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Seneca Village: The Forgotten Community Under Central Park

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Introduction

In 2011, archaeologists and historians came together to uptown Central Park in order to conduct an excavation of the ground where Seneca Village, an African American community dating back to 1825, once stood. The excavation unearthed signs of a forgotten community. Some of the artifacts discovered were shoes, decorative buttons, a hair comb, and a toothbrush.¹ These artifacts helped remind us of the existence of Seneca Village and reveal a glimpse of what life was like in that progressive community; a community that was demolished in order to create Central Park, and thus erase from Seneca Village from the Popular memory of New York City.

This thesis will examine how the creation of Central Park led to the destruction of Seneca Village and its surrounding areas. Both developments could not exist in the same space, so one had to make way for the other. In this case, Seneca Village made way for Central Park. This thesis will also show that Central Park is anything but a natural park. Most of the park's natural features, such as its trees, fields, reservoir, and even its topography, is man-made; Central Park thus is not a natural environment, but rather the product of intense labor, planning, and expense. Prior to construction, Central Park's land was marshy land, but contained houses and farms. The houses and farms were razed, swamps were drained, the land contoured, and new structures were built in order to create Central Park. This paper seeks to help rectify the fact that the average Central Park user today likely has little idea of the history of Central Park and what was destroyed in order for it to exist. While Seneca Village is well known among historians and scholars, its existence was long forgotten by the general public. Lastly, this thesis

¹ Diana diZerega Wall, et al. "Seneca Village, A Forgotten Community: Report on the 2011 Excavations", (Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History, Inc., 2018) 46.

will argue that both Seneca Village and Central Park became oases for the groups of people who created them. Seneca Village became an oasis for African Americans seeking to flee Lower Manhattan, where violence and discrimination against African Americans made it too dangerous for many to live. Similarly, Central Park became an oasis for New York's elites, who wanted a green space and a place for leisure in a city of congestion and pollution. One was a social and political oasis, and the other was an environmental oasis. But most importantly, the demise of the oasis of Seneca Village, led to the creation of the oasis of Central Park.

In order to advance this analysis, my thesis is broken up into three chapters. The first chapter will discuss how the New York legislature's passage of multiple gradual emancipation acts led newly freed slaves to join New York's competitive job market. The introduction of freed slaves into the workforce led to increased prejudice against, violence towards, and kidnappings of, newly freed slaves. In addition to violence, African Americans were also confined to the worst parts of Manhattan, where disease ran rampant and a disproportionate number of African Americans died from the unsanitary living conditions of their houses as compared to their white counterparts.

This combination of violence and discrimination led to the creation of Seneca Village. This community of African Americans grew over the next few decades into a respectable area consisting of numerous working families, three churches, and a school. The community also grew to include Irish and German immigrants, which eventually led to interracial marriages and children. Unfortunately, as African Americans left Lower Manhattan in favor of Seneca Village, an exponential increase in Lower

Manhattan's population led to a similar need to expand into uptown New York, which leads to chapter two.

Chapter two will analyze how the wave of immigration during the early 1800s created unlivable, overcrowded conditions in Lower Manhattan. The need to expand from the confines of Lower Manhattan was evident to city planners, but there was also the fear that the entire island would fall to the same fate as Lower Manhattan's suffocating development unless care was taken to prevent its recurrence. As a solution, many of New York's elites advocated for a central park that would give lungs to the city and provide a green space that could be enjoyed by everyone. The idea caught-on and soon Central Park would become a reality. But before the park could be created, it had to be designed, leading to a publicized design competition to plan Central Park. While public anticipation for the park grew, the question arose regarding what to do with the people currently living on the land where the proposed park was to be built, leading into chapter three.

The last chapter of my thesis focuses on how the people of Seneca Village and its surrounding communities were portrayed in the media in order to garner support for their eviction. Newspapers, magazines, and even some of the Central Park design proposals, were able to minimize the existence of Seneca Village residents and defame the communities that they worked years to build. Unfortunately, the misrepresentation of the communities worked, and New York City was able to acquire all their land at below fair market rates, through eminent domain, razing what had been built over decades in order to build Central Park.

In doing research about my thesis topic, I examined how historians have studied Central Park, Seneca Village, and New York's African Americans. The most helpful pair of historians that I reference in my paper are Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar. Their work was extremely helpful in connecting the creation of Central Park to the demise of Seneca Village. The historians focused on the creation of Central Park, from its original idea to its opening day. They also provided insight on the various communities that lived on Central Park's land, including Seneca Village.

Another historian who was very helpful was Catherine McNeur, who analyzed the evolution of Manhattan. McNeur looked at Manhattan's development from an island of pig farms and untamed countryside to its rapid expansion into an urban area that accommodated the city's growing population. She provided insight as to the island's need for development and expansion and what life was like for those living on the still largely undeveloped uptown land, as well as some details about the creation of Central Park.

Historian Eric Homberger helped to paint a vivid picture of the unsanitary and congested state of Lower Manhattan. Homberger went into detail, giving accounts of people who lived in Manhattan during the early- to mid-nineteenth Century and explaining why so many people were unhappy with the state of their city. He also described the massive population growth due to large-scale European immigration starting in the 1800s, and how that contributed to the poor environment and conditions of Lower Manhattan.

I also relied on historians who focused their work specifically on the African American experience in New York after the gradual end of slavery in the

early-to-mid-Nineteenth Century. Graham Russell Hodges and Leslie M. Harris both spoke of the economic and political climate that influenced the creation of Seneca Village. These two historians comprehensively detail the events leading to the end of slavery in New York and the aftermath of abolition. They both describe the violence and discrimination that African Americans faced after emancipation, including wage, workplace, employment, and housing discrimination, as well as overall racial prejudice.

The last two historians whose work I utilized for my thesis were Morrison H. Heckscher and Cynthia S. Brenwall. These historians go into great detail about the advocacy, proposals, development, and opening of Central Park. They describe why a central park, similar to those of grand European cities, was seen as necessary for New York, who advocated for the park, why the park is located where it is, the proposals for the design of the park, and lastly, the actual physical creation of the park. These historians provide a comprehensive look into how Central Park was built from the ground-up.

While these historians may focus their studies on different aspects of Nineteenth Century New York City, they all contribute to my investigation of Seneca Village. The historians' discussions of the development of Manhattan, the crowded and intolerable conditions faced by African Americans in Lower Manhattan after emancipation, and the discrimination they faced, made clear why Seneca Village was so attractive to African Americans. Historians also highlighted how the rising tide of immigrants led to additional overcrowding, and the perception among city leaders that New York needed a large central park to provide a green space with air to breath that would not be over developed like Lower Manhattan. Examining these secondary sources revealed the

forces that put the innovative community of Seneca Village in conflict with the largely well-meaning plans for what became Central Park.

To help strengthen my thesis, in addition to using secondary sources and citing work that historians and other scholars have written, my paper also utilizes primary sources to get a better glimpse into what people were thinking at the time and how various groups were portrayed in an effort to garner public support for the construction of Central Park. The most significant primary sources my paper uses are contemporaneous newspapers and journals. My paper will discuss articles from *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, *The Freedom's Journal*, *The New York Daily Times*, *The New York Daily Tribune*, *The New York Herald*, and *The New York Times*. In addition to analyzing newspaper accounts of the development of Central Park and how the papers depicted Seneca Village, my paper will also examine memoirs of New York, including Charles Dickens' book, *Notes on America*, and George G. Foster's, *New York by Gas-Light*. This paper will also utilize a variety of maps, photographs, magazines illustrations, submitted proposals to the Central Park design competition, church records, census records, letters, and petitions, to deepen its analysis. In using these various primary sources, my paper will help us see what people were thinking at the time and how proponents of razing Seneca Village and its surrounding communities used the press in order to achieve their goal. I also examined records showing how residents of Seneca Village advocated for themselves for better compensation for their land. And I discovered through these primary sources that interracial marriages occurred in Seneca Village, the types of jobs census records showed people who lived there had, and how Seneca Village was a stable community with residents living in the

haven't it provided for decades. The primary sources are the basis for many arguments in my thesis.

While primary sources were very important in developing my thesis, I discovered that there were some obstacles and limitations in finding sources. Due to the fact that this paper was written during the Covid-19 pandemic and most of the country remained closed, I was not able to find as many sources as I would have likely found had I not been confined to largely online sources. Also, primary sources solely about Seneca Village are sparse. I realized that this sadly made sense as Seneca Village was a working class African American community that was destroyed almost 200 years ago; it was not the type of place that, until relatively recently, was seen as worth preserving or commemorating. That only made me look harder to find the primary sources I did. That said, I also decided to expand my thesis topic to discuss Central Park as a whole, as there were more primary sources on that topic, and the creation of Central Park was inextricably tied to the destruction of Seneca Village. Overall, I think that the sources that I found helped shape my thesis and animate the people of Seneca Village.

Over this past year of conducting research and writing many drafts, my thesis has come together; it begins with the gradual emancipation of slaves in New York and how that impacted the lives of African American New Yorkers.

Chapter I

An Oasis in a City of Discrimination

The dynamics of New York's labor force were forever changed due to the abolition of slavery and the exponential growth of immigration throughout the Nineteenth Century. The influx of immigrant workers added to the newly freed African American labor force led to overcrowding in Lower Manhattan and societal racism and violence towards African Americans. This incentivized many African Americans to move uptown and create what became Seneca Village.

Much like most of the United States in the Eighteenth Century, New York had a significant slave population. There were over 21,000 enslaved people throughout New York State before the Gradual Emancipation Law of 1799.² After years of abolitionist and manumission societies calling for freedom, New York finally listened. However, it was not for the reasons one might think. In the years prior to the emancipation legislation being passed, slavery actually became harsher in New York in response to unrest and protests by Black slaves.³ New legislation allowed masters more control over their slaves, such as the 1792 law that allowed slaves to be exported by their masters from New York if they committed misdemeanors.⁴ However, this law would become short-lived as slavery would be eradicated throughout the state within 50 years of the legislation being passed.

