

# History of Mianus River Park<sup>[1]</sup>



(The following history was compiled by John E. S. Lawrence, with help from Walter Wheeler, Sue Sweeney, Erin McKenna, Peter Moss, Denise Savageau, and Bruce Spaman. If you have any corrections or additions, please email us at: [friends.of.mianus.river.park@gmail.com](mailto:friends.of.mianus.river.park@gmail.com))

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## 1. Overview



Mianus River Park

The Mianus River Park is a remarkable jewel of rocky, riparian public land lying mostly to the west of the Mianus River on the Greenwich/Stamford borders, and immediately north of Treetops<sup>[2]</sup>. Its almost 300 acres of mature forest and dramatic landscape is parceled between a (west) entrance on Cognewaugh Rd (Greenwich) and another (east) entrance on Merriebrook Lane<sup>[3]</sup>.

The park is one of a series of conservation areas of the greater Mianus Greenway that help protect the river and its watershed as a major contributor to regional water supply. It has become a highly valued resource for surrounding communities, contributing in important ways to their quality of life and 'social capital'<sup>[4]</sup>. Its origins, detailed description, and recent management development via a consortium of governmental and non-governmental agencies and groups are described below.

## 2. The Name: Mianus

The word Mianus is said to come from the chief Sachem Myn Myano, whose name meant 'he who gathers together'<sup>[5]</sup>. His story is fraught with the saga of

confrontations between Native Americans and English and Dutch settlers. Chief Myano's tribe, the Siwanoy (Algonkian-speaking and part of the Wappinger Confederacy) controlled the area from the NY-CT border south to Cos Cob and the Long Island Sound.

It is suggested that the white settlers came to the Valley of the Mianus in the early 1600s carrying diseases that decimated Native American populations. Thus weakened, and in less than a decade, Sachem Myano and his tribe were forced off their land through a system of confusing land deals with colonial farmers<sup>[6]</sup>. Furthermore there is evidence that these Native Americans had a record of harboring Indian malefactors from the Hudson River, tribes who fled Dutch justice under Governor Kieft in New Amsterdam, resulting in punishing raids by English and Dutch soldiers and the notorious massacre at the Siwanoy village of Petuquapaen in February 1644. Sachem Myano himself attacked, and was shot dead by Colonel Daniel Patrick who had purchased much of what is now Greenwich (including Todd's Point) from the Indians for a price of twenty five coats a few years earlier<sup>[7]</sup>, so there are also traces of old grievance and sadness hanging under the heights and rocky ledges of the park.

### 3. The River



The Mianus River  
(click to enlarge)

Mianus River begins its spectacular 20-mile journey flowing north into Bedford, NY. Geologists say that the River originally continued north into the Hudson. During the last Ice Age, however, glacial debris forced the river to turn south just below Bedford's Indian Hill. Today, the river flows south-southeast from Bedford through *Mianus River Gorge Preserve* and into Stamford, running parallel to the Greenwich border. North of Palmers Hill, the river turns southwest into Greenwich, where it flows through Mianus Pond, over a dam into Cos Cob Harbor and, finally, into the Long Island Sound. The river is a source of drinking water for up to 150,000 residents in lower Fairfield County and adjoining New York, making its protection a key factor in management of the surrounding lands. Thus it remains particularly

important to find, and maintain a responsible compromise between recreation and preservation for users of the Park.

## 4. Origins

While evidence of Native American presence in the Park has not been extensively documented, there are abundant historical accounts of Indian livelihoods, dwellings and activities in the immediate region<sup>[8],[9]</sup>. Many visitors report a strange sense of awareness among the gatewayed old walls and curious standing stones. Some researchers even suggest very early settlements on the basis of possibly pre-ceramic artifacts actually found a little higher up the Mianus River<sup>[10]</sup>. Thus there is every reason to believe that full advantage was taken of the fresh water source, game, and river flats by native populations well before the Europeans came.

After they arrived in the early 1600s, and negotiated for ownership of different properties, the Europeans immediately began clearing the forest. With the exception of areas that were too steep, wet or rocky, much of the land along the river was farmed or used for pasture up until the Civil War. Trees in the rougher areas were often cut down for lumber, firewood, and/or charcoal production. It is thought that the north end of the Park was most likely farmed and that the rougher sections to the south were used primarily for hunting, fishing, and charcoal production. After the Civil War, some area farms were abandoned in favor of more fertile land in the West. The abandoned lands slowly returned to forest. Remnants of several stone walls, burial mounds, even a well, and old storage cellars and caves can still be seen in the Park. Many of the walls on the Stamford side have been mapped in coordination with the municipal government and the New England Antiquities Research Association.



