

3. The Hudson Highlands in Inwood and the West Bronx

Manhattan and the Bronx (west of the Bronx River) are the southern limits of a mountain range called the Hudson Highlands. The relief is most pronounced from upper Manhattan into Riverdale. Going against the grain, we traverse valleys at or nearly at sea level and ridges, often quite steep, rising more than a hundred feet. Transportation corridors are in the valleys or on flat ridge tops. As in the song, the Bronx is “up” (and the Battery’s “down”). Dense residential areas are built on ridges which also guide the flow of drinking water to lower places.

Begin at 207th St and Tenth Ave, (207th St 1,9). Note the commercial signs in the area (Who do you think lives here?) On the west side of the elevated structure, see how 207th St. angles to the northwest with Inwood Hill Park in the background. (Check your atlas; why is there such a departure from the geometry of the Manhattan grid?) Also note the apartment houses on 207th St and Post Ave (Who were they built for and when?). Walk east on 207th St past the auto-oriented commercial buildings at Ninth Ave and over the University Heights drawbridge to the Bronx. Pause on the bridge to observe Bronx Community College (formerly NYU uptown) to the southeast on “University Heights”. To the south view the Harlem River, the drawbridge support structure, the Metro North Hudson line (and University Heights station), the Major Deegan Expressway (connecting to the NYS Thruway), the Washington Bridge (181 St) and the Alexander Hamilton Bridge (a continuation of the Cross Bronx Expressway). Hamilton lived on an estate, Hamilton Grange, in an area now called Hamilton Heights, near City College. In the rear is the senior Highbridge, built to carry the aqueduct from Westchester County into Manhattan. A good eye can follow the Harlem River Drive in the distance making its way up to the George Washington Bridge. To the north see the storage yards for the A train and the Broadway Bridge into Marble Hill and Riverdale near the site of the 1697 Kingsbridge first connecting Manhattan to the mainland in colonial times.

Walk up Fordham Road. At Hampden Place observe apartment houses with foundations extending an extra four or more stories in the rear, testifying to the steepness of the terrain. (Why is Fordham Road curved?) Note Landing Rd. Where does it go? Attain the heights at University Avenue. Note older dense housing for the upper middle class and the private homes at the northeastern end of Defoe Park.. How did the residents get there? Detour a little onto Aqueduct Walk, following the gradual flow of water from the Westchester reservoirs into New York City and return to Fordham Rd. Contrast the older housing you just saw with the middle class apartment houses on Grand and Davidson Aves built in the 1920’s after the Jerome Avenue elevated train was built. Observe the bustling Fordham Rd. shopping district and compare it to a suburban mall. What does it have, what’s missing? Who shops here? Note the width and malled structure of the Grand Concourse with a retrofitted subway beneath and that Fordham Rd. traffic funnels under it all. The Grand Concourse was designed in the style of the 19th century “Grand Boulevards” of Paris and in the early 20th century Bronx it assumed the status of its ‘Fifth Avenue’. In fact, the Concourse is almost a trans-Harlem River extension of Fifth Avenue but lacks the bridged continuity planned for the Park Avenue and Third Ave rail routes. Turn right on the Concourse to 188 St to see the defunct Loew’s Paradise theater, the largest built in the Bronx. Cross the street for an even better view. (What caused the big movie palaces to fail?) Note the large horizontal commercial structures on this stretch of the Concourse, similar to the daylight factory buildings that characterized modern industrial districts during the same early 20th century decades.

Return to Fordham Rd and continue east to Valentine Rd where the ridge peaks again and the descent into the next valley begins. At the Bryan Park triangle Kingsbridge Rd joins Fordham Rd. (Which is older?) Follow Fordham Rd down to the flat valley marked by the auto traffic on Webster Avenue (US Route #1 turning into Fordham Rd!) astride the Metro North Harlem line and the terminus of Third Ave and its historic elevated train which continued to Gun Hill Rd. A bustling bus plaza adjoins the train station. The relatively new round Fordham Plaza Commercial Center dominates the scene, taking advantage of this mixed-mode transportation junction. To the north, is the well-wooded Rose Hill (the next hill going east!) campus of Fordham University, founded as St. John’s College in 1841. Leave the area by Metro North train (check schedule in advance) or return to the Grand Concourse (Fordham Rd C,D). Local buses eventually connect to other subway lines.