Even though New York had passed laws reinforcing the institution of slavery in the years prior to the Gradual Emancipation Law, there was still a push for abolition in

² Kathleen Thompson, "When Did Slavery Really End in the North?," Civil Discourse (Civil Discourse, January 9, 2017).

³ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004), 70.

⁴ Ibid.

the early 1790s. Unfortunately, these advances for freedom all failed. As a member of the Manumission Society, which was a society formed to help free slaves and call for the abolition of slavery across New York, John Jay, the Governor of New York, attempted to pass a bill in 1795 providing for the gradual emancipation of enslaved people.⁵ This bill failed, however, due to the lack of compensation to the slave owners. Those who opposed the bill argued that gradual emancipation without compensation would be, “unjust and unconstitutional to deprive any citizen or citizens...of their property without compensation.”⁶ Consequently, the legislature would not pass a law ending slavery, without some form of compensation to slave owners for the loss of their property.

After multiple failed attempts at emancipation legislation, in 1799, New York successfully passed the Gradual Abolition Law. This law only focused on slaves born after July 4th, 1799, however, and thus did nothing for slaves born before that date. The law stated that all children born after July 4th, 1799 would be free; but, there was a catch.⁷ The children were not truly born free, as they still had to serve their masters until the children turned 25 for girls and 28 for boys.⁸ The period of time where the children were technically freed, but were still tied to their owners, was described as the masters’ form of compensation. Thus, the children were not really free until adulthood, while slave owners received over 20 years of labor in compensation for having the children eventually freed. While this concept is abhorrent to modern thinkers, it was a political compromise between abolitionist goals and complaints about property rights. It resulted

⁵ Graham Russell Hodges, *Root & Branch: African Americans in New York & East Jersey 1613-1863* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 170.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

in a contradiction, because the children were legally freed, but they were still controlled by masters and forced to work under them into adulthood.

Even though slave owners received work from the newly born freed children as a form of compensation, many slave owners still argued that the state was stealing what was rightfully theirs.⁹ In order to accommodate these concerns, the Gradual Emancipation Law also allowed slave owners to abandon the children after a year.¹⁰ If the slave owner chose abandonment instead of the child working for him, the state would then pay the slave owner \$3.50 every month, until the child reached the age of freeing, in what they called “maintenance fees.”¹¹ Luckily, for the children who were at risk of abandonment, New York revoked this section of the law as it quickly became too costly for the state. After six years of the law’s passing in 1804, New York had already paid \$20,000 in maintenance fees, so New York ended this practice in fear of losing more money.¹²

With the passing of the Gradual Emancipation Law, one problem still remained -- the slaves who were born before July 4th, 1799. While everyone born after that date would be fully freed in 25 or 28 years, slaves born before then were not included in the law, and without further legislation, they would be enslaved for an indefinite period of time. The solution to this predicament came with a new law, the Gradual Emancipation Law of 1817. Under that law, slaves born before 1799 would be freed in 1827. Again, the law did not give freedom until after an extended period of time as a means of compensation to the owners.¹³ As a result of the passing of the Gradual Emancipation

⁹ Hodges, *Root and Branch*, 170.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 193.

laws, every enslaved person in New York State was eventually freed. The number of slaves would continue dwindling over the next decades.

As stated above, before the abolition of slavery, there were 21,193 slaves in New York.¹⁴ By 1800, the number of slaves in New York declined to 20,903, which shrunk to 15,017 in 1810, 10,088 in 1920, drastically reduced to 75 in 1830, and diminished further to 4 in 1840, until there were no slaves at all recorded in New York in 1850.¹⁵ Furthermore, when looking at the proportion of freed African Americans to slaves, Harris noted that, “in 1790, there was approximately one free black for every two slaves; by 1800, there were three free blacks for every two slaves, and by 1810, about seven free blacks for every slave.”¹⁶ Within just a few decades, the proportion of freed African Americans to slaves thus increased dramatically. Even though the gradual emancipation of slaves in New York took roughly 50 years, New York was able to abolish slavery relatively peacefully and without the need of a war.

One reason why the ending of slavery in New York was achieved relatively peacefully as compared to other parts of the United States, was in part due to the economics of the labor force in the North. Almost all of the South’s economy was built on slavery. Southern states would not have become an agricultural powerhouse without the use of slave labor. The South also relied too heavily on agriculture and slavery in its economy, because it was so profitable, instead of diversifying and expanding and developing other forms of profitable industries. The Southern states felt that they could not afford to abolish slavery, as it would be devastating to their economy and the

¹⁴ Thompson, “When Did Slavery Really End in the North?”.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 74.

comfortable way of life the slave owners enjoyed at the expense of enslaved African Americans.

New York State, on the other hand, did not have those problems as it had a more diversified economy. Moreover, many slave owners actually wanted to free their slaves in favor of paid labor for economic reasons.¹⁷ Economically, slaves cost a lot of money to own. Even though one would get free labor, the slave owner was responsible for essentials, such as clothes, food, housing (or at least a room or somewhere to sleep), and furniture. In a city where prices continually increased, living expenses for slaves became something many owners did not want to have to pay. Thus, as the cost of living increased, it led to a decrease in owners wanting to pay for slaves' expenses. In addition, there was also the impact of the rise of European immigration, which gave the North another source of cheap labor. For example, many skilled artisans would rather employ cheap immigrant labor and not have to pay for their living expenses, than to have free labor via slaves and be required to pay for the slaves' living expenses.¹⁸ As Harris wrote, "artisan slaveholding declined in the 1790s as the arrival of large numbers of European immigrants made it more cost-effective for artisans to hire cheaper wage labor than to own slaves or indentured servants and be responsible for their food and lodging."¹⁹

In addition to the economics of slave labor, slave owners also had a racist reason for choosing European immigrants over their own slaves. Slave owners would rather employ the new labor force of European immigrants than slaves because the

¹⁷ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Europeans were viewed as less “foreign” than slaves.²⁰ This sentiment of preferring Europeans, no matter the country or language of origin, over African Americans, carried over after emancipation when tens of thousands of newly freed slaves went looking for jobs and were met with discrimination and hardship.

First, previous owners of slaves often did not want to keep newly freed slaves as employees. Many former owners who were now would-be employers were bitter because of the slaves' newfound freedom and were offended that they had become free. One former slave owner, turned prospective employer, stated, “the laws set him free and he left me -- now let the laws take care of him.”²¹ These former slave owners wanted nothing to do with their former slaves and expected the government and those who worked for emancipation to help the former slaves.

Second, the limited skills freed slaves had acquired during their time in slavery hindered their job opportunities. The majority of slaves in New York City had worked as domestic and personal servants, which meant that they did not learn more sophisticated, higher-paying skills that would have allowed for economic prosperity and growth after freedom.²² For those slaves who did not work domestically, the remaining majority worked under artisans as skilled workers. While this would have ordinarily led to good employment opportunities for these former slaves, as stated above, artisans would rather employ cheap immigrant labor and rarely hired African Americans. Furthermore, for those former slaves who attempted to continue their work as artisans, few succeeded in establishing themselves as an artisan. There were only 75 Black

²⁰ Ibid., 70.

²¹ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 80.

²² Ibid., 70.

artisans in the New York City's directory in 1820.²³ The lack of skills that African Americans were taught as slaves combined with employers' prejudice against hiring freed Blacks, left many former slaves impoverished or settling for unskilled labor work. Still, even in trying to find unskilled work, African Americans were met with prejudice.

Discrimination against hiring African Americans thus left newly freed slaves with only a handful of low-paying jobs as practical employment options. This workplace discrimination confined many to unskilled, low-paying jobs.²⁴ Men were essentially limited to jobs such as day laborers, peddlers, maritime workers, chimney sweeps, and hucksters, while women were limited to working mainly as domestic workers, peddlers, rag pickers, or launderers.²⁵ Even though these were low paying and undesirable jobs, there was competition for even these jobs between African Americans and newly arrived European immigrants. Tension between African Americans and immigrants thus continued to rise as European immigrants saw African Americans as competition for jobs and many immigrants refused to work alongside African Americans.²⁶ Even outside of the artisan field of work, employers from every field chose not to employ African Americans, because of the overwhelming refusal by white employees to work with or in the same building as African Americans.

Regardless of hiring discrimination, racial tension and prejudice against African Americans due to competition for jobs continued. This tension quickly led to violence against African Americans by European immigrants. Kidnappings, lynchings, riots, and even selling African Americans into slavery were all too common occurrences for

²³ Ibid., 77.

²⁴ New York Historical Society, *Seneca Village: A Teacher's Guide to Using Primary Sources in the Classroom*, (New York, 2010), 8.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

African Americans in New York City during the mid-Nineteenth Century.²⁷ Lower Manhattan, where most of the city's population was located, was not a safe place for African Americans due to the racial violence and prejudice against them.

These acts of violence scared many African Americans, because not only were they victims of heinous crimes, the legal system was against them. Nowhere is this expressed as clearly as in the third volume of *The Black Abolitionist Papers*. In an 1836 letter, Thomas Van Rensselaer, Jacob Francis, and David Ruggles conveyed both their fears for African Americans and how to solve the problem. The authors wrote about the kidnappings of African Americans stating:

Whereas, the barbarous practice of kidnapping continually menaces, endangers, and invades the peace, safety and liberty of every colored citizen in these United States. And, whereas, Captains of Merchant's vessels, Slaveholders, Slavetraders, and their kidnapping agents have sold into slavery, citizens of the State of New York. And, whereas, the alarming precedent, lately established in this city, has firmly convinced us in the belief that the people of color can expect no protection from the laws, as at present administered, without the benefit of trial by jury.²⁸

To the authors, the only way to resolve these problems would be to have, "every colored citizen unite his every effort to procure for every person who may be arrested a fugitive slave a trial by jury; and the removal of such legal abuses as may at present exist, and continue those efforts in every proper and legal manner, until our rights be established."²⁹ Still, attempting to protect African Americans through the legal system after something horrible had happened would not stop the violence or kidnapping from

²⁷ Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Cynthia Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City," (*Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 1 2008): 97.

