



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

# PORT MORRIS & THE 134TH STREET FERRY BRIDGES

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

The Port Morris section of The Bronx was once part of Morrisania, which was established as a seaport in 1842 by Gouverneur Morris, Jr., son of United States founding father Gouverneur Morris. In the 1850s, the area's waterfront developed as an industrial center with tenants such as stone works and furniture and piano factories. By the end of the 19th century, Port Morris was the capital of piano manufacturing in the United States. These enterprises took advantage of the area's affordable land and rail access to markets and raw materials. Inland of the industrial waterfront, developers constructed apartment buildings and commercial blocks to serve factory employees. Today the neighborhood has retained this layout. The Bruckner Expressway forms a boundary between the waterfront and inland zones, which, for the pedestrian, gives a clear sense of this character delineation, as well.

In 1906, the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad yards were constructed on the Bronx Kills. Improved transportation further cemented Port Morris' status as an industrial hub. In 1916, New York City passed its first zoning law, which, among other things, regulated land use for the first time. Port Morris, Mott Haven and West Farms were zoned almost exclusively for manufacturing, while the majority of The Bronx was zoned residential to serve as a suburb of Manhattan. Port Morris experienced a steady decline in prosperity beginning in the 1940s. Arson destroyed many structures in the area in the 1970s, but by the end of the 20th century, industry began to return. In 2006 the city designated the area as an Industrial Business Zone, with business incentives to encourage enterprises to remain in the area.

Around the turn of the 20th century, Port Morris was part of a network of industrial waterfront districts in the southern Bronx, northern Queens and northern Manhattan. As there were not yet bridges connecting these parts of the city, ferries were the primary means of crossing the waterways. The enterprises that made up this network were largely owned and operated by German immigrants, including the owner of the New York and College Point Ferry Company, George Ehret, Sr. Ehret was the wealthy founder of the Hell Gate Brewery, one of the largest breweries in the country at that time, at 92nd Street and 2nd Avenue in Manhattan. His ferry service transported passengers and goods between the factories in The Bronx, the produce market in Harlem, the brewery on 92nd Street, the largely German residential neighborhood of Yorkville in Manhattan, the largely German industrial neighborhood of College Point in northern Queens, and the German recreational enclave of North Beach, also in northern Queens.

One of the ferry depots along this network was at East 134th Street in The Bronx, for which a pair of large ferry bridges or "gantries" was constructed in 1948. The ferry bridges were discontinued in the 1960s and have been left to deteriorate. Their rusty silhouettes grace the waterfront and have become the subject of a vigorous preservation campaign by the Friends of Brook Park, a local advocacy and education group who wishes to turn the site into a much-needed park. The ferry bridges are the final stop on this self-guided tour of Port Morris.

## I. BRONX GRIT CHAMBER

158 Bruckner Boulevard

McKim, Mead & White, 1936–37

*New York City Individual Landmark*

The Bronx Grit Chamber was built as a sewage disposal plant for The Ward's Island Sewage Treatment Works, New York City's first major effort to alleviate water pollution. As one of the world's largest and most modern facilities of its kind, it

was capable of treating one fifth of the city's sewage.

Designed in McKim, Mead and White's signature neo-Classical style, the building's architecture recalls other contiguous civic works. Its symmetrical front façade

centers on a large arched window flanked by four rusticated pilasters with alternating courses of Roman brick and limestone. Other ornaments include limestone moldings and a foliated keystone at the top of the arch.



