

DISCOVER SENECA VILLAGE

Selected Research Topics and Resources



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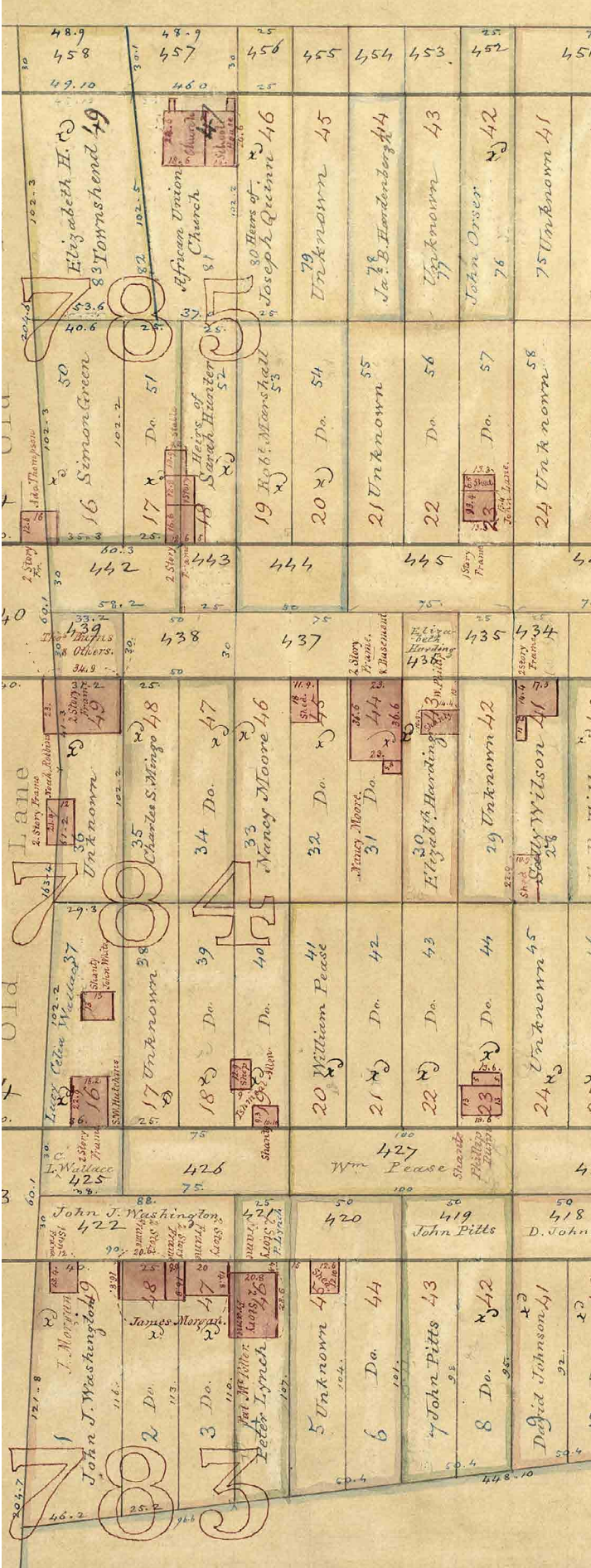
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Left: Detail of map showing houses in Seneca Village, 1856. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.

Cover: Egbert Viele, detail of Map of the lands included in the Central Park, 1856. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.



INTRODUCTION

The Central Park Conservancy has been conducting research on Seneca Village, the predominantly African-American community that existed from 1825 to 1857, for the past several years. This work builds on the initial research of Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar in their book, *The Park and the People* (1992), as well as the ongoing work of the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History (IESVH), a group of scholars and archaeologists who have been studying Seneca Village since the 1990s.

While the Conservancy had been aware of Seneca Village since the 1990s and involved in various initiatives to share and research its history, a more focused effort on Seneca Village began in 2015, as part of planning to rebuild the two playgrounds located in the Seneca Village site. This work included archival research and archaeological testing that discovered additional information on and artifacts of Seneca Village residents. This work also related to the Conservancy's broader interest in pre-Park history—uncovering the history of the land before Central Park, including its geology and other natural features, settlements, military occupations, and more.

