An address on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx was once as prestigious as any in New York City. It was where upwardly mobile Jewish, Irish and other immigrants flocked when they arrived here in the 1920s through the 1950s. The boulevard's four-lane grandeur echoing Paris' Champs d'Élysées, its architecturally stunning apartment buildings, public transit access to jobs in Manhattan and direct links to the borough's beautiful parks made it an attractive destination for families to raise their children.

It was where people like Lauren Bacall, Martin Scorsese, Regis Philbin, Don DeLillo, Batman co-creators Bob Kane and Bill Finger and many other celebrities grew up and studied and worked. It was where presidential candidates like John F. Kennedy Jr. campaigned for election.

That it became such a destination for urban life might have made proud Louis Risse, the chief engineer of the Concourse, who envisioned a grand boulevard in the late 1890s connecting Manhattan to the distant parklands and vacation estates that existed among the vast woodlands of the Bronx. The boulevard would carry fast horses and carriages, cutting through the heart of the borough to transform it. As chief engineer, Risse steered the road to completion in 1909.

But what was once a destination for the upwardly mobile in the mid-20th Century became a locus of blight by the 1960s. Although the reasons are well documented elsewhere, suffice to say a mass exodus of people from the Grand Concourse dramatically changed the Bronx. It wasn't until recent years that the boulevard has seen a resurgence and new vitality.

The history of the Grand Concourse is rich and varied, and here are but a few of its secrets unearthed with the generous help of the Bronx County Historical Society.
"The Great Wall of China"

As the Grand Concourse was being constructed in the early 1900s, its official engineer, Louis Risse, realized that a bridge had to be built to traverse a valley surrounded by rolling farmland at 174th Street.

He proposed a steel bridge (as seen above) to do the job. But Louis J. Heintz, a promoter of the Concourse and a street improvements commissioner, foresaw a time when the roadway would be so well traveled that a stronger bridge would be required.

Thus the bridge was erected in stone masonry, becoming a formidable span that split the farmlands and which locals christened "The Great Wall of China." The wall was obliterated during the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway that was built between 1948 and 1972.

(Credit: Courtesy of The Bronx County Historical Society Collections)

The birthplace of Batman?

...As the two men leer over their conquest, they do not notice a third menacing figure standing behind them... it is the "BAT-MAN!"

THE BAT-MAN!!!
It is almost too much of a coincidence to be dismissed out of hand -- that Batman may have been created on the Grand Concourse. In 1939, the co-creators of Batman, Bob Kane and Bill Finger, had already begun collaborating on comics, often at Poe Park near Edgar Allen Poe's cottage off the Grand Concourse. Over one weekend, they created Batman, the World's Greatest Detective, taking inspiration from various sources including Zorro.

Now here's where the details get murky. Kane had a studio where he also lived on the Concourse, but Finger lived on Kelly Street. According to Marc Tyler Nobleman, who has written a biography of Finger called "Bill the Boy Wonder: The Secret Co-Creator of Batman," it is impossible to verify where they were when they created the Dark Knight.

But here's what is known: In the early 1940s, Kane and Finger continued to collaborate, coming up with some of the earliest story lines for the World's Greatest Detective while sitting at Poe Park.

(Credit: DC Comics)

**A vision of the Virgin Mary**

At the northern end of the Grand Concourse, there is a secluded shrine accessible up a narrow staircase that marks the spot where a 9-year-old boy had a vision of the Virgin Mary 70 years ago.

It was on Oct. 29, 1945 that Joseph Vitolo said he saw the virgin floating above the spot where the shrine is now. The sighting attracted mass media attention, with more than 30,000 people descending on the spot near the northern end of the Concourse. Among the people who lined up was none other than Frank Sinatra.

But the Archdiocese of New York wouldn't validate the "Bronx Miracle," and the sighting faded from the headlines. Today the shrine still remains, unaffiliated with the church, but the flowers are fresh and there are benches where believers can go and sit in reflection or prayer. For years, Vitolo continued to live nearby and serve as the caretaker of the shrine.

(Credit: Cristian Salazar)
A luxury hotel stop on the path to sports and political glory

During Mickey Mantle's early years playing for the Bronx Bombers he would spend his nights at the Concourse Plaza Hotel, built in 1923 just blocks from Yankee Stadium. Mantle would read the sports pages, think about the next day's game, even take a walk on the Concourse to see local stickball games, according to Tony Castro's "Mickey Mantle: America's Prodigal Son."

Since the hotel apartment building had opened, the Yankees kept a block of apartments at the building for rookies and visiting teams. Most players had to share rooms, except Babe Ruth, according to Bronx Borough Historian Lloyd Ultan. But by the 1930s, many of the players, tired of living under the watchful gaze of the team, moved out to private apartments and by the 1950s the Yankees had given up space at the hotel.

But it wasn't just star baseball players who lived there. The Plaza Hotel was the center of social life in the Bronx for decades, the place you went if you had to organize an important wedding or if you were someone like a guy named John F. Kennedy Jr., running for president in 1960.

But as ruin came to the borough, the hotel declined and was left vacant. It was during this time in the 1970s that a Gena Rowlands picture directed by John Cassavetes called "Gloria" was shot at the hotel. Ultan recalled a scene of Rowlands looking out a window at the Grand Concourse.

