Books

New York Underfoot

Touring Gotham's Archaeological Past: 8 Self-Guided Walking Tours through New York City, by Anne-Marie Cantwell '65GS and Diana diZerega Wall. Yale University Press. $18.00.

By
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Today's New Yorkers share their city with 8 million people, but long before the city was a humming metropolis, their neighbors were woolly mammoths. Paleoindians moved in 11,000 years ago, most likely from Asia, at the end of the last ice age. The sea level was lower, and one could walk from Manhattan to Staten Island. In *Touring Gotham's Archaeological Past: 8 Self-Guided Walking Tours through New York City*, by archaeologists Anne-Marie Cantwell '65GS and Diana diZerega Wall, readers learn of an excavation in the 1950s that turned up a leaf-shaped fluted spear point, indicating the presence of the first Native Americans. Artifacts discovered throughout the city yield similarly fascinating evidence of New Yorkers, from post ice-age hunters and gatherers to revolutionary-era families.

Professional archaeologists didn't start digging up New York until the twentieth century. Proof of early Native Americans may have been destroyed entirely if it hadn't been for self-taught archaeologists who in the 1800s and early 1900s set out with their pickaxes and shovels on weekends to salvage pieces of the city's history. *Gotham* is as much their story as it is of the objects they found. Button enthusiast William Calver, for example, uncovered hundreds of buttons stamped with military squadron numbers, including ones from the 52nd Regiment. He examined historical records of army activity in northern Manhattan and determined the buttons belonged to a Hessian troop that in 1776 occupied the area near Payson Avenue and Beak Street. (Fort Tryon Park was a nearby Hessian outpost, although the authors don't have evidence linking the two).

Other small, seemingly insignificant discoveries reveal a history of New York that might surprise even the most hard-core native. A 1984 dig at One Financial Square in Lower Manhattan unearthed a spoon with x's and +'s engraved on it. Archaeologists initially thought the marks were accidental, but an interpretation by Leland Ferguson, author of the 1992 book *Uncommon Ground* led them to believe that the scratchings may have been made by the Bakongo, a West African people brought over as slaves. The lines depicted the relationship between the living and the dead, and the earth and water, Ferguson theorized, and were likely used in rituals involving water. That is probably why the spoon was discovered beneath landfill that was used to extend Manhattan in the nineteenth century.

Most of the archaeological evidence in *Gotham* has been moved to museums or other locations safe from scavengers. Some edifices still stand, such as Castle Clinton, a nineteenth-century fort in Battery Park where one can now buy tickets for the ferry to the Statue of Liberty. But most sites the book refers to show no sign of their archaeological past, in part because, as Cantwell explained in an interview, "the best way to protect a site is to pave over it." Instead, a modern building might serve as a landmark. Around the corner from the Goldman Sachs building at 85 Broad Street, for example, archaeologists discovered a part of the foundation walls from a seventeenth century tavern.

The authors' descriptions are so vivid that it doesn't require too much imagination to travel back in time. The sites' modern identities are sometimes part of the fun. Today's Greenwich Village attracts every sort of character, and on weekends the streets teem with visitors from the boroughs and New Jersey, whom the locals derisively call "bridge and tunnel" people. But in the early nineteenth century the area was home to the city's wealthiest families. In 1822 a yellow fever epidemic triggered a mass migration to Brooklyn Heights and Jersey City, creating the city's first commuter suburbs.

Gotham is short on histories of Queens, the Bronx, and Brooklyn mainly because archaeologists have focused on excavations in Manhattan. At first glance it appears Staten Island is overlooked, except for a peek at the borough from Ellis Island. Staten Island actually houses some of the earliest traces of human life, but the authors omitted it because, unlike in other areas of the city, most of its sites are unprotected. And unfortunately for those curious about what was beneath Low Library 10,000 years ago, the book skips over Morningside Heights, although Cantwell says "it was definitely Indian country."

Cantwell and Wall wrote Gotham after readers of their first book, Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City (Yale University Press, 2001) asked how to locate the sites described. The sequel's collection of tours serves as a modern map to the city's past. The routes are probably better suited to history buffs or the more adventurous visitor, but almost anyone will find these stories, hidden well below the paved avenues, to be a thoroughly new and unexpected view of New York.

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