In 2018, the Conservancy decided to look at all the work done on Seneca Village and think about how to better share it with the public. The Conservancy's historian, working with the IESVH, created a temporary exhibit of interpretative signs that were installed in Central Park in October 2019. The signs mark the sites of the Village's churches and other buildings, provide information on residents, and point out current features in the landscape that existed in Seneca Village. It was important to the Conservancy to share this information in the Park, thus allowing visitors to discover the Village and its people in the place where they actually lived.

The signs are just one way that the Conservancy hopes to share this history and encourage the discovery of Seneca Village. This guide, which includes selected research topics and suggestions for further research, is not exhaustive but intended to provide some additional context for the information provided on the signs. It takes the form of a series of frequently asked questions about Seneca Village, reflecting what we've learned Park visitors and others are most curious about.

Research into Seneca Village is ongoing; the Conservancy, the IESVH, and others are continuing to investigate Seneca Village and are working on developing additional resources to help tell the story of this extraordinary community.

Marie Warsh

Historian, Central Park Conservancy
October 2019

SENECA VILLAGE OVERVIEW

- Located between 82nd and 89th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues on approximately five acres of land.
- Started in 1825 when African-Americans affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church based downtown began purchasing land in the area.
- People settled in the area over the course of 30 years. By 1855 the estimated population was approximately 230. Residents lived in 52 buildings scattered throughout the area. Most of them were two-story, wood frame houses. Some people had sheds and barns.
- By 1855 there were three churches: African Episcopal Methodist Zion Church, African Union Church, and All Angels' Church.
- Adjacent to African Union Church was a small school, called "Colored School #3," which was part of the City's public school system.
- Majority of the population in 1855, approximately two-thirds, was African-American.
- Irish immigrants began settling in Seneca Village in the 1840s and by 1855 made up one-third of the population.
- Highly significant as a predominantly middle-class African-American community that included a large number of African-American property owners.
- In 1853, the City began the process of acquiring the land to create Central Park using the law of eminent domain. Residents who owned property were paid for the value of their land. They had to leave by 1857, when the City began to build the Park.

RESEARCH TOPICS

How and why did Seneca Village start?

Seneca Village began as the result of a series of real estate transactions. In 1825, a white couple named John and Elizabeth Whitehead, who owned farmland in Manhattan's west 80s and 90s, divided up their land into individual lots and began to offer them for sale. Andrew Williams, an African-American who lived downtown, was the first to purchase three lots. It is not clear how he heard about this offering. Two other African-Americans, Epiphany Davis and John Carter, also purchased lots that same day. Both Williams and Davis were affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the City's first African-American church. A week later, the church bought seven lots, which they planned to use as a burial ground.

Although the actual settlement of Seneca Village as a predominantly African-American community occurred slowly and overtime, it was set in motion by these purchases. Other than the church's practical purchase for burial space, there is no

known documentation of the intentions of those who first bought the land, whose distance from the center of the City made it relatively affordable. However, it is likely that the church and those affiliated with the church were motivated to develop a more autonomous and secluded community for African-Americans in the City, where they could escape the racist climate and crowded and unhealthy conditions of lower Manhattan. In addition to being involved in the church, both Davis and Williams were also involved in the New York African Society for Mutual Relief, formed in 1808 to provide support for African-American individuals and families as well as institutions such as churches and schools. Their involvement in this organization was a sign that they were individuals committed to promoting the stability and prosperity of African-Americans, something that moving to a more remote area and owning property also furthered.

Overtime, the Whiteheads sold 50 lots, approximately half to African-American families.

In 2018 and 2019, Seneca Village researchers reexamined all of the documents—the census, maps, and tax records—to try and get a more precise number of residents in Seneca Village in 1855. This was a challenging endeavor, as

These are the surnames for the 51 families that researchers believe lived in Seneca Village in 1855. Those in bold are African-American family names. In a couple of cases, indicated with a (/), there were alternate spelling for the same family.