(Credit: The Bronx County Historical Society Collections)
Over the decades, the building at 1130 Grand Concourse has hosted a series of social services organizations. In 1926, it was the Bronx Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children and today it is the home of BronxWorks, a social services agency with services for children and youth.

But in the 2009 film "Precious," it got what was probably its most high-profile role to date: serving in key scenes for the movie about a wayward, pregnant 16-year-old girl.

John Weed, assistant executive director of BronxWorks, explained that several scenes were shot in the building, including Mariah Carey's cameo appearance where she plays a social worker interviewing Precious and her mother. The scene was shot in one of BronxWorks' Positive Living HIV/AIDS departments. The building also appears in the last scene of the movie, when Precious walks out into a possibly brighter future.

(Credit: Lee Daniels Entertainment)
Art-Deco treasures galore

To this day, the Grand Concourse is a mecca for Art-Deco landmarks. The Landmarks Preservation Commission called it "one of the great repositories of Art Deco buildings nationwide," rivaled only by Miami Beach, Florida.

Art Deco swept the country in the 1930s, bringing with it a more modern, streamlined look to architecture. At the same time, developers in the Bronx were erecting apartment houses along the Grand Concourse, and chose Art Deco as the predominant style. Marketed to professionals who could afford higher rents, the buildings featured inventive use of terra cotta, cast stone, brick and other machine-age materials to create a contemporary elegance.

Among the most striking examples are 888 Grand Concourse, which uses "recessed or decorated spandrels to... create an effect of continuous vertical window strips," as the LPC noted, and 1150 Grand Concourse, known as the "fish building" for its mural of tropical fish and plants "in tinted concrete or cast stone and mosaic tiles."

(Credit: Emilio Guerra)
A home for poor millionaires

When Andrew Freedman, a wealthy real estate tycoon and a former owner of the New York Giants, died in 1915, he left behind a $5 million trust to establish a unique retirement home. The home, he set forth, would be for people who had once been wealthy but were now “aged and indigent.”

Freedman was determined to help an “overlooked class of persons” facing dire circumstances and to keep them from suffering the fate of the “lowborn” poor, as Charles Henry Wenhold put it.

The home opened off the Concourse in a Renaissance Palazzo-style building in 1924. There were well-trained butlers, weekly soirees, and afternoon tea in the garden, a professional chef and other luxuries. In 1938, Life magazine visited the Andrew Freedman Home, writing, “It is, as poorhouses go, just about perfection.”

The home itself became destitute, though, by the 1980s and was converted to senior housing with 130 or so people living there. In 2007 it closed only to reopen a few years later as a cultural and arts center.

(Credit: LIFE Nov 7, 1938)
From the Bronx to the Supreme Court

The Great Depression-era murals by Ben Shahn at the former main post office of the Bronx (now being redeveloped into a market) are well known landmarks on the Concourse. They depict men and women at work and were inspired by a Walt Whitman poem.

Lesser known, but equally historically important, are murals at the former Dollar Savings Bank on the Grand Concourse.

Though the building was best known to generations of Bronxites for its large clock on its façade, the five 1930s murals inside the building also help to make this one of the architectural and artistic gems on the throughway. These murals, by Angelo Magnanti, depict earlier moments in Bronx history, including settlers and Native Americans.

Magnanti wasn't any old muralist. He also produced works for the original Penn Station and, perhaps most significantly, designed the interior of the U.S. Supreme Court's main court.

(Credit: Library of Congress)
A fountain rescued from German anti-Semitism

Though rarely read today, Heinrich Heine was among the leading German writers of his time in the mid-1800s.

But when the sculptor Ernst Herter was commissioned to create a fountain honoring Heine in 1888 to be placed in his birth city of Dusseldorf, locals vigorously opposed the work.

In a defense of the fountain, piano manufacturer William Steinway argued that the hostility stemmed from the "license of [Heine's] pen and because of his Jewish birth."

A group of German Americans decided to rescue the fountain and bring it to the Bronx, where it was installed at the south end of what is now known as Joyce Kilmer Park on the Grand Concourse.

(Credit: Emilio Guerra)
Crossroads of "America's first highway"

It was the Route 66 of its time. America's "first highway" was carved along an old Indian path and connected New York to Boston, crossing the Grand Concourse and following Van Cortlandt Avenue East.

The old Boston Post Road, as it was known after it was established in the 1600s, allowed riders on horseback to travel from lower New York to Kingsbridge to the northern Bronx and up through Westchester and on to Boston.

During the American Revolution it was a key pathway along the Northeast Coast, helping Paul Revere carry long-distance messages between Massachusetts and the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. George Washington led a victorious army south along the road from Boston to New York in 1776.
During the Revolutionary War, the British built a fort as a defense of the strategically important Boston Post Road that would have run along Van Cortlandt Avenue East across today's Grand Concourse. This fort, which was probably more an "outpost" or "redoubt" has become known as "Negro Fort" because it was run by "freed men of color" who were fighting on the British side. Military dispatches mention the fort in 1777 and may have remained into 1779.

Historian Ultan says that it's likely the fort was involved in a number of important skirmishes, including an attempt by American forces to besiege the Brits' much more important Fort Independence. "But the 'Negro Fort' was in the way," Ultan said.

In recent years, local officials have been seeking to set a placard at the site of the former fort, which would have been located on today's St. George's Crescent. When apartments were built there, some small musket balls were found, but little else remains of the site.

(Credit: The Bronx County Historical Society Collections)