Do you recall reading the side panel of the old co-op milk containers, which gave a wonderful definition of a cooperative? It went like this:

A CO-OP IS A BUSINESS OWNED BY THE PEOPLE IT SERVES.

IT IS A NON-PROFIT BUSINESS. ITS EARNINGS ARE RETURNED TO MEMBER SHOPPERS, BASED ON THEIR PATRONAGE.

EVERYONE CAN BE A MEMBER. THE CO-OP IS A DEMOCRATIC BUSINESS, EACH OF WHOSE MEMBERS HAS ONE VOTE AT AN ANNUAL MEETING.

BECAUSE IT SERVES ITS MEMBERS, THE CO-OP EMPHASIZES QUALITY IN ALL ITS SERVICES ... AT REASONABLE PRICES.

*Distributed by Mid-Eastern Cooperative, Inc.*

Figure 5 From 20 years of Park Reservoir

“Besides having one of the city’s 1920s cooperative garden-apartment complexes in Sholom Aleichem Houses, the neighborhood also has one of the very first Mitchell-Lama cooperative apartment houses built in New York City – the Park Reservoir complex of three buildings at 3835 Sedgwick, 3845 Sedgwick (with alternate entrances on Cannon) and 3915 Orloff Avenue. The Mitchell-Lama law, passed in 1955 by the State legislature, was described in a 1957 article in the *New York Times*.<sup>12</sup> The law was...

*“...designed to encourage the construction of apartments renting at \$19 to \$25 a room. It permits the state or city to make fifty-year low-interest loans – for up to 90 per cent of construction costs – to private builders and cooperatives that agree to a limit of 6 per cent profit on their investment. The law was sponsored by State senator MacNeil Mitchell, Manhattan Republican, and Assemblyman Alfred A. Lama, Brooklyn Democrat. It also provides a 40 per cent realty tax abatement for thirty years.*

*...Two are [currently] under construction. These are the 275-family Park Reservoir development on Orloff Avenue [sic], the Bronx, and the 420-family Earl W. Jimerson Houses on Linden Boulevard in Brooklyn. Park Reservoir is sponsored by the Park Reservoir Housing Corporation, headed by Abraham Kazan, at 570 Grand Street, Manhattan.”*

As historian Richard Plunz explains:

*“The Limited Profit Housing Companies Law passed by the New York state legislature in 1955 also had a critical impact on the design and construction of government-subsidized housing in New York City, extending over the next two decades. Popularly known as the Mitchell-Lama program after the originators of the legislation, it was the first program to openly provide government philanthropy for the middle class. It was*

<sup>12</sup> *New York Times*, August 25, 1957, p. 292.

*designed to promote construction of urban middle-income housing, which neither the public housing program nor unsubsidized private developers were producing. ...”*<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

## Mutual Housing 1954

The Van Cortlandt chapter of the American Veterans Committee decided to sponsor a four-building cooperative and the United Housing Association joined this endeavor in approximately 1954. The Limited Dividend 3850 Sedgwick Avenue, was the first United Housing Association building. It was chosen because it was near Amalgamated which managed the building in the beginning. When Mutual Housing opened in 1956, all terraces face the Jerome Park Reservoir and Fort Independence Park.

Then, when Mitchell Lama was created, three undeveloped lots were transferred to a newly created Park Reservoir Corporation and those three buildings were built. Mutual was supposed to be part of Park Reservoir, but had to be separated as an independent corporation, because Mutual was privately financed. Then Park Reservoir became the first Mitchell Lama project built under the 1955 law.

### A.V.C. SALUTES AMALGAMATED—

The Fort Independence Chapter of the American Veterans Committee takes pleasure in greeting the people and leadership of the Amalgamated Cooperative Community on the occasion of its 20th Anniversary.

We veterans of the Fort Independence and Van Cortlandt areas take special pride in the fact that in our neighborhood is to be found the foremost example of successful cooperative endeavor in the field of housing in this country.

Today, when housing is the number one need of the returned veteran with hardly anyone in government or private enterprise doing anything really tangible about it, it is the Amalgamated that is pointing at least one way toward a practical, democratic solution of the problem not only by proving, over twenty turbulent years, that cooperative housing is safe and economical, but by actually building more cooperative housing here and now.

We of the local chapter are particularly grateful to the Management of the Amalgamated for granting us the free use of one of their vacant stores as our headquarters for nearly two years.

Our sincere best wishes for your continued success and expansion.

Executive Committee,  
Ft. Indep. Chapter, A.V.C.

Figure 6 Photo from 75th Anniversary: Page 15



Figure 7 Photo from 75th Anniversary: Page 12

## CONCLUSION

Siting the Jerome Park Reservoir in the community cast the dye. Immediately, the center of the water world, became our community “commons.” It took another fifty years to fill the need to be near this reservoir-park which sparked: the New York City’s Cooperative Housing movement with Amalgamated Housing, Shalom Aleichem Houses, Mutual Housing, the namesake Park Reservoir and Scott Tower (a City Mitchell Lama Coop); “Educational Mile” with from north to south: Clinton HS, Bronx HS of Science, High School of American Studies at Lehman College, Herbert H. Lehman College, Walton HS, and PS 86; and it continues around the reservoir with the old Our Lady of Angels, MS 143, and PS 95; and the nature of Van Cortlandt Park, Moshulu Parkway, Fort Independence Park, Harris Field and Annex, and Fort Four Park. The story continues to evolve around the Jerome Park Reservoir as it brings the community together as they fight to keep it as it was and is.

Many thanks to those who helped by sharing information, reading this document, and urging me to continue. While this is a draft, it will help to make the argument that the Jerome Park Reservoir was and is as important to the lives of its neighbors, the developments that surround it, the nature and wonder of its parkland, and the City of New York.

With a little look at Nature,

*Karen Argenti*