Allen, Allen, Barlow, **Benson**, Berry, **Butler**, Casey,
Casey, **Davis**, Dunn, Foley, Gallagher, **Garnet**,
Geary, Germond, Glynn, **Green**, Haff, Hale,
Hamilton, **Harrison**, **Hicks**, Hinson, **Hutchins**,
Jackson, **Jimmerson**, **Landen**, Lane, **Mathews**,
McCollin, **McClancey**, McFarlane, Meyers, **Morgan**,
Pease, **Phillips**, Renahan, Riley, **Scudder**, **Sisco**/
Cisco, **Smith**, **Snowden**, **Sylvan**/**Silver**, Thomson,
Wallace, **Webster**, **White**, **White**, **Williams**,
Wilson, **Wilson**.

34	404	Frame	900	525	Pleasant Smith	5 M B	Child	New York	1	30	Porter	1	-	-	1	-
35					William C. Wilson	41 M B		New York	1	30		1	-	-	1	-
36					Charles E. Wilson	39 Y B	Wife	New York	1	30		-	-	-	1	R
37					Wm H. Wilson	17 M B	Child	New York		17	Wailer	-	-	-	1	-
38					Joseph Wilson	15 M B	Child	New York		15	None	-	-	-	1	-
39					John Wilson	13 M B	Child	New York		13		-	-	-	1	-
40					Isaac Wilson	11 M B	Child	New York		11		-	-	-	1	-
41					Charlotte Wilson	7 Y B	Child	New York		7		-	-	-	1	-
42					James Wilson	5 M B	Child	New York		5		-	-	-	1	-
43					Mary Wilson	3 Y B	Child	New York		3		-	-	-	1	-
44					Charles Wilson	2 M B	Child	New York		2		-	-	-	1	-
45	405	Frame	800	526	William Benson	39 M B		Virginia	1	5	Sabour	-	-	-	1	R
					Sarah Benson	39 Y B	Wife	Hawland	1	5		-	-	-	1	R
					William H. Benson	3 M B	Child	New York		3		-	-	-	1	-
				527	James Hamilton	36 M B		Virginia	1	10	Shiver	1	-	-	-	1

6

Is there a connection between Seneca Village and the Underground Railroad?

Researchers have not found any evidence that Seneca Village was a stop on the Underground Railroad. However, the Village's location was far from the centers of population downtown and in a much less developed area, conditions that could have been helpful for hiding fugitives.

The only documented connection between Seneca Village and abolitionism is through Albion Lyons and his family. Lyons operated a boarding house for sailors downtown that was a noted stop on the Underground Railroad. He also owned property in Seneca Village, which he had inherited from his wife's family, but maps and other records show that there was no building on the land and that no one lived there. Lyons and his family lived in several locations downtown. His family fled the City in 1863 after their home and boarding house was destroyed during the draft riots in 1863.

Research is currently underway to determine any possible connections between Seneca Village and the abolitionist movement.

Where else in New York City did African-Americans live?

During the 19th century, the City's African-American population was concentrated downtown, in the fifth, sixth, and eighth wards. (Today these are roughly the neighborhoods of Soho, Tribeca, the West Village, and Chinatown). The sixth ward was where the notorious Five Points neighborhood was located.

Free and enslaved Blacks had a long presence in the area, dating back to the Dutch settlement. The discovery of the African Burial Ground in 1991, which had long been hidden under layers of concrete and asphalt, shed light on the history of enslaved Africans who lived downtown, a history of which many people were unaware. Historian Leslie Harris explains, "Before the completion of emancipation in 1827, New York City contained the largest urban slave population outside of the South. After 1827, the City was home to one of the largest free Black communities in the North."

Although the abolishment of slavery in 1827 in New York State inspired great hope for many African-American New Yorkers, many aspects of their daily life were still severely limited by discrimination. They were unable to access public transportation and barred from many jobs; they faced harassment of many forms, often violent. One way to try and counteract this oppression and create a sense of safety was to create their own communities, and form neighborhoods with institutions such as churches, newspapers, businesses, and aid organizations.