²⁸ Thomas Van Rensselaer, Jacob Francis, and David Ruggles, *The Black Abolitionist Papers: United States 1830-1846*, (The University of North Carolina Press, Vol. III, 1991), 169.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

occurring in the first place. African Americans were still in danger and there were not many effective solutions as to how to stop the violence and kidnappings.

In response to this oppression, some African Americans decided to create spaces for themselves that would offer an escape from the daily prejudice and discrimination they faced. While many of these spaces were physical, such as what Seneca Village would become, there were also intellectual spaces created, namely, the *Freedom's Journal*. Founded in 1827 in New York, The *Freedom's Journal* was the first African American owned and operated newspaper in the United States. In its first issue, *The Freedom's Journal* expressed how important it was to not only voice opposition to prejudices, but also stop them and not fall victim to them. The first issue in the journal stated:

The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed, and to lay the case before the public. We shall also urge upon our brethren, (who are qualified by the laws of the different states) the expediency of using their elective franchise; and of making an independent use of the same. We wish them not to become the tools of the party.³⁰

The same issue also expressed how African Americans suffer discrimination in that their “vices and our degradation are ever arrayed against us, but our virtues are passed by unnoticed,” and that in order to advance the treatment of African Americans in New York, one must “vow to arrest the progress of prejudice, and uphold ourselves against the consequent evils.”³¹ However, while newly freed slaves were able to express their feelings through this journal, finding an area to live without discrimination would prove to be much more difficult.

³⁰ *Freedom's journal*, (New York, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 12, 1827), 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*

New York City looked completely different in the early 1800s than it does today, mainly because most people resided in Lower Manhattan. Most of Manhattan's development in the early 1800s was compacted into land below 14th street.³² In looking at the 1807 Commissioner's map of New York City and the Island of Manhattan, almost all of Manhattan's nearly 100,000 residents lived in Lower Manhattan.³³ In fact, most of Manhattan at that time was not developed and was not inhabited by people. Rather, Manhattan was a place of trees and hills. There had yet to be the development of New York's iconic grid system, although the map mentioned above was one of the first to propose a grid system for the undeveloped land. Nevertheless, Upper Manhattan was not inhabited by many people and most New Yorkers crammed into Lower Manhattan. This lack of space only exacerbated the racism faced by African Americans, as they lived in the worst parts of the crowded available area.

At the time, there was almost no worse place to live in Lower Manhattan than in the 5th and 6th wards, which were located in the upper west and central areas of Lower Manhattan.³⁴ Areas of the wards were swampy, which led to deplorable living conditions. As Harris noted about the area, "its swampy land attracted malarial insects and leather tanners used the pond as a dumping site for the noisome by-products of their trade."³⁵ Not only was the area unsanitary and potentially dangerous, but it also had a wretched smell.³⁶ And it was not only the swampy land African Americans reside

³² Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division, The New York Public Library. "This Map of the City of New York and Island of Manhattan, as laid out by the Commissioners Appointed by the Legislature, April 3d. 1807 is Respectfully Dedicated to the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty Thereof by their most Obedient Servant Wm. Bridges, City Surveyor." (New York Public Library Digital Collections).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 74.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

on that promoted disease-ridden conditions, but also the homes they lived in themselves were wretched.

Even in the most impoverished part of Lower Manhattan, many African Americans still could not afford decent housing. Many struggled to rent a place to live; buying a home was a virtually impossible dream. The lack of good jobs and in turn lack of money to pay for housing led many newly freed slaves to live in the cellars of buildings, while white people lived in the above-ground area of the buildings.³⁷ These cellars often had poor ventilation and broken drainage, which led to the rapid spread of disease.³⁸ In fact, although whites and blacks often lived in the same building, because of the poor standard of living the cellars offered, African Americans would routinely get sick while their white building counterparts stayed healthy. As Harris compared whites and African Americans, “during the 1820 epidemic known as the Bancker Street Fever, for example, in one section of the street, out of 48 blacks living in ten cellars 33 became ill and 14 died, while the 120 whites living above them did not even get sick.”³⁹ Even when looking at overall proportions of Black deaths, the numbers are startling. In 1824, 16.5 percent of the Black population had died, 418 out of 4,341 in the area. In 1825 that percentage rose to 17.4 percent, with 875 out of 5,018 dying.⁴⁰ The living conditions were so bad that Hodges made the comparison that, “the nature of disease and the death rates in these black neighborhoods rivaled conditions on southern plantations.”⁴¹ Not only were African Americans kept away from any sort of lucrative job opportunities,

³⁷ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Hodges, *Root & Branch*, 196.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

leaving them economically burdened, but they also lived in some of the worst conditions in Manhattan where many died due to their unsanitary and unsafe environment.

While making money and finding a home to sleep in might be on the forefront of newly freed slaves' minds, in addition to avoiding violence and hatred against them, there was yet another injustice facing African Americans -- political discrimination. In addition to workplace discrimination and racial violence, African Americans faced an increase in voter discrimination, including laws being passed that were designed to prevent many African Americans from voting in New York City. With the abolishment of slavery, many New York elites were worried about the consequences of freeing slaves and the possibility of African Americans being able to vote. This worry led to a 1821 New York Constitutional Convention where some of the elite argued that African Americans should not be allowed to vote. The convention did not disenfranchise African American's right to vote outright, but the convention instead imposed strict voting requirements that were very difficult for African Americans to fulfill.

For example, "in 1821, the second New York State constitution imposed a \$250 property suffrage requirement for African-American men in the state, while all property requirements for whites were gradually removed."⁴² Not only was there a property suffrage requirement imposed for African Americans in New York City, there was also a residency requirement. "African Americans had to fulfill a three-year residency requirement for voting, while European Americans only had to satisfy a one-year residency requirement."⁴³ New York City wanted to silence African American voices and tried to make it as difficult as possible for them to vote and have their voices heard in

⁴² Wall, Rothschild, and Copeland, *Seneca Village and Little Africa*, 97.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

elections. Between economic, social, and housing discrimination, as well as violence and voter suppression, Lower Manhattan was detrimental for African Americans to live or thrive in. In order to escape the hardships they were facing downtown, some African Americans decided to move uptown to less settled land where they would be able “to establish separate communities for their own people, along with a parallel network of separate institutions such as churches and schools.”⁴⁴ Thus, Seneca Village was created as a place for African Americans to live and work without discrimination.

Seneca Village was not created overnight. It did, however, begin with one person, Andrew Williams. Williams was a 25 year old free Black man who worked as a bootblack.⁴⁵ Williams purchased 3 lots of land for \$120 in 1825 from John Whitehead, the lot owner for the majority of land making up Seneca Village.⁴⁶ The land purchased was located between what is now 83rd and 88th street and 7 and 8th Avenue.⁴⁷ On the same day Williams purchased land, Epiphany Davis, who worked as a laborer but was also an African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church trustee, purchased an additional 12 lots of land from Whitehead for \$578.⁴⁸ Slowly, over the next 20 years, almost all 50 lots of Whitehead’s land would be purchased and almost 300 residents would live in what became Seneca Village.⁴⁹

As the lots of land grew into a community, three churches and a school were established. What made this land so desirable to African Americans was the fact that it was affordable housing. Rather than living in a cellar that you could not even afford to

⁴⁴ Wall, Rothschild, and Copeland, *Seneca Village and Little Africa*, 98.

⁴⁵ Harris, *In The Shadow of Slavery*, 76.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

own, you could instead purchase an entire lot of land by moving uptown.⁵⁰ Rather than living in an 8 by 10 foot tenement room, in the cellar of a building, or in a garret surrounded by an unsanitary swamp, one had the luxury of living in his own house with considerable outdoor, natural space and the opportunity to build barns, stables, and gardens to help support his family.⁵¹ To be fair, these residents were not living in mansions or large homes, but rather small, one-story houses that were not professionally constructed.⁵² Nonetheless, this growing community of African Americans were in a much better situation than their downtown counterparts.

Not only did many residents own their property, but a number of them met the criteria to be able to vote. To go further, some properties were worth much more than what the voting quota required, with one census recorder valuing one of the houses at \$4,000.⁵³ While not everyone was fortunate to afford such expensive housing, as most residents were poor, working class people, that did not stop them from owning their property. Among the residents in Seneca Village, more than half owned their property, which was a rate five times greater compared to the rest of New York. Seneca Village residents also were 39 times as likely than other African Americans in the city to own property.⁵⁴

Furthermore, of the over half of residents who owned property, 10 of them qualified to vote. These residents met both the \$250 property requirement as well as the three year residency requirement. While this might not sound like a lot of people, due to the strict voting requirements, only 91 African Americans in New York out of 13,000

⁵⁰ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: a History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 66.

⁵¹ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 68.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 70.

people met these requirements.⁵⁵ Out of all the 91 Black voters in New York, 10 of them lived in Seneca Village, meaning that about 10% of eligible Black voters lived in Seneca Village. Seneca Village was in some ways the center of Black voting in New York as it had the highest concentration of voters compared to the rest of New York.

In addition to increasing African American voters and thus voter representation, the people who lived in Seneca Village were able to work and make a living without the prevalent discrimination evidenced throughout the rest of New York City. The residents of Seneca Village, moreover, worked in a wide range of jobs. The census of 1855 showed employment as including drivers, porters, domestic workers, peddlers, milkmen, gardeners, and waiters.⁵⁶ These jobs were in no way middle class jobs and only a handful of Seneca Village's residents were considered to have middle class jobs. However, what was important was that Seneca Village helped open doors for African Americans and helped them become closer to owning property and thus gaining the ability to vote. The residents of Seneca Village were able to make an honest and good living without the bigoted racial violence of Lower Manhattan. Through this honest living, the residents were able to have stability in where they lived. Census records showed that 75% of residents from 1840 were still living in Seneca Village in 1855 and that between the 1850 census and the 1855 census, almost almost every resident remained in the village through 1855.⁵⁷

Given the origins of Seneca Village as a place where African Americans could live together free from discrimination, it is thus somewhat surprising that Seneca Village became a racially integrated village. Irish and German immigrants entered the city in

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁶ Census of the 22nd Ward as quoted in New York Historical Society, *Seneca Village*, 44.

