Long forgotten pipes return water to Ft. Tryon Park

by Graham Winfrey

Deep beneath the cobblestones and paths of the park surrounding the Cloisters Museum lays an architectural relic – a network of pipes that used to feed water to the 60 acres of Ft. Tryon Park. Rediscovered just two years ago, the forgotten water system doesn't just still exist: it still works.

Constructed with the park in 1935, the system that used to provide water to the second highest point in Manhattan has not been used since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Because the rediscovered resource can work without too much repair, soon, the water system will serve a variety of new functions throughout the park.

The process of restoring the pipes began in 2006 when the Peter Jay Sharp Foundation provided the Fort Tryon Park Trust with a three-year $500,000 grant to initiate the restoration of the park's Alpine Garden.

While revisiting the park's original plans, drawn up by John and Fredrick Olmstead, sons of Frederick Law Olmstead Jr. who oversaw the construction of Central Park, plumbers from the Parks Department discovered that ground hydrants still existed in the original locations indicated on the historic drawings.

The Department of Environmental Protection reactivated several areas of the water system and plumbers began sending water to certain lines to see if it would come though. They determined that most of the water system was still intact, and that simply by replacing some old fixtures and broken pipes, the water service could be restored.

This discovery marks the latest development in a long history of revitalization that began in 1983 after a period when the park fell on hard times.

"When the park was constructed by Rockefeller in 1935 it had a full complement of staffing, 17 gardeners, maintenance and operation staff," said Northern Parks Administrator Jennifer Hoppa. "During the fiscal crisis of the 70s there was no way that level could be maintained."

The park fell into disrepair and knowledge was lost.

With budgets restored and funding piped back into Northern Manhattan parks, 25 years of various revitalization efforts have bloomed and Ft. Tryon Park is now anticipating having water service again as soon this spring.

One interesting component of the project is the restoration of a miniature waterfall from a picture taken in 1936 over a still existing grotto in the Alpine Garden.

"We've gotten a fountain consultant who's done work in Riverside Park working with a landscape architect, and they've been doing engineering on how to reactivate this as a water feature," said Hoppa. The waterfall cannot be restored to its exact original state, however, because of safety reasons. "You can't really have standing water in New York City because it's a drowning hazard. What's envisioned here is more of a wetland planting, but having some movement on the tongue of the grotto as well as using a timer to periodically turn the water on and off.

"It's really going to be great when this is done," said Hoppa.

This year, park received $50,000 from the Cleveland Dodge Foundation to reinstate water service along the Broadway side of the park.

(Above) Water fountains hand picked by John D. Rockefeller when Ft. Tryon Park was first built are being returned to the park.

(Left) The waterworks underneath the fountains are being protected by stone bases. (photos Graham Winfrey)

"Four wonderful, rusticated drinking fountains that Rockefeller hand-picked for the park will be reactivated," said Hoppa.

The fountains, which have been out of service for roughly three decades, are being re-installed with protective measures in order to prevent damage from parks trucks or vandals, and some of that labor has already been done.

"We've purchased these stone bases that get submerged into the earth, and then the fountains get attached to that so all of the inner workings are protected," Hoppa said.

In addition to year-round fitness walks, summertime yoga classes and Tai chi are also conducted in the park, which will benefit greatly from the new drinking fountains.

"Soon, you'll be able to stop, get a drink of water and keep going," Hoppa said.

"We're also bringing water to the [Sir William] dog run. There'll be water for the dogs and dog owners."

As part of the plumbers' preliminary work on the north side of the park, it was discovered that an important valve connected to the Anne Loftus Playground had been sealed over by a previous contractor, resulting in minimized water pressure in both the playground bathrooms and the children's spray fountain.

"The plumbers were able to reinstate full power," Hoppa said, "so now the bathrooms work better." The children's fountain is off for the winter, but will also benefit from increased pressure this summer.

The new water sources will also provide major horticultural advantages for the park.

We're going to be doing an entrance garden at Dongan Place, so we wouldn't have been able to do that if there were no water service," Hoppa said. "That's the main Broadway entrance to the garden, so we'll be improving that to make it more welcoming."

Another basic use of the new water will be for cleaning and maintenance purposes.

Despite all the improvements from the soon to be restored water system, the restoration of the Alpine Garden may still be the development for which Hoppa feels the most grateful, due to its traditional use only on private estates.

"It's just fascinating that something that would ordinarily only be used on private land was put into a public park. That much care and labor went into something that was going to be gifted to the public."