African-Americans formed enclaves in small pockets of downtown, such as the area known as "Little Africa," which was south of Washington Square, near what is now Minetta Lane and Minetta Street. Institutions in this area included churches, branches of the Freedman's Saving and Trust Company (established after the Civil War), and a school for African-American children.

Seneca Village was one of several communities located outside of the urban core in the 19th century. Other important examples include Weeksville in Brooklyn, Sandy Ground in Staten Island, and Newtown in Queens.

Located in present-day Crown Heights, Weeksville was formed beginning in 1838 when African-Americans began buying property in an area of eastern Brooklyn that was made more accessible by the opening of a train line. Weeksville grew quickly; by 1850, the population was over 500 people, including many residents from the south. Similar to Seneca Village and other African-American communities, Weeksville had not just homes but institutions, including several churches, a cemetery, and a school, as well as a newspaper, an orphan asylum, and its own baseball team. Also similar to Seneca Village, for African-Americans in Weeksville, land ownership and investment was a cornerstone to stability and prosperity.

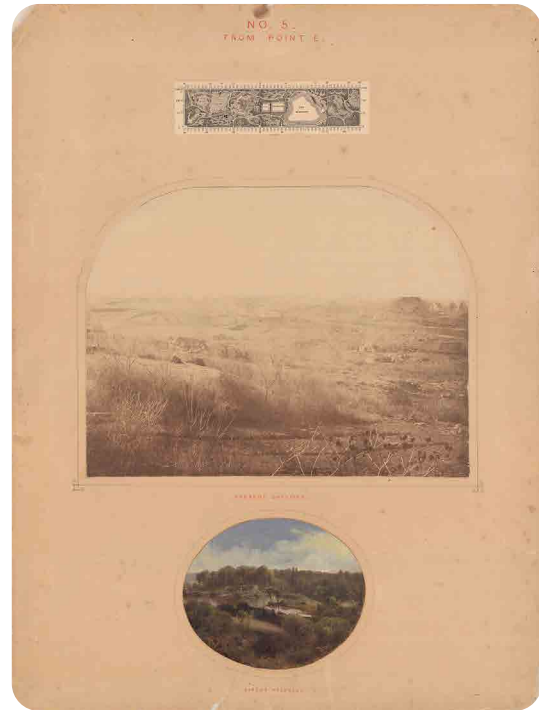


Pictured here are some of the buildings from Weeksville dating to the mid-19th century that are preserved at the Weeksville Heritage Center. Photo by Marie Warsh.

Why are there no photographs of Seneca Village?

Researchers have not found any photographs of the Village or the people who lived there. When people started buying property in Seneca Village in 1825, photography had not yet been invented. Photography was invented in Europe around 1839, and while it quickly spread around the world, it was not widely accessible until the end of the 19th century. The technology was complex and cumbersome, consisting of large wooden cameras and glass-plate negatives. This made it much easier to work in a studio setting and to focus on formal portraits. By 1850, there were over 70 portrait studios in New York City, which charged the present-day equivalent of around \$20 for a portrait, a cost that was prohibitive for many New Yorkers at that time.

