

Joseph Rodman Drake Park

The property of Joseph Rodman Drake Park in the Hunts Point area of the Bronx was once the site of a Weckquaesgeek Indian village called Quinnahung, meaning “a long high place” or “the planting neck.” During the Revolutionary War, George Washington’s continental troops passed through this plot in their retreat from Long Island. In the late 17th century, Thomas Hunt (for whom the Hunt’s Point neighborhood is named) acquired this property and built his stone mansion, the Grange.

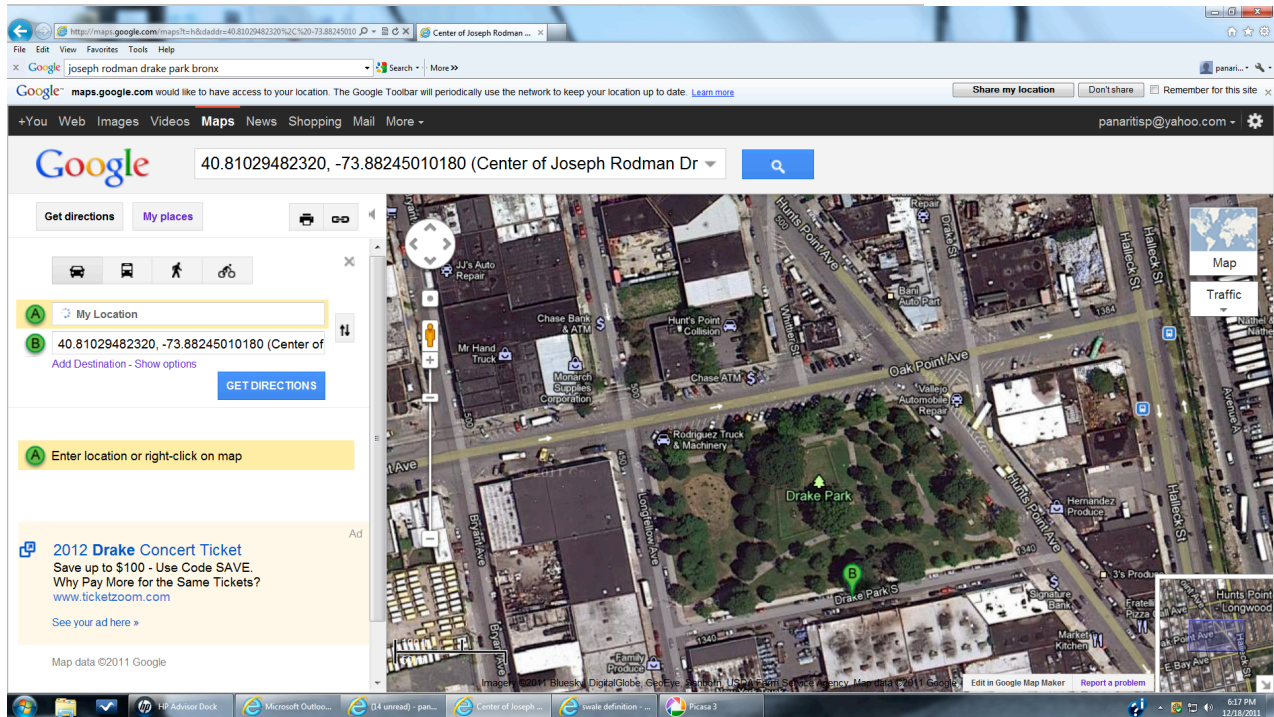
The Hunt mansion served as a childhood haven for Joseph Rodman Drake. Born on August 7, 1795, Joseph Rodman Drake was a descendant of Sir Francis Drake, a 16th century navigator who was the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe. Joseph Rodman Drake was a gifted young poet who praised the natural beauty of the Bronx in his verse. In 1813 Drake abandoned a career in business and began studying medicine with local doctors. That year he met and immediately befriended fellow poet Fitz-Greene Halleck. From March to July 1819, they collaborated on “The Croaker Papers.” This series of humorous poems lampooning City officials was published in the New York Post.