⁵⁷ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 67.

vast numbers in the mid-1800s. These groups of immigrants also faced housing and workplace discrimination, though not on the same scale as African Americans. Consequently, some Germans and Irish moved to Seneca Village and the village became integrated.

By the 1850s, two-thirds of the population of Seneca Village was African American, while the other one-third was European, most of whom were Irish.⁵⁸ Black and white people coexisted and even interracial marriages occurred, which was essentially unheard of at the time. One example of interracial marriage was between a white woman and an African American man, Elizabeth Harding and Obadiah McCollin.⁵⁹ White and Black lived together, married one another, and became an integral part of each other's lives.

The records of All Angels Church Parish, one of the Churches in Seneca Village, showed that African Americans and Europeans engaged together in church functions and ceremonies, such as baptisms, and that white people and Black people were buried next to each other in the church's cemetery.⁶⁰ For example, a burial document showed: "A female still born child of Egbert Stairs (colored) & Catherine Cochran, his wife (white) was buried in All Angels' Churchyard; November eighteenth, eighteen hundred and forty nine."⁶¹ Even though the child was stillborn, the child still showed that interracial marriage and biracial children were not uncommon in the village. This proved not only to the rest of Manhattan, but the rest of the country, even if they did not want to listen at

⁵⁸ Wall, Rothschild, and Copeland, *Seneca Village and Little Africa*, 98.

⁵⁹ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 68.

⁶⁰ All Angels' Church Parish Records (1849-1850) as quoted in New York Historical Society, *Seneca Village*, 48.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

the time, that African Americans and white people can coexist together and even have relations together without violence.

New York drastically changed economically and socially after the gradual emancipation of slaves. Thousands of African Americans were now free and were expected to work and live independently. Unfortunately this expectation was complicated by workplace and housing discrimination faced by the newly freed slaves in addition to general racism and prejudice. As a means of living in a house they could own, on property that was not dangerous, and the prospect of living in a community of African Americans, many chose to make the move uptown for a better life. Seneca Village proved to be like no other village or neighborhood at the time in Manhattan as it had Black property owners, Black eligible voters, and an integrated community. However, as the population of Seneca Village grew, so did the overall population of Manhattan. Soon Lower Manhattan would not be able to hold the massive influx of people and an expansion would be necessary. The sense of community and security that Seneca Village had spent decades building was all put in question when plans for expanding the development of Manhattan and creating Central Park would threaten and ultimately destroy the existence of Seneca Village.

Chapter II **For The Good of The City**

From Andrew Williams buying three lots of land for 125 dollars in 1825 to becoming a village of almost 300 residents by 1855, Seneca Village became a community for both Black and white people in upper Manhattan.⁶² Their community blossomed into one encompassing seven blocks of land, three churches, and a school. It was home to 10 percent of the eligible African American voters in New York. However, just as Seneca Village grew in population over 30 years, so did the rest of Manhattan. In looking at the population growth, Homberger noted that, “New York’s population rose from 123,706 in 1820 to 813,669 in 1860, about a quarter of whom were Irish-born.”⁶³ This means that the population of Manhattan grew almost seven fold in roughly only 40 years. This would not have been that big of a problem had the population been spread evenly throughout the Island, but, as stated earlier, most of the population lived in Lower Manhattan. The drastic increase in residents further suffocated the already overcrowded population of the area.

One of the main reasons why there was such a dramatic increase in population was due to the political and economic climate in European countries as well as the starvation of an entire island. First, with the political and economic unrest in Germany, about one million Germans immigrated to the US during the 1850s.⁶⁴ Riots, rebellion, and a failed revolution between 1848 and 1849 that attempted to establish democracy and unify the various German states, left Germans politically drained and in economic

⁶² Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 65.

⁶³ Eric Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City: a Visual Celebration of 400 Years of New York City's History* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2016), 70.

⁶⁴ Library of Congress, “*The Germans in America*,” (European Reading Room).

hardship. This led many Germans to emigrate to America in search of a fresh start.⁶⁵

Germans were one of many groups immigrating to the United States during this period.

In addition to the Germans, Irish people came by the boatfuls to the United States, due to their island being starved by the failure of their potato crops and the lack of help from the British during the Irish Potato Famine.

During the Irish Potato Famine, between 1845 and 1850, one million people died and over 1.5 million Irish citizens sought refuge in the United States.⁶⁶ To put that into perspective, the population of Ireland before the Famine was about 8 million people; by the end of the Famine, 2.5 million had left Ireland, either by death or by emigration, meaning that over a quarter of the population of Ireland was gone. In addition to the population of Ireland decreasing drastically, there was a population surge in the United States as people fled Ireland for a better life. Irish immigrants came in such large numbers that they were responsible for a quarter of the population growth in New York City between 1820 and 1860.⁶⁷ Many of the German and Irish passed through Castle Gardens in Lower Manhattan.

Castle Gardens was the United State's first immigration center. Roughly eleven million immigrants passed through between 1820 and 1892.⁶⁸ Located in Lower Manhattan, Castle Garden was where countless immigrants took their first steps on American soil. And while many used Castle Gardens as just a point of entry before moving to different parts of the United States, such as Boston, Chicago, Texas, and Wisconsin, many immigrants decided to stay in Lower Manhattan. These immigrants

⁶⁵ Library of Congress, "*The Germans in America.*"

⁶⁶ Constitutional Rights Foundation, *The Potato Famine and Irish Immigration to America*, (Bill of Rights in Action, Vol. 26, no. 2, 2010).

⁶⁷ Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City*, 70.

⁶⁸ The Battery Conservatory, *Castle Garden: America's First Immigration Center*.

tended to lean towards large cities as there were more unskilled jobs available, as a large portion were uneducated and lived in poverty in their home countries. The immigrants were willing to take any job. Thus, a large number of immigrants arriving through Castle Gardens decided to stay in Lower Manhattan and find work in the city. This caused a rapid growth in the population in a very short amount of time, essentially suffocating Lower Manhattan and making it an unbearable place to live.

Not only did residents recognize the need for improved conditions in Lower Manhattan, those visiting the city were also shocked at the state of the city. One of these people was Charles Dickens. In his book, *American Notes*, Dickens wrote about his travels around the United States in 1842 and described what he noticed about each place, giving an outsider's perspective on each city he traveled to. While a native New Yorker might ignore some negative aspects of living in the city, as an outsider looking in, Dickens was able to identify many of New York's most pressing problems. This unique perspective led Dickens to express some not so kind words about New York City. Among his main criticisms was the fact that "poverty," "wretchedness," and "vice" were very prevalent throughout Manhattan.⁶⁹ However, no criticism was as damning as his observations about the Five Points, one of the most dangerous, disease ridden, and densely populated areas of Manhattan. This area, not coincidentally, was mostly inhabited by poor immigrants. In writing about the Five Points, Dickens stated:

These narrow ways, diverging to the right and left, and reeking everywhere with dirt and filth. Such lives as are led here, bear the same fruits here as elsewhere. The coarse and bloated faces at the doors, have counterparts at home, and all the wide world over. Debauchery has made the very houses prematurely old. See how the rotten beams are tumbling down, and how the patched and broken windows seem to scowl dimly, like eyes that have been hurt in drunken frays.

⁶⁹ Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Chapman & Hall, 1842), 86.

Many of those pigs live here. Do they ever wonder why their masters walk upright in lieu of going on all fours? and why they talk instead of grunting?⁷⁰

Dickens' observations were as clear as day, there was something seriously wrong with the Five Points section of New York and something needed to be done about it.

Moreover, Dickens was not alone in his sentiments about Manhattan and the Five Points. George Foster, who was a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, wrote *New York By Gaslamp* in 1850, similarly exposing the dark side of New York. In also describing the Five Points, Foster brought up many of the same concerns as Dickens. Dickens mentions that "nearly every house is a low tavern," and Foster expanded on this issue and discussed how taverns became houses and what really happens in those houses.⁷¹ In his exposé Foster wrote:

Opposite the lamp, eastwardly, is the 'Old Brewery' -- a building so often described that it has become as familiar as the Points themselves -- in print. We will not, therefore attempt another description of that which has already been so well depicted. The building was originally, previous to the city being built up so far, used as a brewery. But when the population increased and building, streets and squares grew up and spread out all around it, the owner -- a shrewd man, and very respectable church deacon -- found that he might make a larger income from his brewery than by retaining it for the manufacturer of malt liquid. It was accordingly floored and partitioned off into small apartments, and rented to persons of disreputable character and vile habits, who had found their inevitable way gradually from the "Golden Gates of Hell," through all the intermediate haunts of prostitution and drunkenness, down to this hell-like den -- little less dark, gloomy and terrible than the grave itself, to which it is the prelude.⁷²

Foster then went on to suggest that every house in the area was like what he described above.⁷³ In other words, a respectable brewery changed to a house of prostitution, due

⁷⁰ Dickens, *American Notes*, 87.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² George G. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina Press, 1990), location 1146.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

to the dramatic increase in population. Had it not been for the population increase, the brewery would have most likely remained a brewery and not sunk to the level that it did.

Dickens and Foster were not the only ones to see just how bad Lower Manhattan, and especially the Five Points, were. In the famous illustration published in *Valentine's Manual of Old New York* in 1927, Henry Collins Brown depicts the Five Points as somewhere no one would want to live. In the illustration, violence, multiple fights, and prostitution were depicted along with roaming pigs.⁷⁴

From both people living in New York at the time and outsiders visiting the city, it was clear that something had to be done to help Lower Manhattan and prevent the immoral, unsanitary, and low standards of living from plaguing the rest of Manhattan.