## 2. ST. ANN'S CHURCH AND GRAVEYARD

295 St. Ann's Avenue

Unknown architect, 1840–41

*New York City Individual Landmark*

Erected by Gouverneur Morris, Jr. as a family memorial on his rural estate, this is the oldest extant church in The Bronx. The building features a simple fieldstone Gothic Revival base and a green-painted

wood Greek Revival tower with an octagonal belfry, low spire and simple cross. In the church's crypt and graveyard lie the remains of illustrious members of the Morris family, including Gouverneur



Morris, Sr., Judge Lewis Morris, first Governor of New Jersey, and Major General Lewis Morris, a member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

### 3. BROOK PARK

Brook Park is named for the “Saw Mill Brook” that once flowed through here. The Friends of Brook Park was founded in 1999 to educate the public on local environmental resources. The organization runs shore clean-ups, boat tours of the waterways and farming lessons, as well as advocates for environmental justice, waterfront access and green space development.



### 4. MOTT HAVEN EAST HISTORIC DISTRICT William O’Gorman & William Hornum, 1877–1900

*New York City Historic District*

This historic district, located on East 139th and East 140th Streets between Willis and Brook Avenues, is one of the oldest rowhouse developments in The Bronx, where the rowhouse typology is rare in comparison to other parts of the city. The houses were designed by two architects who, in some cases, collaborated. The houses on the north side of East 140th Street form a whimsical row in a mix of styles, including Dutch/Flemish pediments.



## 5. UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Originally Willis Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church

330 Willis Avenue

George W. Kramer, 1900

This beige brick Gothic Revival church is punctuated by white-painted wood window surrounds, pediments and moldings. Its richly colored stained glass is a particularly beautiful feature of this corner building.



## 6. 404–450 East 142nd Street William O’Gorman, 1897

These 24 neo-Grec rowhouses on the south side of East 142nd Street were designed by the same architect responsible for many of the houses in the Mott Haven East Historic District. They were constructed of brick with stone ornaments and bracketed cornices. In recent years, some of them have been re-clad or painted in an array of bold colors.





## 7. ST. MARY'S PARK

This park takes its name from a church that once stood on Alexander Avenue and East I42nd Street. In the park's north end is Janes' Hill, which is named for Adrian Janes, a partner of Janes, Kirtland & Company Iron Works, whose factory stood northwest of the park. Amongst the company's achievements were casting the architectural ironwork for Central Park's Bow Bridge and both casting and erecting the iron dome for the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. in 1863.



## 8. CONCORD AVENUE ROWHOUSES

321–355 Concord Avenue  
Ca. 1886–1921

These elegant rowhouses are made of brick with brownstone ornaments and most have retained their historic bracketed cornices. One of the most marked characteristics of this row is its uniform color palette, as almost all of the houses either display their original red brick

or have been painted a shade of red.

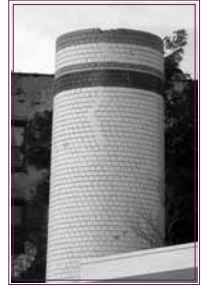


## 9. WARD BREAD COMPANY

367 Southern Boulevard

Unknown architect, ca. 1900

The Ward Bread Company, founded by Irish immigrant Hugh Ward in 1849 on the Lower East Side, was a major company with factories all over the country, including one in Brooklyn and this one in The Bronx. The six-story white glazed terra-cotta building featured a large smokestack with the company's name painted on it. The smokestack has been truncated and the company name painted over. In the early 20th century, the company revolutionized the baking process, employing new technology to bake bread in a mechanized assembly line. In the 1920s, Hugh's grandson William attempted to monopolize the American baking market, using dirty business tactics. To distance itself from the negative press and its tarnished reputation, the company assumed the name of one of the companies it acquired: Wonder Bakeries, makers of Wonder bread.



## 10. WILLOW AVENUE FACTORIES

Willow Avenue, East 132nd to East  
138th Streets

Ca. 1880–1910

This captivating six-block stretch contains several historic factory buildings. The Philip Knitting Mills on the southeast corner of Willow and East 136th Street was constructed in 1884 and features decorative brickwork on its cornice and window lintels. Its doorway on East 136th Street was later decorated with art-deco limestone details. Also of note are the two factories on the street's west side between East 135th and East 136th Streets. At East 136th Street is a factory dating to 1907, whose southern façade is graced with original wood shutters, seen from the alley off Willow Avenue. To the south is the Marcus Brush Company, which features decorative brick-



work on its cornice and painted signs on Willow Avenue.



