

**Minutes of the Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting of Oct. 23, 2019 at  
Manhattan College Kelly Student Commons, 3900 Waldo Ave.**

**Attendees**

Committee: Bob Bender (chair), Robert Fanuzzi (vice chair), Eider Garcia, Marvin Goodman, Robert Jacklosky, Daris Jackson, Laura Spalter, Debra Travis

Absent: Eric Bell, David Gellman, Donell Leverett, Herb Barret

Other CB8: Tao Moran

DPR: Christina Taylor, Stephanie Thayer, Dan Reynolds, S. Keller, A. Sutton

Community: Toni Butler; BJ Velez; Thomas X. Casey, Sharon A. Mahoney, Kingsbridge Historical Society; Debra Wallace, Jacki Fischer, Linda Burnett, I.C. L'Engel, Belinda Hancock, Caroline Calman, Tom Russell, Molly Prior, Jess Solan, Sheila Coppin

**Agenda**

The meeting began at 7:10 pm. Bob Bender said a few words about the community board at the request of Prof. Adam Arenson, whose Manhattan College history class attended. Bob then introduced the panel to discuss the Enslaved People's Project at Van Cortlandt Park: Prof. Arenson, Nick Dembowski of the Kingsbridge Historical Society, Laura Carpenter of the Van Cortlandt House Museum, Christina Taylor of the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, and Michele March, who conducts tours of the Van Cortlandt property.

Presentation and Discussion of the Enslaved Peoples Project at Van Cortlandt Park

Prof. Arenson noted the presence of his class and said that this semester they have been studying slavery in the Bronx. He mentioned that they have done some research at Drake Point, located in the South Bronx and are now studying Van Cortlandt.

Nick Dembowski narrated a slide program displaying his research into the lives of the enslaved population on the Van Cortlandt plantation and in the local area. He noted that there was a greater slave population than has previously been recognized. His research began with a headstone on the Van Cortlandt House property, which led him to archives in Westchester County. During the slavery era the Bronx was part of Westchester. Based on this research he estimates that somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the local population was enslaved during the slave era. Most were African or African-American but some native people were also enslaved. The Van Cortlandts were by far the biggest slave owners in what is now the northwest Bronx. After slavery ended in 1827, the African-American population declined substantially, to as little as one or two percent, before increasing again in the mid-twentieth century. Nick shared information he has found about individual slaves who lived on the plantation.

The enslaved population ran the Van Cortlandt plantation, which mainly grew wheat. They built the dam on Tibbetts Brook that created Van Cortlandt lake, operated the mill, transported the grain to ships on the Harlem River, and generally maintained the plantation, including carving the huge millstones, one of which can still be found behind the VC House Museum. They also built the pre-Revolutionary era stone road that still exists to the east of the house museum. There is evidence that slave burials took place where the Putnam division of the New York Central Railroad was later built. Anecdotal evidence suggests that human remains were unearthed during construction of the railroad in the late nineteenth century.

Nick recommends that an appropriate historical marker be placed in proximity to the house museum that will briefly describe this history, and perhaps another marker at the site of the burials.

Nick's lecture was enthusiastically received. He then answered several questions from the audience.

Christina Taylor said that the VC Alliance has funding to do some programming around this topic in the first half of next year. She hopes to produce a self-guided tour brochure at the house museum. She plans to set up a community voices committee to involve members of the community.

Laura Carpenter spoke about the role of the VC House Museum, of which she is the director, and her desire to work with community representatives on this issue. The house museum is owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and sits on DPR property. Like Nick, she wants to tell the story of the Van Cortlandts and specifically of the house – as she put it “the stories that haven't been told.” Over the summer the house museum has been creating reproductions of materials owned by the slaves. Research indicates that the attic of the house may have been inhabited by slaves.

Michele March, a local resident, said that her interest in the subject derives from the fact that her great-grandmother was enslaved. She has been conducting tours about the enslaved population in Van Cortlandt.

Bob Fanuzzi emphasized the importance of the community to this project and the significance it can have for community development.

Bob Bender noted how fortunate we are to have the park because it preserves not only the house, but the dam and the pre-Revolutionary road, as well as containing burial sites. Nearly all other traces of this era in our area are now lost, excepting only the pre-Revolutionary house at 5122 Post Road.

Committee members discussed how we can do outreach about this subject to a wider audience, ideally including local schools. Deb Travis recommended reaching out to libraries as well. Laura Spalter observed that we need to preserve this history for future generations. Bob Bender will propose a community board-sponsored project to the Executive Committee and officers.

A quorum being present, the minutes of the September committee meeting were approved unanimously with an addition on p. 2. The addition appears below in italics:

*“Although the bridge is intended for pedestrian use, it is possible that bicycles could use the bridge, but the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail, which the bridge connects, is designated as a pedestrian trail;”*

### Old Business

Local residents Toni Butler and B.J. Velez complained about the parking situation on Broadway during cross-country events. They said that bus drivers do not have the maps that were provided to meet directors by DPR, and that there is extensive double-parking on weekdays and weekends during events. They commended DPR for installing port-a-potties, which they say has reduced public urination in the alleys of the buildings on the east side of Broadway.

VCP Deputy Administrator Stephanie Thayer noted that bus-parking maps have been distributed to all meet directors and that they were told about the parking regulations during the annual phone call at the start of the cross-country season. Meet directors were warned that they would be accountable for buses that double parked or parked in legal spaces used by residents for parking their cars.

Suggestions were made about identifying buses by requiring school names to be posted. (A minority of buses have school names on the side.) Stephanie said that when specific information is received about the name of the bus company and the date and time observed, that information will be reported to the meet directors and school athletic directors, and they will be held accountable.

It was noted that this problem has existed for a long time and will not be easily resolved. DPR and NYPD are cooperating, but additional efforts by all parties will be necessary.

Dan Reynolds of DPR responded to Ms. Butler’s complaint about parking being removed on Broadway for tree pruning. It was intended to be a one-day event, but the pruning did not take place the same day as posted signs. It was also noted that pruning happens every seven years. Bob Bender said that he was disappointed that DPR Forestry did not provide advance notice to the CB8 office.

The meeting adjourned at 9:40 pm.

Submitted by Bob Bender