Not only was the standard of living falling as the population increased, the small area of land comprising Lower Manhattan could no longer accommodate the growing population. Lower Manhattan was bursting at the seams as the population soared. The more elite residents of New York City who had lived there for many years, yearned for their area of the Island to become less crowded and less overwhelming. Washington Irving, a New York based writer and diplomat, was one of the residents who was fed up with the terrible living conditions of his home. Irving expressed his dismay and disappointment with what Manhattan had become:

New York, as you knew it, was a mere corner of the present huge city,' wrote Washington Irving to his sister in 1847, 'and that corner is all changed, pulled west in William Street, which still remains some of its old features; though those are daily altering. I can hardly realize that within my term of life, this great crowded metropolis, so full of life[,] bustle, noise, shew and splendor, was a quiet little City of some fifty or sixty thousand inhabitants. It is really now one of the most rucketing cities in the world and reminds me of one of the great European

⁷⁴ Henry Collins Brown, *Valentine's Manual of Old New York*, (New York, NY: Valentine's Manual Inc., No.7, 1923).

cities (Frankfort for instance) in the time of an annual fair - Here it is a Fair almost all the year round.⁷⁵

Irving no longer recognized the city he lived in, comparing crowded New York to living in a year-long fair. Moreover, Irving was not alone in his sentiments, as many of the residents of the city wanted to be able to breathe again. Multiple newspapers, including the *New-York Daily Times*, wrote about the need for breathing space. "More than a million lungs are hard at work day and night...respiring the city's air, many of them in lanes crowded to excess, and buildings bursting with repletion. We have no competent breathing place."⁷⁶ However, even though New York City's residents agreed that they needed breathing room and thus had to expand outside of Lower Manhattan in order to combat the overcrowding, many of the city's elites had reservations about expanding uptown.

New York's elites were leery about developing the entire Island as they were worried that the over-development of Lower Manhattan would spread to the rest of Manhattan, eliminating all green-space. Because most of Manhattan was surprisingly still undeveloped and residents could go uptown to enjoy a more natural environment, the elite residents were concerned that Lower Manhattan's streets, buildings, and overcrowding would overtake the remaining green spaces on the Island. While the elites could not stop people from building and moving to other parts of Manhattan, they could still make sure that there would still be nature and green space in New York City. The elites needed to be sure that there would still be a place to breath in the city, even if the rest of Manhattan became developed.

⁷⁵ Washington Irving as quoted in Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City*, 70.

⁷⁶ New-York Daily Times "A New Park" (May 21 1852), as quoted in Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017),199.

This desire for breathing space led to many of New York's elites to become advocates for a park. Multiple advocates of the park vocalized the need for a park for all people, rich and poor, that would, "fulfill New York's 'manifest destiny' and provide the city not only with a monument to its magnificence, but also with 'lungs' to preserve the public health from the increasing density of the social and built environment."⁷⁷ The four primary advocates that led the fight to establish a city park were Robert Bowne Minturn, William Cullen Bryant, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Ambrose C. Kingsland. These men each took different approaches in an effort to convince the general public and specific groups to support the idea of a green place.

Inspired by the city parks of Europe, Robert Bowne Minturn, known as "America's Gentleman" and a prominent merchant, began writing anonymous letters in 1851 from London, and later held meetings in his house, to push for a park.⁷⁸ Minturn was so taken with the parks he saw in Europe that he wanted nothing more than to have one in his home city of New York. Minturn, "on visiting Europe, was so delighted with the parks of London, Paris, and Vienna, that he proposed immediately on his return to have one of these parks in New York. Yes, he came home for the full purpose of laying a train to get a grand park in the centre of the city."⁷⁹ Minturn wanted to convey to the public that there was no need greater for New Yorkers than that of a park.⁸⁰ However, throughout this time, Minturn stayed anonymous and mostly interacted with other elites. Thus, while Minturn was important in advocating the idea of Central Park, he mostly did not interact

⁷⁷ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 199.

⁷⁸ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 16.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

with other groups of New Yorkers beyond his elite circles, so he was not able to persuade those who were socially and economically beneath him.

William Cullen Bryant, the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, by contrast, reached many New Yorkers through his editorials in his newspaper. By promoting the idea of a park in his newspaper beginning in 1841, Bryant was able to reach not only New York's elite, but also a wide range of New Yorkers who were literate (although at the time most newspaper readers did not include immigrants or freed African Americans). Bryant expressed the dire need of a park in the central part of the Island. Bryant wrote that such a park would benefit the city both socially and economically. Bryant argued that New Yorkers needed, "an extensive pleasure ground for shade and recreation," citing that the only other green space in Manhattan was too small for the public to enjoy.⁸¹ While the social benefits of a park were well-known, Bryant also raised economic arguments for creating a park as soon as possible. Bryant, "urged the city to acquire a large tract of land before it became expensive" and stated that, "commerce is devouring inch by inch the coast of the island and if we would rescue any part of it for health and recreation it must be done now."⁸² Essentially, Bryant knew that if New Yorkers waited and pondered over whether to buy land to create a park, it would be too late; either all the land would have already been bought up or the land would be overly expensive. Bryant conveyed the urgency of creating the park as soon as possible.

The third and most notable advocate for a park was Andrew Jackson Downing, a landscape architect. Through open letters in his magazine, *The Horticulturist*, Downing promoted how a park would appeal to and be beneficial to all classes and that the

⁸¹ William Cullen Bryant as quoted in Cynthia S. Brenwall, *The Central Park: Original Designs for New York's Greatest Treasure* (New York, NY: New York City Municipal Archives, 2019), 13.

⁸² Ibid.

United States should be ashamed of the poor quality of its parks.⁸³ Downing used the vast divide between the upper and lower classes in New York to his advantage, arguing that the creation of the park will help civilize the poor socially.⁸⁴ Furthermore, by helping the poor become civilized, it would help not only the entire population, but also democracy as a whole.⁸⁵ Downing believed that creating a park would give a “‘broad ground of popular refinement’ that ‘raises up the working-man to the same level of enjoyment with the man of leisure and accomplishment.’”⁸⁶ Downing also wrote about how anyone, no matter his status, can become an intellectual and moral gentleman. Downing expressed that, “‘every laborer is a possible gentleman, not by the possession of money or fine clothes -- but through the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture.’”⁸⁷ In Downing’s mind, the creation of a city park would lift up the poor to make them more on his level and the level of other elites.

Downing also criticized New York City as a whole for its lack of public greenery. In the *Horticulturist*, Downing wrote, “every American who visits London, whether for the first time or the fiftieth time, feels mortified that no city in the United States has a public park -- here so justly considered both the highest luxury and necessity in a great city. What are called parks in New York, are not even apologies for the thing; they are only squares of paddocks.”⁸⁸ Downing did not hold back in his disappointment of New York’s meager parks and his desire for a real, substantial park (the park should be no less than 500 acres).⁸⁹ In fact, Downing expressed later that the proposed Jones’ Wood Park site

⁸³ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 200.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Andrew Jackson Downing as quoted in Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 13.

⁸⁷ Andrew Jackson Downing as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 200.

⁸⁸ Andrew Jackson Downing as quoted in Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 13.

⁸⁹ Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 14.

was too small as, “one hundred and sixty acres of park for a city that will soon contain three-quarters of a million people! It is only a child’s playground!”⁹⁰ Not only did Downing want a city park, but he wanted a huge city park. Downing’s outspoken beliefs about the park not only caught the attention of general New Yorkers, but also caught the attention of prominent politicians, namely the mayor of New York City, Ambrose C. Kingsland.

Kingsland’s political rhetoric, including that the park would help the poor, helped to persuade the City’s Common Council to support the park. The idea that Kingsland kept pushing was that the proposed city park would help in terms of, “health, happiness, and comfort of those whose interest are specially interested to our keeping -- the poorer classes”⁹¹ In speaking directly to the Common Council to advocate for the park, Kingsland emphasized the benefits for the lower classes and brought up the longevity of Manhattan. Kingsland, being the mayor of New York City, not only thought about what was best for the city at the time, but he also emphasized what would be the best for the city for decades to come. In a speech to the Common Council, Kingsland stated, “The establishment of such a park would prove a lasting monument to the wisdom, sagacity, and forethought of its founders, and would secure the gratitude of thousands yet unborn for the blessing of pure air, and the opportunity for the innocent, healthful enjoyment.”⁹² Kingsland thus took future generations into consideration and argued that in fifty years, people are going to be thankful for the city park as an area to breath fresh air and not have to live in a place with no greenery. Kingsland’s proposals

⁹⁰ Andrew Jackson Downing as quoted in Morrison H. Heckscher, *Creating Central Park* (New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), 14.

⁹¹ Ambrose C. Kingsland as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 201.

⁹² Ambrose C. Kingsland as quoted in Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 13.

did not fall on deaf ears, as the Common Council, agreed with Kingsland and other proponents of the park. In 1852, the Board of Aldermen created a special committee for the creation of a central park.⁹³ The idea of a central park thus came from members of New York's elites who wanted a city park, inspired by Europe's parks, to further their own interests, namely the need to breath in the congested, over-populated city as well as the desire to help bring the lower class citizens up to their level socially, but not economically. The elites essentially wanted a park for themselves and used the idea of benefiting the lower-classes as a prop in order to get what they wanted.

While these advocates were eventually successful in persuading the city to create a park, there was a debate as to whether the social benefits of the green space would outweigh the massive cost needed to create the park. From the time Central Park was still in its infant stages of development, to when the park was under construction, newspapers debated whether the park was worth its cost. On one side of the debate, newspapers cited the underestimates of the cost to complete the park as well as the poor topography of the proposed land. First, in 1853, the *New York Daily Times* reported on property owners who lived on the land where Central Park was to be built who were skeptical of the estimates of the land appraisals. Mr. Brett, a property owner, believed that the park's estimate of \$1,407,225 for 756 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres was far too low of an estimate and that the estimate should be closer to \$6,000,000.⁹⁴ In his view, for such a large stretch of land, spanning forty blocks and a thousand building lots, the amount of money needed to dig the land, build walls, and build the park was not accurately taken into account.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the newspaper noted that apparently the six million dollar

⁹³ Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 14.

⁹⁴ "Additional City News," *New York Daily Times*, August 10, 1853, 8.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

endeavor would be coming right out of the taxpayers' wallets, which would be much more than the taxpayers would be willing to pay.⁹⁶ Thus, in the eyes of property owners living on Central Park's land, the park should not be built, because it would cost too much to build it.

