



CENTRAL PARK: AN AMERICAN MASTERPIECE

Central Park, constructed from 1857 to 1873, is a unique and long-recognized masterpiece of landscape architecture and an important work of 19th-century American art. Central Park’s designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, struggled to establish themselves as artists and to equate their work with the venerable tradition of landscape painting. When the Park was near completion, Olmsted affirmed its status as a “single unified work of art.”

Like every other work of art, Central Park is entirely man-made. The only natural feature on the Park site is the metamorphic rock called Manhattan schist, which is approximately 450 million years old. To create the Park’s naturalistic lakes and streams, low-lying swamps were drained, a naturalistic shoreline was established, and City water pipes were installed; to create the Park’s vast, undulating meadows, swampland was filled with soil and rock outcrops were leveled with gunpowder; to create the Park’s three woodland areas, barren rock-strewn slopes were planted with millions of trees, shrubs, and vines.

Olmsted and Vaux estimated that if all 10 million cartloads of soil and materials used to build the Park were to be placed end to end, they would have stretched for 30,000 miles (48,280 kilometers). A walk through Central Park was designed to be a moving experience. Olmsted used the term “passages of scenery” to explain the ever-changing views experienced while walking through the various landscapes: broad meadows, rustic woodlands, tree-lined allées, and a diversity of architectural structures.

As you walk along the Park’s paths, notice how the scenery changes with the weather conditions and times of day. Come back to the Park throughout the year and marvel at the

difference that seasonal foliage and vegetation bring to each carefully composed landscape.

One criterion used to critique a great work of art is its longevity—the ability to elicit emotion and communicate meaning long after its creation. In this sense, Central Park is a masterpiece that has survived the test of time.

Like every great work of art, Central Park requires constant care and attention to maintain its present beauty and energy. In the 1960s and 1970s the century-old preserve had become forsaken and dilapidated. In 1980, a handful of farsighted and passionate New Yorkers set out to revitalize the Park and founded the private, nonprofit Central Park Conservancy.

There is no greater testimony to the Park’s resilience than the extraordinary renaissance it has enjoyed since 1980 when the Conservancy began to restore Olmsted and Vaux’s masterpiece of landscape architecture. The Conservancy continues to care for the entire Park year-round, tending to the largest and smallest details of its maintenance and restoration. Its mission is to preserve and celebrate Central Park as a sanctuary from urban life, enhancing the enjoyment and well-being of all. As a nonprofit organization, we can’t do this work without your support. Your donations keep Central Park clean, beautiful, free, and open to all, every day.

SELF-GUIDED TOUR: CENTRAL PARK'S NORTH END



Charles A. Dana Discovery Center



Harlem Meer



Fort Clinton



Conservatory Garden

[Charles A. Dana Discovery Center](#)

The Charles A. Dana Discovery Center, which opened in 1993, was the first building in the Park's history to be built as a visitor center. Environmental education and activities are offered, as well as community programs, seasonal exhibits, and holiday celebrations. In the warm months, enjoy the Central Park Conservancy's free catch-and-release fishing program and the free Harlem Meer Performance Festival.

[Harlem Meer](#)

The Park's designers, Olmsted and Vaux, called this man-made water body the Meer (a Dutch word meaning lake), in recognition of the former swampland that was a part of Harlem, the 17th-century community established in this area by New York's first European immigrants.

In the 1660s, the British governors constructed the Kingsbridge Road, an eastside highway that linked the growing port at the southern tip of Manhattan Island to Harlem and the British colonies to the north. The opening by the southern shore of the Meer today became known as McGowan's Pass, a site that played a significant role in the American Revolution.

[Fort Clinton](#)

In August and September several fortifications were built on the high cliffs that flanked the Kingsbridge Road (also known as the Albany/Boston Post Road). From that vantage point, the American troops could see any advancing ships from the Hudson and East Rivers and the Long Island Sound, as well as any armies coming from the northern end of Manhattan. Fort Clinton, named after Mayor DeWitt Clinton, was one of four fortifications on the site that is now Central Park. Although soldiers were stationed at the fortifications, the British never attacked New York City, and in 1815 the Treaty of Ghent ended the war.

[Conservatory Garden](#)

Although the exhibit does not extend into the Conservatory Garden, it is well worth a visit. The majestic trees of North America were a source of great national pride in the 19th century and many of the entries for the 1858 design competition suggested that an arboretum be included in the Park. Olmsted and Vaux originally envisioned an arboretum for the northeast corner of the Park—now the site of the Conservatory Garden and the Harlem Meer. The arboretum was never established, but the Park's first formal garden—the Conservatory Garden—was created in 1898 when a large E-shaped greenhouse was constructed at Fifth Avenue and 105th Street. It featured an indoor winter garden of exotic tropical plants and outdoor decorative Victorian flower beds. In 1937, the then-deteriorated greenhouse was demolished and a new six-acre formal garden was designed for the site.

The garden is divided into three distinct styles: French, Italian, and English. The French-style garden—closest to the Meer—features an ellipse of meandering boxwood and pansies, and showcases spectacular seasonal displays of tulips in spring and chrysanthemums in autumn. In the center is the charming *Three Dancing Maidens* fountain by German sculptor Walter Schott. The central Italian garden features an elaborate wrought-iron entrance gate and a wisteria pergola, a large lawn surrounded by clipped hedges, a 12-foot-high jet fountain (3.7 meters), and two exquisite allées of pink and white crabapple trees on either side of the lawn. To the south is the English-style garden, featuring sculptor Bessie Potter Vonnob's lovely Burnett Memorial Fountain surrounded by flowering trees, beds of perennials and annuals, and a woodland slope.