Although he worked as a physician, Drake is best known as the celebrated author of poems including “The Culprit Fay” and “The American Flag.” When he died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five on September 21, 1820, Drake was laid to rest in the Hunt family burial ground at the Grange. Halleck wrote the epitaph on Drake’s tombstone: “Green be the turf above thee; Friend of my better days; None knew thee but to love thee; Nor named thee but to praise.” Drake’s daughter compiled and published his works in October 1835.

The burial ground of the Hunt mansion consists of about fifty markers including names such as Hunt, Leggett, and Willett--all families associated with the settlement and development of the Bronx. The streets near the cemetery are named for prominent poets including Drake, Halleck, (John Greenleaf) Whittier, and (Henry Wadsworth) Longfellow. In 1905 the cemetery was saved from destruction by local literary enthusiasts. Four years later, Parks acquired the property.

The park was named in honor of Joseph Rodman Drake in 1915. That year the Bronx Society of Arts and Science installed a seven-foot marble shaft inscribed with Halleck’s words to mark Drake’s grave. The Society placed another tablet in Drake’s honor near the Lorillard Snuff Mill in the New York Botanical Garden. A 1934 survey at the site shows a stone dwelling, a metal garage, and a tool shed standing in the vicinity of the burial ground in 1934. These features were no longer in place when a major renovation was undertaken in 1953. At that time, an iron picket fence was installed around the cemetery, benches were placed along the paths and cinder sidewalks were built along the perimeter. In 1962 the timber curbs around the cemetery were replaced with concrete. Even as the surrounding neighborhood has grown more industrial, the pastoral beauty of the Joseph Rodman Drake Park endures.

2.49 acres



Bronx

I SAT me down upon a green bank-side,
Skirting the smooth edge of a gentle river,
Whose waters seemed unwillingly to glide,
Like parting friends who linger while they sever;
Enforced to go, yet seeming still unready,
Backward they wind their way in many a wistful eddy.

Gray o'er my head the yellow-vested willow
Ruffled its hoary top in the fresh breezes,
Glancing in light, like spray on a green billow,
Or the fine frost-work which young winter freezes;
When first his power in infant pastime trying,
Congeals sad autumn's tears on the dead branches lying.

From rocks around hung the loose ivy dangling,
And in the clefts sumach of liveliest green,
Bright ising-stars the little beach was spangling,
The gold-cup sorrel from his gauzy screen
Shone like a fairy crown, enchased and beaded,

Left on some morn, when light flashed in their eyes unheeded.

The hum-bird shook his sun-touched wings around,
The bluefinch caroll'd in the still retreat;
The antic squirrel capered on the ground
Where lichens made a [carpet](#) for his feet:
Through the transparent waves, the ruddy minkle
Shot up in glimmering sparks his red fin's tiny twinkle.

There were dark cedars with loose mossy tresses,
White powdered dog-trees, and stiff hollies flaunting
Gaudy as rustics in their May-day dresses,
Blue pelloret from purple leaves upslanting
A modest gaze, like eyes of a young maiden
Shining beneath dropt lids the evening of her [wedding](#).

The breeze fresh springing from the lips of morn,
Kissing the leaves, and sighing so to lose 'em,
The winding of the merry locust's horn,
The glad spring gushing from [the rock's](#) bare bosom:
Sweet sights, sweet sounds, all sights, all sounds excelling,
Oh! 'twas a ravishing spot formed for a poet's dwelling.

And did I leave thy loveliness, to stand
Again in the dull world of earthly blindness?
Pained with the pressure of unfriendly hands,
Sick of smooth looks, agued with icy kindness?
Left I for this thy shades, were none intrude,
To prison wandering thought and mar sweet solitude?

Yet I will look upon thy face again,
My own romantic Bronx, and it will be
A face more pleasant than the face of men.
Thy waves are old companions, I shall see
A well-remembered form in each old tree,
And hear a voice long loved in thy wild minstrelsy.

Joseph Rodman Drake