In addition to the base cost of purchasing the land, there would also be the cost of completely changing the landscape to suit the park's needs. The idea was to create a beautiful park out of swamp land, which would cost an enormous amount of money and require extensive labor to make it suitable for a park. As the *New York Daily Times* stated in 1857, "the alchemists of old did not meet with greater difficulties in their attempts to change baser substances into gold than the Central Park Commissioners will experience in their efforts to create a beautiful English Park out of the sterile waste of rock and swamp which constitutes the material that they are to metaphase into a verdant Park for our citizens."⁹⁷ The article continues with an explanation of everything that is required to make a swamp into a park, including grubbing the bushes, digging up stones, installing a drainage system, and leveling some areas of the park.⁹⁸ These necessities would not only require large labor forces (once Central Park began its transformation, there would be over 500 laborers working daily), but it would also require a large amount of money, which would also likely mean the opening day of the park would need to be pushed back.⁹⁹ Thus, taking those realities into account, the newspaper argued that the park might not be worth the time and money, because of all the labor and money involved in transforming the land.

⁹⁶ "Additional City News," *New York Daily Times*, 8.

⁹⁷ "New York City.: Progress of the Central Parks Improvements," *New York Daily Times*, September 7, 1857, 3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

As a counter to the above arguments, other newspapers published stories arguing that the topography of the proposed park was not an obstacle and that the money required to build the park was not as much as skeptics were estimating. First, in arguing about the land's topography, some countered that Central Park's land was a perfect place to build a park, because nothing else would have been able to be built there. Both a weekly journal and an article spoke to this. In 1866, the weekly journal, *American Artisan and Patent Record*, stated after the park had opened, that the land was, "never fit for cultivation, and therefore never inhabited except by a few laborers living in shanties."¹⁰⁰ The journal spoke with an admiration about how something so magnificent as Central Park could be built from an area of land that was just a "rocky and sterile region, equally repulsive to eyes that cannot *foresee*."¹⁰¹ The journal saw just how much of a transformation Central Park made and was glad that the area was no longer a vile wasteland.¹⁰² The same sentiments were expressed well before the park had opened. In an 1856 article in the *New York Daily Times*, the newspaper argued that the rugged topography of the land for the proposed park was part of the reason why Central Park was chosen over Jones' Wood. "The grounds of the new Park are especially distinguished for these rough inequalities, and it was partially on this account that they were finally preferred to the less rugged tract of Jones' Wood."¹⁰³ The article discussed how the land was perfect for a park and not buildings; as, "in many places deep ravines and hallows, and in others ledges of rock rising many feet above the level of the graded avenues, render lots almost valueless for building purposes," and that, "it

¹⁰⁰ "Uptown Lands for Residences," *American Artisan and Patent Record : a Weekly Journal of Arts, Mechanics, Manufactures, Mining, Engineering and Chemistry, and Repertory of Patents* 3, no. 7 (June 20, 1866): 101.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ "New York City.: The Present Look of Our Great Central Park," *New York Daily Times*, July 9, 1856, 3.

seems as if Nature had scooped out this hollow in contemplation of the purpose to which it is to be applied.”¹⁰⁴ The article concluded that because of this uneven topography, the land was perfect for the creation of a park rather than buildings, and that if the right care and diligence was taken in constructing the park, it would be the, “most beautiful Park, North of Rio de Janeiro, in the Americas.”¹⁰⁵

While the articles discussed above stressed how the park’s topography was an advantage, rather than a disadvantage, another article argued that the funds needed from taxpayers would not be that onerous, and that in any event, it would be worth it in the end to have a beautiful park. In a 1856 *New York Daily Tribune* article, the writer expressed that the actual amount of money taxed would be only “\$2.20 cents upon every \$100 of the taxable property in the City.”¹⁰⁶ The article noted that the amount of money taxed for every \$100 could go up to \$3, but argued that the return on investment would be worth it.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the newspaper contended that the amount of money needed from each taxpayer would more likely go down, as the population of taxpayers increased.¹⁰⁸ The article rationalized this potential cost in explaining that the amount of money needed from each taxpayer was much less than what many New Yorkers pay for excursions to Hoboken or other places for recreation.¹⁰⁹ Soon, with Central Park, which the article estimated would be completed within 5 years, New Yorkers would not have to pay to travel to Hoboken or other places for leisure; they could simply go uptown to enjoy all that Central Park would have to offer.¹¹⁰ The article concluded, “that never had

¹⁰⁴ “New York City.: The Present Look of Our Great Central Park,” *New York Daily Times*, 1856, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ “New-York Legislature: The New-York Central Park in the City of New-York .” *New York Daily Tribune*, February 15, 1856, 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

so great a project been carried out at so cheap and extremely moderate an expense,” and that, “the people will look upon the Central Park, when completed, as a thing invaluable to their employment and health. It will be an ornament to the city and a pride to the State.”¹¹¹

Even though there were debates for and against the park, in the end, the feared financial cost was outweighed by the prospect of having a charming park for New Yorkers to enjoy.

The idea of giving lungs to the city was no longer just an idea possessed by the city’s elites, it would soon become a reality. When the first site of the proposed city park, Jones’ Wood, ultimately failed to be built, mainly due to its location, cost, small size and subsequent lawsuits by the landowners, Central Park quickly became a favorable alternative site.¹¹² The Jones’ Wood park would have been on the East River, between 66th and 75th streets and consist of 160 acres.¹¹³ The proposed area for Central Park, however, would be much larger and span much of the island of Manhattan. In speaking to just how large the proposed area of land would be, a 1856 *New York Daily Times* article stated:

The limits of the Central Park will extend from One Hundred and Sixth-street on the North, to Fifty-ninth-street on the South, and the Fifth and Eighth avenues will bound it on the East and west, respectively. It will be two and a half miles long and a half a mile wide, and its figure will be that of a parallelogram. It will be centrally situated between the North and East Rivers, at a distance of about three quarters of a mile from each.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ “New-York Legislature: The New-York Central Park in the City of New-York .” *New York Daily Tribune*, 1856, 5.

¹¹² Heckscher, *Creating Central Park*, 14.

¹¹³ Plan of Manhattan between 58th and 109th Street, Illustrated News, June 25, 1853, p. 409 New-York Historical Society as quoted in Heckscher, *Creating Central Park*, 15.

¹¹⁴ “New York City.: The Present Look of Our Great Central Park ,” *New York Daily Times*, 1856, 3.

With the location of the park finalized by 1853, the only remaining thing to do in terms of planning the park was to design what the park would look like. And what better way to design a plot of land than to have a design competition?

The park committee opened the competition to plan and design Central Park to the public. In the *New York Herald*, the park committee announced a competition for “Plans of the Central Park. -- The Board of Commissioners of the Central Park offer the following premiums for the four designs for laying out the Park, which may be selected.”¹¹⁵ Prizes were offered, namely \$2,000 for the winner, \$1,000 dollars for second place, \$750 for third place, and \$500 for fourth place.¹¹⁶ The committee was offering a massive amount of money, as \$2,000 in 1856 is approximately \$60,000 today after taking into account inflation¹¹⁷ With that kind of money up for grabs and five months to create a plan, the best of the best entered the competition, each creating unique plans for Central Park.

One of the designs that did not win, but which was still unique and interesting, was by John Rink, a park engineer. Its ornate design was full of color and symmetry.¹¹⁸ Rink’s design thought of every detail of the park, going so far as to name every entrance and road in the park (which he named after Presidents and patriots).¹¹⁹ Rink’s plan divided the proposed park into symmetrical formal garden sections, which took up the majority of the area, leaving only a small area of open space, which he referred to as the “Parade Ground.”¹²⁰ While this design was beautiful to look at on paper, it was not

¹¹⁵ *New York Herald*, October 30, 1857 New York Historical Society, as quoted in Heckscher, *Creating Central Park*, 21.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Official Data Foundation, *CPI Inflation Calculator*, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Plan of the Central Park, New York, Entry No. 4 in the competition (John Rink) New York Historical Society Library.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

really practical for public use. The formal gardens would leave New Yorkers with almost no space for recreation and leisure; it was just too formal of a plan. The plan would have been perfect for the design of a botanical garden, but not a public park suited for a variety of uses by adults and children.

Another design that was a contender, but did not win, was by George Edwin Waring Jr., a drainage engineer. Waring took a different approach than Rink and went with a more minimalist plan. Instead of having garden structures around the park, Waring left the landscape mostly untouched, leaving the natural topography as it was. He planned footpaths, a cricket field, and a Crystal Palace, but his design left the rest of the land untouched.¹²¹ The simple nature of his park would have probably been a great success somewhere else, but for Manhattan, people wanted more amenities than just some footpaths.

Even though there were numerous entries in the planning competition, there could only be one winning design, which came from Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted. Vaux and Olmsted's 10 foot long winning design plan, which was originally called The Greensward Plan, included playgrounds, a parade ground, a conservatory, fountains, bridges, arboretums, gardens, driving and foot paths, and thousands of trees.¹²² This design was thoroughly planned out and was extremely detailed, going so far as Vaux and Olmsted having guests over to help draw the grass blade by blade. "There was a great deal of grass to be put in by the usual dots and dashes, and it became the friendly thing for callers to help in the work by joining in and 'adding some grass to Central Park.'"¹²³ "The whole was carefully thought out, meticulously prepared,

¹²¹ Central Park Competition Entry No. 29 - George Edwin Waring Jr. New York Historical Society Library.

¹²² Brenwall, *The Central Park*, 40.

¹²³ Heckscher, *Creating Central Park*, 26.

and cogently presented.”¹²⁴ Vaux and Olmsted won the design contest and would be cemented into history as the creators of Central Park.

The rapid growth of Manhattan’s population led to the realization that Lower Manhattan could no longer hold everyone and that Lower Manhattan had to expand into undeveloped lands. With this realization came the fear that all of Manhattan would become like Lower Manhattan. Inspired by European gardens, this led to the idea of a city park that would provide a green space for all and an escape from the crowded city for its residents. Advocates preached the social, economic, health, and class interest benefits that a city park could have for all New Yorkers, poor and wealthy alike. The successful advocacy led to the purchasing of 760 acres of land in the middle of Manhattan Island for a public park. A competition to design and plan the park was open to the public, which Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted won. With the acquisition of land, and the design for the Park being set, the question then turned to what would happen to the 1,600 people living on that land? In order to build Central Park, people had to be removed from their homes and villages, including the residents of Seneca Village. Were the desires of New York’s elites more important than the homes of 1,600 people and the communities they had built for decades.