A Cave

Not much is yet known in detail about the intervening period. It is said there has never been a dwelling on the



Red Barn on Merriebrook

property<sup>[11]</sup> although at least one deep well has been discovered west of the river, and there are remnants of early buildings both in Treetops and the Mianus River Park. In 1928, 200 acres, constituting most of the land that is now the Park, was purchased by Robert Goodbody, a New York financier. Local historians say that the Goodbody home was located in what is now Fort Stamford Park and that the

Goodbody's stabled horses in the red barn that still stands in the southeast corner of the Mianus River Park near Merriebrook Lane. Several of the current Park trails, including the Inner Road and the River Road were, at one time, Goodbody bridal paths.

In the late 1960s, the City of Stamford purchased 77 acres known as the "Old Mill Lane - Mianus Tract" for park and recreational space under the Federal Open Space Act. The Mianus River Park was officially created when Greenwich purchased 109.7 acres (for \$500,000) and Stamford 110.3 acres, both from the Goodbody Estate in 1972<sup>[12]</sup>. The Goodbody family had owned the property since 1928<sup>[13]</sup>.

The express purpose of this joint effort by the two municipalities was to preserve a large tract of undeveloped forest and field for conservation and passive recreational use. Residents of both towns were to have equal access to the entire park. Soon after the purchase, six trails were laid out cooperatively by the representatives of Stamford and Greenwich. They were planned to provide variety to the user of the park. Initially both towns planned to share a ranger who would live in the lodge on the Stamford side of the property and maintain the park.

However, associated costs made this idea impractical<sup>[14]</sup>.

## 5. Geology, Flora & Fauna

The Park exhibits periglacial formations, numerous scarped rock outcroppings in an extraordinary display of shapes and clusters. These outcroppings consist of rock formed during

the Ordovician period 500 million years ago. Around 24,000 years ago, the advancing glaciers, which created the Mianus Valley, scraped the rock clean. When the glaciers retreated, about 13,000 years ago, they left behind the scars, as well as many large glacially deposited boulders.



Glacially Deposited Boulder

After the glaciers retreated, most of the Atlantic Coastal area became a single, vast forest, consisting primarily of mixed hardwoods with pockets of conifers. The forest was punctuated by temporary meadows, created by fires, blow-downs, beavers, and Native American agricultural activities. Traces of Native American activity, thought by some to date back perhaps thousands of years, have been discovered including what appear to be dwelling, worship and burial sites, although evidence for these continues to be questioned.



Rock Outcrrping

Unquestionable however is the simple and unadorned natural beauty of the many ridges and valleys. Intermittent streams and perched Red Maple swamps are scattered throughout the Park. A network of trails passes through Oak and Tulip dominated uplands, areas with young Ash and Cherry trees, old stands of Hemlock and Beech trees, an old field, rock outcrops and

Mountain Laurel patches. Among the Black Birch, Tulip Tree, Red Ash and Tupelo can be found many types of fern including: Ladyfern, Sensitive Fern, Cinnamon Fern, Maidenhair, Royal Fern and Bracken.

The park's wetlands are prime breeding pools for a variety of salamanders and frogs. The variety of vegetation provides resting and nesting habitats for wildlife, such as ruffed grouse, pheasant, mallards, cranes, heron, songbirds, woodpeckers, squirrels, deer, raccoons, fox, coyote, weasels, mink and river otter, and various small mammals. In the *Mianus River Gorge Preserve*, to the north, The Nature Conservancy has recorded over 100 species of trees, 150 species of birds and 250 species of wildflowers. Many of these species are also found in the Mianus River

Park -- at least 125 bird species alone have been observed in the Park since 1972 [15].

## 6. Deed Restrictions and Ordinances

On the Greenwich side, deed restrictions limit property use to passive recreation. Permitted activities include walking, jogging, hiking, horseback riding, fishing, and nature study. No picnicking or camping is allowed, and fishing may only be done with a State License. On both Greenwich and Stamford sides, city ordinances<sup>[16]</sup> are quite specific on the required leashing of all dogs, commensurate responsibilities of owners/custodians to abide by these restrictions in controlling their pets (e.g. keeping them leashed, removal of feces), and penalties for violation. Furthermore, Connecticut State regulations also require leashing of dogs at all times in state parks<sup>[17]</sup>.