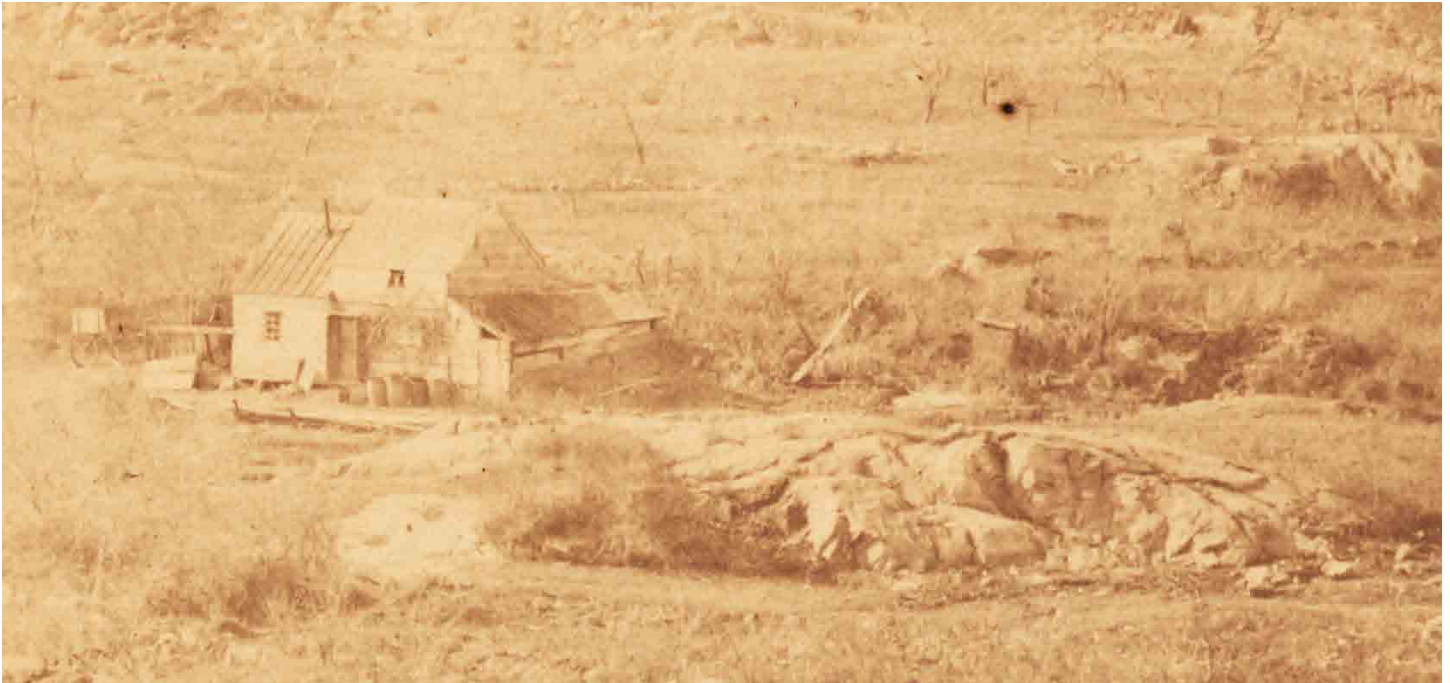
The Lyons' family portraits are the only known images of African-Americans who were associated with Seneca Village. The Lyons family owned property in the Village but did not live there. They lived in lower Manhattan, where they also owned property, and near to their business and parish, St. Philip's Church. In ca. 1860, the family posed for studio portraits, which are in the collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.



Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, Greensward Plan Presentation Board No. 5, view southwest from Vista Rock, 1858. Accompanying Olmsted and Vaux's original plan for Central Park were these illustrations, which included a photograph of the existing landscape and a painting depicting its transformation. From the collection of the NYC Municipal Archives.



Double ambrotype portraits of [Maritcha Lyons](#), her younger sister [Pauline](#), and their parents [Albro Lyons, Sr.](#) and [Mary Joseph Lyons](#). From the Harry A. Williamson Photography Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library.



Detail from Greensward Plan Presentation Board No.5 showing a building on the Park site. This photograph gives us a sense of what buildings in Seneca Village may have looked like. From the collection of the NYC Municipal Archives.

While we do not know of any photographs of Seneca Village, there are photographs from the 1850s that show dwellings in the area and depict the landscape before it was transformed into Central Park, some of which gives us a sense of what Seneca Village might have looked like.

One of the most well-known photography studios in New York City was run by Mathew Brady. The administrators for Central Park hired Brady to document the existing conditions of the land that would become the Park. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux included these photographs in their presentation of their design for the Park, called “Greensward.” They paired a photo of the existing landscape with a small painting of what they envisioned the Park would look like. (Brady went on to become even more famous for his photographs of the Civil War.)