¹²⁴ Heckscher, *Creating Central Park*, 27.

Chapter III Destruction is needed for Creation

With the proposal for Central Park finalized, the plan seemed to take into consideration everything that city dwellers would want in an urban park as an escape from the suffocating life of Lower Manhattan. However, what the proposal failed to consider was the impact on the people who lived where Central Park was planned to be built. “The 778-acre Central Park (expanded to 843 acres in 1863) would be almost five times as large as all the existing parks and squares in the city combined.”¹²⁵ Additionally, there were thirty-four thousand lots of land in and around Central Park.¹²⁶ The huge area of land required to build Central Park was home to 1,600 residents, over 260 of whom lived in Seneca Village. In order to begin construction of the park, all the residents in the area would have to leave.

It was not easy to persuade the residents of Seneca Village to leave their homes in favor of a city-wide park. By the time New York City tried to obtain their land, the residents of Seneca Village had embedded their lives deeply into their community. Most residents who lived in the village had lived there for years, with a majority living there between fifteen to twenty-five years. As Rosenzweig and Blackmar calculated, “three-quarters of those residents (or their families) who were taxed in 1840 were still there fifteen years later.”¹²⁷ In addition, “some black residents had much deeper roots...at least nine individuals or families could trace their ties back more than two and a half decades.”¹²⁸ The well established lives families had in Seneca Village meant that the residents would not easily uproot their lives and everything they had built to make

¹²⁵ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 59.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

way for the park. This caused proponents of Central Park to minimize and slander the people of Seneca Village in order to pass the necessary legislation to remove the unwilling residents and obtain their land.

Before discussing the defamation of Seneca Village specifically, it is important to note how multiple sources influenced public opinion regarding the area in general by the use of imagery. In order to influence public opinion, a combination of illustrations as well as the recent invention of photography was utilized. Hand-drawn illustrations were the primary way of using imagery to influence opinion, as they were much cheaper and more readily available than photographs. One example of this was actually from the winning proposal for Central Park. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux included in their proposal actual pictures of the undeveloped land and paired them with hand-drawn illustrations of what the area would become. For example, one picture showed an abandoned farm with divided land and an old stone wall, while the corresponding rendering of the proposed Central Park landscape depicted a lake that was lined with trees and contained a gazebo looking out to the water.¹²⁹ The photograph made it seem like the land was empty and had seemingly been abandoned and run-down, while the rendering illustrated how the forgotten land could be transformed into a beautiful park to please the park committee. Moreover, as it looked like no one lived on the proposed park land, taking possession of the land would not be difficult.

Another prominent photograph took a different angle in showing the consequences of building Central Park. While it is unknown who took the photograph and who captioned it, it is important in how it portrayed the people living on the site of the proposed Central Park. Instead of showing the pre-park land as deserted as in

¹²⁹ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 212

Olmsted and Vaux's plan discussed above, the photograph depicted people living on the land. The photograph was taken on 94th Street, just a couple of blocks north of Seneca Village. It showed, however, homes that looked more like huts that could collapse at any moment. The photograph was captioned, "there's nothing like a Fifth Avenue address for social prestige, and these squatters have it over all the others on 94th street. Central Park shown in the background."¹³⁰ This image paired with the caption showed the irony that poor squatters were living on upscale Fifth Avenue. Downtown, Fifth Avenue was where the elite lived and was a prized address to call home, but as one traveled uptown, Fifth Avenue was occupied by squatters living in huts. This was aimed right at New York's elites to show that something needed to be done to restore the prestige of Fifth Avenue, no matter who was living in the northern areas.

While photographs and illustrations were used broadly as a means of persuasion, some were used to target certain areas of the park, with Seneca Village being one of them. In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, an illustration showed Seneca Village to be similar to the poor settlements on 94th street that are discussed above. The illustration showed a cluster of huts, with some looking more like tents than sound structures.¹³¹ In front of the houses, goats and chickens roamed.¹³² This was a stark contrast to how the community that was described in Chapter One looked like. This drawing was used as a way to diminish everything the Seneca Village community had built for decades, and reduced the village to almost a tent-city with a few huts.

¹³⁰ "Shanty" at Fifth Avenue and 94th Street, 1888. Collection of the New-York Historical Society as quoted in New York Historical Society, *Seneca Village*, 49.

¹³¹ Harper's New Monthly Magazine as quoted in Coevans, "The Community Before Central Park," *Real Archaeology* (Vassar College, November 15, 2015).

¹³² *Ibid.*

Pictures were not the only method of persuasion used. Reports and newspaper articles were also used to diminish the village. First, the Special Committee of Central Park and the Mayor of New York City underestimated the number of people living in the area, in order to make it seem like there were almost no inhabitants in the area, and thus lessen the impact of building the park. The then Mayor of New York City, Fernando Wood, stated that the proposed area of land was an, “almost uninhabited part of the island.”¹³³ Going along with Mayor Wood’s statements, in a report by the Special Committee on Parks, the committee reported that there were, “very few improvements, such as private dwelling-houses.”¹³⁴ Creating the illusion that there was virtually no one living in the area made it seem that only a handful of people would be affected by the land acquisition. When considering the cost of acquiring 778 acres of land, minimizing the detrimental effects on current residents led to advocates for the park having an easier time persuading others of the need to remove the seemingly few residents in the area.

In addition to minimizing the actual number of people living in the area, various newspapers and magazines slandered and defamed the people of Seneca Village and its surrounding communities. Multiple newspapers, including the *New York Daily Times*, referred to Seneca Village by the hateful term, “Nigger Village.”¹³⁵ African Americans at the time were constantly the victims of dehumanization where derogatory terms were used in place of proper names. Using this language made the village and its inhabitants seem less important and more disposable. But even though different media outlets

¹³³ Mayor Fernando Wood as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 203.

¹³⁴ 1852 Report of the Board of Aldermen, the Special Committee on Parks as quoted in Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 203.

¹³⁵“New York City.: The Present Look of Our Great Central Park ,” *New York Daily Times*, 1856, 3.

attempted to marginalize Seneca Village, it was difficult to show it as deplorable, as it was a well-established, working class village. Thus, some supporters of the proposed park simply tried to avoid discussion of Seneca Village. McNeur explained the reason for this as, “less attention was paid to Seneca Village, probably because destroying their more established working- and middle-class neighborhood would not have fit so neatly into the clearance literature as did the hodgepodge, illegal wooden shanties filled with animals and barefoot Irishmen.”¹³⁶ While it might have been more difficult to depict Seneca Village in such a negative light, because it was a well-established village with churches and schools, many media outlets still tried, as noted above.

While many media outlets did not depict Seneca Village in a good light, it was not the only community subjected to the misrepresentation. On the south side of Central Park was a settlement known as Pigtown. Pigtown was a collection of pig farms and pig bone boileries and was home to fourteen households on the eastern side of the park.¹³⁷ They were an easy target to be used to justify the land acquisition, as the town was made up of huts and was home to lower class residents. Consequently, the media spotlight focused on the poor German and Irish piggery communities in an effort to garner the support necessary to acquire the land for Central Park and in turn cause the demise of Seneca Village.

The piggeries were run by Irish immigrants on the east side and German immigrants on the west side. These residents were low class, most of whom worked as day laborers or in a road gang if they were not already working in a piggery.¹³⁸ These communities were seen as less developed and more resembled a shanty town than

¹³⁶ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 207.

¹³⁷ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 73.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

other communities, such as Seneca Village. In addition to having poor immigrants living in shanties in prime real estate, due to the nature of these communities' work, the area had a rancid smell. Moreover, the smell seemed to be so prominent that it would be the first thing one noticed about the area. For example, when Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect for Central Park, first visited the area he recalled, "the low grounds were steeped in [the] overflow and the mash of pigs sties, slaughterhouses and bone boiling works and the stench was sickening."¹³⁹ Various media outlets took the opportunity to expose the shameful communities that were wasting land.

Newspapers made it seem as though there was no difference between the animals and humans in the area, that the people were just as wretched as the land on which they lived, and as the animals they slaughtered. In a *New York Times* article, a reporter wrote that the people in the areas lived in, "shanties in which the pigs and the Patricks lie down together while little ones of Celtic and swinish origin lie miscellaneously, with billy-goats here and there interspersed."¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, this article was not an isolated incident; many newspapers and even census reports depicted the deplorable living conditions. In 1855, one census reporter reported that the German children in the communities in Central Park made up the most deaths.¹⁴¹ The census taker noted that these Germans lived in "swamps" and were subjected to constant "fever and ague."¹⁴² In addition to the census reporter, newspapers also showed the Pigtowns as decrepit areas. In a *New York Daily Times*, a writer recognized the differences between Seneca Village and the Pigtowns, so he chose to focus on the

¹³⁹ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 161.

¹⁴⁰ New York Times, "Metropolitan Nuisances," (June 5 1858) as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 161.

¹⁴¹ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 73.

¹⁴² Ibid.

Pigtowns in order to support his argument that the people should be removed in favor of Central Park. The article states:

West of the reservoir, within the limits of Central Park, lies a neat *little settlement*, known as 'Nigger Village.' The Ebon inhabitants, after whom the village is called, present a pleasing contrast in their habits and appearance of their dwellings to the Celtic occupants, in common with hogs and goats, of the shanties in the lower part of the Park. They have been notified to remove by the first of August. The policemen find it difficult to persuade them out of the idea which has possessed their simple minds, that the sole object of the authorities in making the Park is to procure their expulsion from the home which they occupy. It is hoped that their removal will be effected with as much gentleness as possible.¹⁴³

From this article, one can see how life in Seneca Village compared to other soon-to-be displaced communities. Yet all the communities had to leave.