Dog Owner with  
Leashed Dog

Dogs must be leashed

## 7. The Park Today

Major Wilensky's prediction (*see footnote 4 above*) came true only too soon; future generations did appreciate the Park. Publicity surged with strong community support for saving Treetops from real estate development, as well as with growing state and local emphasis on the importance of municipal green space. A separate web-history has documented<sup>[18]</sup> the story of the smaller Treetops lying to the southwest of the Merriebrook bridge, and forming an adjacent and elegant (smaller) sibling-land in the broader context of the overall Mianus Greenway. Notably, its recent acquisition as a public park depended on several extraordinary and unprecedented cooperative public/private actions, a key factor in which was Greenwich's (first ever) turning down of a planned residential development on 'vernal pools' conservation arguments<sup>[19]</sup>.

The larger Mianus River Park has now become a favorite of nature lovers, joggers, dog walkers, hikers, anglers, bikers,



and cross-country skiers. By the mid 2000s, it was recognized that the Park was seriously suffering from over-use. 'It's being loved to death' said a Stamford land-use planner<sup>[20]</sup>. In 2006, after 2 years of work, a joint Stamford-

Greenwich action plan<sup>[21]</sup> was created, with help from the National Park Service, and with input from the Park user groups, to help control Park use, and to repair some of the damage. This work is visibly on-going and requires the cooperation of all Park visitors.

From the beginning, preserving the Mianus River Park, and the entire Mianus River Greenway, has been a collaborative effort by city, state and federal officials, numerous conservation organizations, and countless residents. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people have helped in one way or another. Many continue the work today.

*John E.S. Lawrence*

*July 16, 2009*

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**Footnotes:** *(all links will open in the same new window)*

[1] This history is built on a number of sources (referenced in footnotes) and earlier drafts as well as careful investigative work by several supporters of the Park conservation and management, including Walter Wheeler, Sue Sweeney, Erin McKenna, Denise Savageau, and Bruce Spaman.

[2] [http://www.friendsofmianusriverpark.org/treetops/history\\_of\\_treetops.htm](http://www.friendsofmianusriverpark.org/treetops/history_of_treetops.htm)

[3] Location coordinates of Merriebrook Bridge are 41° 4' 0" North, 73° 35' 33" West

[4] On September 6, 1972, after the closing of the Stamford purchase of the eastern side of today's park, then-Mayor Julius Wilensky observed that the purchase would "not be fully appreciated during this lifetime... [but that] future generations will thank us". Since then, park users have testified in surveys, petitions and community meetings, to the treasure the place has meant to themselves, their families and friends.

[5] Source: Success Stories; Mianus River Gorge: [The Pioneer Project](#) and thanks to <http://www.>

[nynjctbotany.org/lgtofc/nymianus.html](http://nynjctbotany.org/lgtofc/nymianus.html)

[6] Connecticut Watertrails.com ([Mianus River](#))

[7] The Indians of North Castle - Our Native Americans. Doris Finch Watson. North Castle History. Vol 6. No 1. 1979.

[8] See for example: The Indians of Greater New York and the Lower Hudson. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History. Vol III. Clark Wissler (Ed). 1909.

[9] Native New Yorkers. The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York. Evan T Pritchard. 2002.

[10] Bulletin of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology, Inc. Publication date ca. 1963.

[11] Town of Greenwich: Dept of Parks and Recreation [link >](#)

[12] *ibid*

[13] *ibid*

[14] *ibid*

[15] Town of Greenwich: Department of Parks & Recreation.

[16] Stamford Ordinance 997, Chapter 111. Dogs and Other Animals, Section 111-11. Dog Regulations B. (2) (a.); Greenwich Municipal Code. Article 2. Parks and Recreation Places. Sec. 7-25. Pets.

[17] State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection, Bureau of Outdoor Recreation, General Regulations. Section 23-4-1(f)(2). Pets and riding animals (relevant since the State of Connecticut is a partner in the Mianus River Park complex).

[18] <https://sites.google.com/site/mianusriverpark/treetops-state-park>

[19] Decision by Greenwich Inland Wetlands and Watercourse Agency. Pers. Com. Denise Savageau, Town of Greenwich. July 10, 2009.

[20] Erin McKenna, during an interview discussing Stamford and Greenwich collective efforts on a management plan for the Park. Greenwich Times September 1, 2006.

[21] Mianus River Park. Managing Natural Resources & Recreation: an Action Plan - September 20

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