Another photographer, Victor Prevost, took photographs of New York City beginning in 1853 using a new and more portable technology: paper

negatives. He documented the Park in 1862, while it was still under construction.

[His photographs](#) give us some sense of what the landscape originally looked like, as well as the intensive work involved in building the Park.



Victor Prevost, view of the Park while under construction in 1862. From the collection of the New York Public Library.

What did the landscape of central Manhattan look like before the Park, and who else lived there?

In the 1850s, central and upper Manhattan was still sparsely settled. Most of the City's streets and avenues had not yet been laid out very far north, though some like Eighth Avenue and some other major roads were in existence. Although it wasn't totally developed, it also wasn't the country. Originally Manhattan Island was 80% forest, but by the 1800s most of it was gone. Except for a few areas at the very northern end of the island, most of it was cut down by the British during their occupation of Manhattan.

Much of the area slated for Central Park was farmland that was sparsely settled. The area had several natural springs, a source of fresh water for those who lived in the area. The landscape was varied, with many hills and low-lying swampy areas. There were innumerable outcrops of Manhattan schist.

Approximately 1,600 people lived on the land that the City acquired for Central Park through the process of eminent domain. Seneca Village was the most densely populated section of the then 779-acre site. (The site was expanded to 110th Street in 1863, making the total area of the Park 843 acres, which is the current acreage.) People lived scattered throughout, but there were a few areas with larger concentrations of residents, such as Seneca Village. In the southern part of the Park site was a small settlement of Irish and German immigrants, some of whom had small gardens and raised livestock. In this area were also some small industries including tanneries and a bone-boiling establishment, which were located in this less-crowded area because they had more space and fewer neighbors to bother with their fumes and other pollutants.



This color lithograph from 1854 shows the area slated for Central Park, just beyond the built-up part of New York City. John Bornet, *Panorama of Manhattan Island* (detail), from the collection of the New York Public Library.

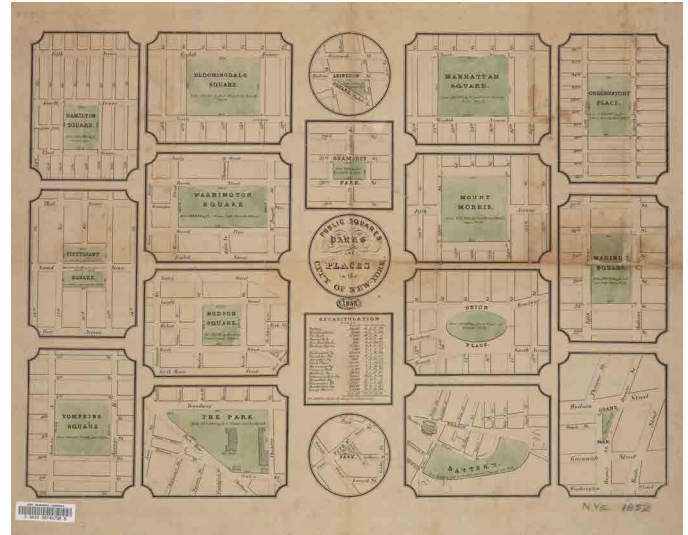


This illustration depicts the view from what is now the Great Hill. It shows the convent on the left and a tavern on the right. Published as part of Egbert Viele's survey of the Park in *First Annual Report on the Improvement of the Central Park*, 1857.