## II. NORTHERN APPROACH TO HELL GATE BRIDGE

Ca. 1917

Extending north from East 132nd Street underneath the highway bridge is a series of concrete arches supporting the approach to the Hell Gate Bridge to Randalls Island. This historic railroad bridge is one of the neighborhood's most notable engineering features.



## 12. INDUSTRIAL WATERFRONT SITES

Adjacent to the ferry bridges site are two General Electric methane gas power plants and an oil tank facility. Local advocates fear that these operations might seek to expand into the ferry bridges site and close up river access points. These include Park Avenue, which has a sizable green space, and Lincoln Avenue, which locals use for fishing and boat

launches. For over two decades the South Bronx community has been fighting for environmental justice in the area and has been successful in shutting down the last medical waste incinerator in the city. The fight continues to shut down four polluting power plants on the waterfront. The latest effort is to prevent the food trucking company Fresh Direct from receiving \$130 million in public subsidies to occupy the last available stretch of public waterfront within the NYS Department of Transportation–owned Harlem River Rail Yards, located west of the Bruckner Expressway. Numerous actions, demonstrations, community input sessions and door-to-door outreach have garnered the support of dozens of organizations and elected officials, and led to a lawsuit filed by the New York Lawyers for the Public Interest.

### 13. 134TH STREET FERRY BRIDGES

#### I06 Locust Avenue, 1948

The 134th Street Ferry Bridges, or “gantries,” are located on the shoreline of the East River on Locust Avenue between East 134th and East 135th Streets. At roughly four stories tall, they stand as a reminder of New York City’s rich nautical heritage. Prior to the construction of bridges in the early 20th century, passengers and goods were transported by ferry services operating from slips on the waterfront. The 134th Street ferry slip was established in 1902 by the New York and College Point Ferry Company, which had been operating ferries across the East River from various points since 1886. To capitalize on Port Morris’ inclusion in a network of communities serviced by ferry, a market, hotels, restaurants and stables were constructed nearby in 1905.

With the advance of railroad, subway and highway infrastructure, the necessity of ferry service declined and many companies went out of business. The New York and College Point Ferry Company went out of business in 1918, though not entirely due to its obsolescence. George Ehret, Sr., the company’s founder, was understood to have been a financial supporter of German causes and was in Germany at the onset of World War I. As a result of his decision to stay there, the United

States government considered him an enemy alien and seized his assets, including the ferry company. From that point, the city controlled ferry operations from the site for transportation to city institutions located on Rikers, Welfare and North Brother Islands. In 1948, North Brother became home to Riverside Emergency Housing for World War II veterans and their families. To accommodate this new island traffic, the city upgraded the 134th Street ferry facility and constructed the ferry bridges that same year. The ferry bridges functioned as gangways to load passengers and vehicles onto the ferry boats and absorb some of the impact of boats entering the slip. In 1966, the ferry was discontinued and the Police Department began using the site as a marina. A one-story brick building was constructed for the Harbor Unit headquarters. Today



the site is still owned by the city, but has been mostly unused since the 1990s.

In 2006, the city revealed its proposal for the South Bronx Greenway, which includes a new ferry service connecting recreational hot spots along the waterfront, including a stop at the ferry bridges called the East River Landing. In 2013, construction will begin on a quarter-mile path from East 132nd Street to Randall's Island called the Randall's Island



Connector. The path will run beneath the arches of the railroad bridge and be equipped with lighting, plantings and a pedestrian bridge over the water. Longer term, the plan includes the creation of a bike lane and plantings along Locust Avenue. In addition to these plans, the Friends of Brook Park are advocating for the creation of a public green space at the ferry bridges site.

# PORT MORRIS & THE I34TH STREET FERRY BRIDGES

