

A plethora of colorful awnings over busy storefronts lines many streets of Upper Manhattan, but a historic farmhouse dating back to the 18th Century interrupts the commercial activity at the end of one block on Broadway. A pharmacy, a podiatrist's office, a medical plaza, a hair studio, a dry cleaner's shop, an accounting office, and a tattoo and body piercing shop share the block between 207th and 204th Streets in Inwood, a neighborhood located at the uppermost point of Manhattan, with the Dyckman House, a Dutch Colonial Farmhouse, which, according to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, was built in 1785. Susan Devries, the Director of the Dyckman House, noted that the Dyckman house became a National Historic Landmark in 1967 and a New York City Landmark in 1978. The farmhouse and the small, tranquil park in which it sits stand out from their surroundings, but the benches that line the sidewalk in front of it steals the attention of many people. In Inwood, a place in which greenery and parks abound, this busy corner on Broadway and 204th Street, complete with a bus stop, a view of a gas station, and heavy foot traffic, is the chosen place for relaxation for many local residents.

Inwood Hill Park, Isham Park, Fort Tryon Park, and Sherman Creek Park all provide an abundance of peaceful, green space for people to escape from the busy streets and crowded sidewalks of Inwood. These parks do attract numerous visitors, but many people still prefer to unwind on the benches that line Broadway at regular intervals. The trees of Isham Park provide much shade from the summer sun for the benches that line the adjoining sidewalk, but this relatively quiet area – even on the sunniest days -- is not nearly as crowded as the corner of

Broadway and 204th Street, which has no shade despite the Dyckman House Park eight stair steps above it.

“I’ve often wondered that myself,” said Anne Story, the caretaker of the park for the past 10 years, with a laugh when asked why so many people fill the benches. “People come here every day and sit out on the benches.”

John O’Brien, a retired local resident who has lived in Inwood since childhood, even came out to sit on a bench and read his newspaper on a drizzly afternoon on Friday, August 20th. Despite the humidity and the light rain still falling, O’Brien was happy to share his knowledge about the neighborhood while casually smoking a cigarette. According to O’Brien, the benches “have always been here.” Susan Devries, the Director at the Dyckman House confirmed that the benches had occupied the block since at least the 1950s, but neither she nor Jennifer Fine of the New York City Historic House Trust could confirm this information.

O’Brien, who returned to the benches the following day, also commented upon the character of the Inwood residents. They are, he says, “pretty much a homefolk.”

Donald Belanger, a tattoo artist at Alley Kat Tattoos, located next to the Dyckman house at 4915 Broadway, agreed that many locals prefer to stay close to home. Despite the proximity of so many parks, people are “too lazy to go that far,” he stated. Belanger, who moved to Inwood from Massachusetts just three months ago added another reason for the popularity of these benches. According to Belanger, at this corner there is “more entertainment watching people go by than sitting in a park starting at the woods.”

Tony Alicea, a jovial Inwood local who has lived in the area for 30 years, comes to this corner of Broadway whenever he is not working at J/G Auto Body in Yonkers. On Saturday, August 20, a cloudy, cool day, he spent over two hours on a bench outside the Dyckman house,

chatting with passerby and friends who are also regulars at the Dyckman benches while the Bx7 and M100 buses and other traffic rolled by at regular intervals. “We lean on Broadway,” he emphatically said of the corner, stretching out his arms to indicate the benches in front of the Dyckman house. “We come here every day and we sit and we chitchat.”

Another man, Raymond Luciano, who has lived around the corner from the Dyckman house for 12 years, stopped with his dog Ginger to talk to Alicea and Frank Medina, another long-time Inwood local. “He should be mayor, and him, deputy Mayor,” Luciano says about Alicea and Medina respectively. According to Luciano, the two know much about the happenings of Inwood and know many of the residents personally. In fact, in the course of two hours, each of the people along the benches encountered at least one passerby he or she knew personally.

The use of this corner as what Anne Story, the caretaker at the Dyckman House, called a “meeting place” for the local residents is clear. A group of elderly women chatted eagerly for over an hour on Saturday, August 20th. Occasionally one would leave, but a newcomer would take her place very shortly. However, by the time one elderly woman, dressed in a fine flower-printed dress and a beautiful pearl necklace, arrived with her caretaker, the other women had already departed, their places on the second bench along the sidewalk occupied by younger neighborhood locals. The disappointment showed clearly on the woman’s face as her caretaker remarked in a soft Caribbean accent, “There’s nobody here today.”