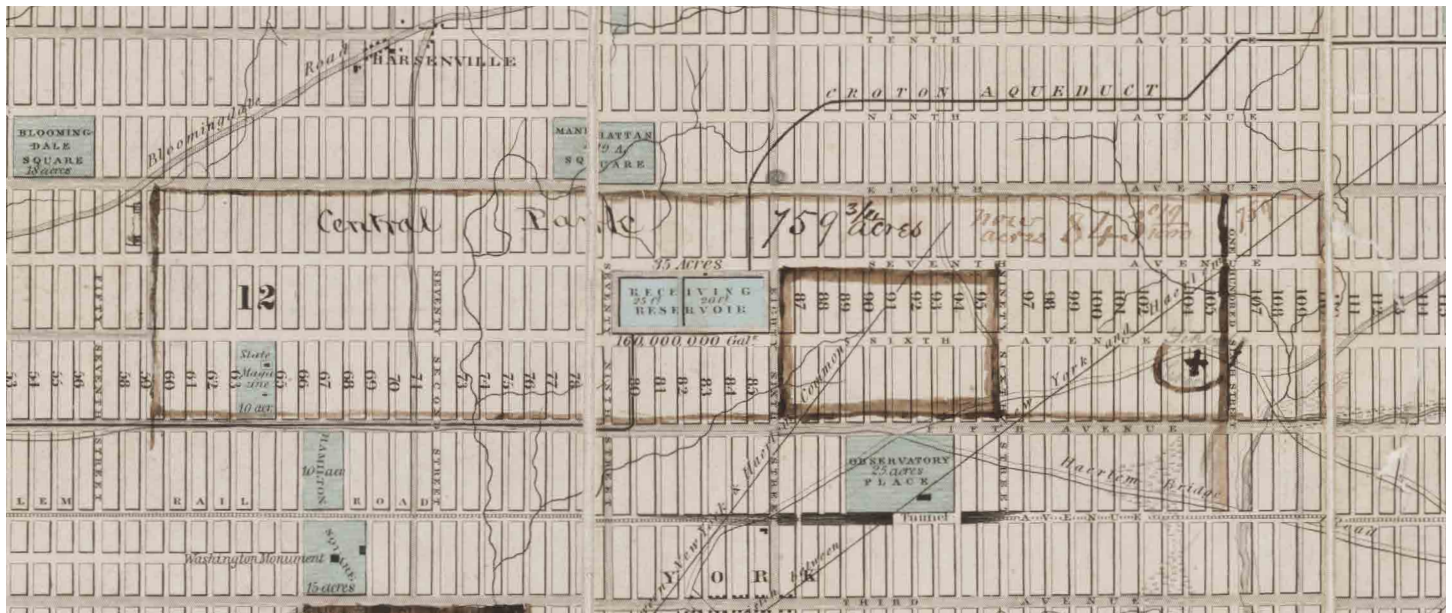
The northernmost section of the Park site was the most rural but had a number of notable buildings and features, as well as dramatic, hilly topography. One of the City's oldest roads, called the Eastern Post Road, ran through the northeastern part of the Park site. As a result, there were a couple of taverns in the area. Some of the hills in the north had been the site of fortifications during both the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. On another hill stood a convent and school, the Academy of Mount St. Vincent, established in 1847 by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. When the City built the Park, the nuns and their students were also forced to move. They relocated the school to the Bronx, where it still exists today. The City purchased the building and included it in the Park as a restaurant and museum. It burned in a fire in 1881.

How did the City choose the site for Central Park?

In the 1840s, some civic-minded New Yorkers began to write editorials in newspapers about the importance of setting aside public open space for the rapidly growing City. The commentaries were a response to a number of widespread concerns about urban growth. Many worried about public health in the aftermath of numerous disease outbreaks, the lack of space for recreation, as well as the alarming rate at which the City had begun to sell off public lands for private development. Between 1845 and 1855, the City's population doubled—and this made even more clear that the existing collection of small public squares, the City's only open spaces, was inadequate. These early advocates believed that a large open space would provide an escape from the City—a place for New Yorkers to congregate, breath fresh air, and experience nature. They also hoped that a large public park would be a unique expression of American democracy while also becoming a cultural attraction that would rival those in European cities.



[Public squares, parks, and places in the City of New York](#), from 1852, illustrating the City's collection of small parks and squares. From the Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division of the New York Public Library.



Detail of 1849 [City & county map of New-York, Brooklyn, Williamsburgh, Jersey City & the adjacent waters](#) showing the two park sites under consideration. From the Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division of the New York Public Library.

The choice of location for this unprecedented public space was not without controversy. William Cullen Bryant, the poet and editor of *The Evening Post*, suggested a privately owned area along the East River known as Jones' Woods that was largely undeveloped. As plans for this location began to take shape, some park advocates argued that the 150-acre space was not big enough, nor central enough; others pointed out that those promoting this location were landowners in the area that would benefit financially from the presence of a park.

The City began to consider a larger tract of land in the center of the island that encompassed the Croton Receiving Reservoir, an important piece of the City's system for delivery of fresh water. This was a somewhat rugged landscape with several swamps and numerous rock outcrops, which made it difficult to develop as real estate. This area also encompassed many acres that were already public lands (meaning they were already owned by the City), making the endeavor less expensive per acre. Debate continued, for almost three years, before the City decided on this central location.

There is no evidence that the City or the State's decision on the park location was directed by an interest in destroying Seneca Village. However, some journalists and others writing in favor of the Central Park plan did portray the site as a wasteland and those living on the land as impoverished squatters. For the most part, these journalists did not look very closely at the different communities and people living on the land slated for the Park; instead, they sought to create a general sense of the entire area as unpleasant and disorderly and the people living there as worthless. This portrayal likely served to justify the City's acquisition of so much land for what was an unprecedented purpose and promoted the creation of the Park as the utmost transformation, one of beauty replacing blight. When they did mention particular communities, they typically portrayed them (particularly Irish immigrants) in derogatory terms, reflecting prevailing attitudes toward African-Americans, immigrants, and the poor.



An illustration from the 1870s. From the collection of the New York Public Library. This is a typical and generalized depiction of the pre-Park area. It's unclear if this depicts a particular location or settlement.

What happened to Seneca Village when the City acquired the land for Central Park?

Through eminent domain, the power of the government to take private property for public use, the City bought the land for Central Park. The Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provides that the government may only exercise this power if it provides “just compensation” to the property owners. All those who owned land slated for the Park were financially compensated for their property before they were made to leave. Central Park was not the first municipal improvement to apply the rule of eminent domain. With the growth of cities in the 19th century, many citizens had to cede their private property to the government for a range of uses, including for military uses, avenues and streets, schools, hospitals, and urban infrastructure.

For Central Park, the process began with the creation of a map in 1855 that identified all of the residents and owners of the land, the sizes of their property, and the types of houses they lived in, as well as other buildings such as sheds and barns. This map was created in order to determine who to pay for their property and how much to pay. As a rule, corner lots and those on avenues were more valuable; size and quality of the structures and size of the land were also considered. This map, called the Central Park Condemnation Map, documents the entire area, and is a key source of information about Seneca Village and all those who were living on the land.

Being forced to leave one’s home was undoubtedly traumatic. Many residents protested the valuation of their property, asserting in letters that the value deemed by the State was too low.

Researchers have not found many records of other forms of protest. There are records of Archibald Watt, a wealthy man who owned many acres of land and wanted to hold on to it; he insisted that the area was not a good place for a park. A couple of newspaper articles suggest that violence would need to be used to remove people from the land but there are no accounts of what actually happened and how residents responded.

After residents left, most buildings were razed, and the wood recycled for other uses. Based on discoveries during archaeological investigations it appears that those clearing the land collapsed building foundations and chimneys and covered them with soil. Some of the larger homes that had been purchased through eminent domain, as well as the State Arsenal, were utilized as space for park operations and employees. All Angels’ Church in Seneca Village actually moved their building to a new location on Eleventh Avenue between 80th and 81st Street.

Researchers are currently trying to trace where residents went after leaving Seneca Village. Andrew Williams is one resident that researchers have successfully rediscovered. After leaving Seneca Village, he moved his family to Queens, where he was able to reinvest the money he had received in the compensation for his property in a new home. William Wilson, who lived in Seneca Village and had been the sexton for All Angels’ Church, moved with his family to the Upper West Side, near the new location of the church.

RECOMMENDED READING

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