This is not to say, however, that Seneca Village was portrayed fairly, as the article misrepresented the village as well. The article first called the village a "little settlement," which was not true, as the area spanned almost ten blocks and encompassed over 260 people, in addition to three churches and a school.¹⁴⁴ As mentioned above, the primary way different factions persuaded others into supporting legislation to dissolve Seneca Village was to diminish its existence. Thus, by calling it a "little settlement" and naming it "Nigger Village," lessened both its size and its worth. However, the main focus of this article was on one of Pigtown's Celtic communities. The people there are labeled as simple-minded, living amongst farm animals in shanties. From that description, no one would want to advocate or protect that community, because they seem to be only bringing down the city. And who would want a rancid smelling, poor immigrant

¹⁴³ "New York City.: The Present Look of Our Great Central Park ," *New York Daily Times*, 1856, 3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

neighborhood when one could instead have a breathable, beautiful, nature escape? The choice seemed obvious and the growth of support was inevitable.

Looking back, the piggeries and Pigtowns had no real chance against New York's elite. The elites of New York did not want their pristine park to be infested with pigs and the smells, diseases, and eyesores that came with them.¹⁴⁵ It was more of a surprise that they lasted as long as they did, rather than that they were destroyed. Furthermore, many New Yorkers seemed to even be ashamed that the communities existed in the first place and that they inhabited the area that would become Central Park. An article in the *New York Herald* described this disappointment by writing that it was, "hardly possible to conceive that so much abomination could have existed in a city like this as represented as found in the neighborhood of the beautiful Central Park. It is hardly credible, and the recital is positively sickening."¹⁴⁶ The revulsion of the piggeries made the decision to acquire all the land within Central Park an easy decision, making other communities, including Seneca Village, fall to the same fate, despite Seneca Village's different nature.

Beginning in 1853, the city government gradually took control of the land and subsequently acquired all the land through eminent domain. This gradual taking happened in three stages, beginning with collecting rent from anyone who chose to still live in the area after the city bought the land. In 1856, the Central Park Police Force was formed in order to collect rent from inhabitants, as well as enforce a no trespassing and collection of natural materials rule, which would become stage two.¹⁴⁷ Writing about the

¹⁴⁵ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 171

¹⁴⁶ New York Herald "The War upon the Piggeries: City Inspector's Report" (September 20 1859) as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 171.

¹⁴⁷ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 209.

rent collection, in an 1856 article, the *New York Daily Times* noted how much most residents were paying in rent. “The present number of tenants is about 180, and the general quality of the houses, and the present productiveness of the land in that section, may be inferred from the fact that more than 130 residents pay a rent not more than \$40 per year, and a good many not more than \$10. The amount received for the first quarter of the year is some \$1,800.”¹⁴⁸ In addition to having to pay rent, the residents of the area could no longer use the park as a natural resource. Prior to the establishment of Central Park, people would often cut down trees for firewood and graze animals on land.¹⁴⁹ As McNeur stated, “the resident arrested in the summer of 1856 for selling the ‘park’s stones,’ which he had broken up as street paving, was engaging in a ‘business’ no one would have questions six months earlier.”¹⁵⁰ Activities that had been going on for decades, were now considered illegal and seen as a threat to the park’s grounds. In fact, more police were hired to protect the land to apprehend the, “nocturnal depredations that have been so frequent on the grounds.”¹⁵¹

After a period of policing the area and collecting rent from those who were still living in their homes, the last step in removing the remaining people was through eviction after giving some compensation to the property owners. Rosenzweig and Blackmar clarified that the, “state was not confiscating anyone’s property; it was taking it through a judicial procedure and only after payment of suitable compensation.”¹⁵² In the same article that spoke to the amount of rent collection received by the city, it also explained the process of finalizing the land acquisition by eminent domain:

¹⁴⁸ “City Items,” *New York Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1856, 7.

¹⁴⁹ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 209.

¹⁵⁰ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 91.

¹⁵¹ McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 210.

¹⁵² Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 59.

There being an uncertainty as to the actual period when the work of 'laying out' will commence, and in order to secure to the city all the revenue available from this source, the various tenets and lands on the new Park grounds, have been rented as far as practicable and on the best possible terms for the period of one year from the first of the present month; the Corporation reserving the right to enter upon possession of the premises, on giving ninety days' notice. A large number of these houses are now empty. The former occupants having preferred to move at once, than run the risk of being ousted before the end of the year.¹⁵³

The city thus began the process of the legal proceedings that would lay out exactly how it was going to evict the remaining residents. There was disagreement, however, as to how much each lot of land was worth. There was general consensus that the amount that was being paid out was far too low for the properties' values. Rosenzweig and Blackmar explained that, "many considered the seven hundred dollar per lot (on average) the commission offered inadequate; just two years earlier some of them had suggested that they expected eight hundred dollars."¹⁵⁴ Most residents were truly underwhelmed with the amount of money presented to them and were expecting more compensation. *The New York Daily Times* commented on how the residents were feeling in an article stating, "the measures taken in reference to the opening of Central Park, have produced quite a commotion among property-holders within the proposed limits. Some complain that the awards made them are not equal to what, in justice, they are entitled; but more of them, doubtless, could truly say that the sums named fall short of their expectations."¹⁵⁵ The property owners were put between a rock and a hard place, because on the one hand, they were at least getting some money for their lots, but no matter if they were satisfied with the amount or not, they still had to vacate their property.

¹⁵³ "City Items," *New York Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1856, 7.

¹⁵⁴ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 81

¹⁵⁵ "City Items," *New York Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1856, 7.

The question of land compensation had been debated since before the creation of the park. And every time, the land owners believed they were not fairly compensated for their properties. In 1853, a “few minor property holders” were called to a meeting in order to discuss the prices for buying the land. Amongst these property holders were those that would be willing to move and those who were opposed to moving.¹⁵⁶ John Townsend, a property owner, was one of the people who was willing to give up his land for a fair price. In a *New York Daily Times* article summarizing the meeting, Townsend expressed that, “his patriotism did not go so far as to give up his property for a trifle, or inadequate compensation. If he were paid for his property, he was quite willing to sell his lots, and let the community have the benefit of a park.”

While some, like Townsend, were open to selling their land, others were adamant against selling it, unless they received a fair amount of money. Mr. Brett, another property owner, refused to sell his house unless he was duly compensated. Brett exclaimed that, “the Common Council had no right, he thought, to take the property without consulting the property-owners.¹⁵⁷ The proposed Park would stand upon nearly forty blocks, or a thousand building lots. He had a little property, and wanted its full value.”¹⁵⁸

From another newspaper summarizing the meeting, the *New York Daily Tribune*, a third property owner, Mr. Gallagher, did not care whether or not the park would be created, he just cared about how quickly it would be completed as the quicker it was

¹⁵⁶ “Additional City News,” *New York Daily Times*, August 10, 1853, 8.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

done, the quicker the property owners got their money.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, it did not matter what the property owners thought of the proposed property compensations, as the city went ahead and claimed the land for Central Park via eminent domain, so the property owners no longer had a say in the matter.

Andrew Williams, the first resident of Seneca Village, the owner of three lots of land, was one of the people who thought he was not being fairly compensated. Williams went so far as petitioning the city to receive more money for his land and house. The petition stated that Williams objected, “to the report of the Comrs on the grounds that the Comrs have not allowed to said Williams a sufficient sum for the aforesaid lots -- they having allowed him the sum of \$2325.”¹⁶⁰ The petition continued asking for more money, “when he, Willians declares said lots with the house at \$4000 -- and said Williams further says that he has been offered the sum of \$3500 -- for said lots and that he refused the same.”¹⁶¹ The city, however, did not care about whether residents like Andrew Williams got their fair share of compensation, it only cared about vacating the lots. And the people had to vacate their lots and, of course, their homes.

The *New York Times* joyfully wrote about the eviction notices, writing, “the kingdom of shantytown, which has long been dominant in the region, is to be swept away.”¹⁶² All reminders of what once occupied the land was to be destroyed in favor of creating one of the largest urban public parks in the world. Every person, home, school, lot, and church vanished from the area or relocated elsewhere and with it soon the memory of them ever existing there.

¹⁵⁹ “The Central Park: Meeting of Property Holders,” *New York Daily Tribune*, August 10, 1853, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Andrew Williams’s Affidavit of Petition, 1856. Collection of The New York City Municipal Archives, Bureau of Old Records as quoted in New York Historical Society, *Seneca Village*, 45

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² New York Times “Progress of the Central Park Improvements” September 5 1857, as quoted in McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 211

Conclusion

In 1871, according to the *New York Herald*, laborers were uprooting trees from Central Park when they discovered multiple coffins buried underneath the ground.¹⁶³ The workers did not know why there were people buried together in coffins in the middle of Central Park. No one remembered that there had been a church, namely, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, on that site or that it had its own graveyard, and that its congregation members were buried in that sacred ground. Once the church was razed to make room for Central Park, it left the memory of most New Yorkers. The Seneca Village oasis in a city of discrimination was forgotten to make way for a different type of oasis, namely Central Park as a green oasis to give lungs to the city. Strikingly, neither oasis was a natural one as both had to be built from the ground up. There was an equally striking difference between the oases, however, namely, the land Seneca Village was built on was fairly purchased in arms-length transactions by hardworking individuals, while the land for Central Park was taken by eminent domain from those landowners without fair compensation. The innocent residents of Seneca Village were thus displaced, and everything that Seneca Village had built for decades, both in community and in structures, was torn down. No one seemed to care. As long as the city was able to build its park oasis, the proponents of the park did not care if doing so dismantled another oasis.

The creation of Central Park as an oasis led to the eviction of all residents from Seneca Village and its surrounding communities. While Seneca Village's residents were likely able to relocate somewhere, some of Seneca Village's institutions were not. Of the three churches and one school established in the village, only one of the churches was

¹⁶³ "Yesterday Afternoon..." *The New York Herald*, August 11, 1871, 4.

able to survive the eviction. All Angels' Church was able to relocate a couple of blocks away, but the other two churches and the school were left behind and torn down to make way for Central Park.¹⁶⁴ The community was lost.

In looking at how each oasis was created in relation to what was happening in New York City at the time, it is interesting to see how much the city had changed in less than 30 years. Chapter one of the paper explained that Lower Manhattan was not a safe or healthy place for African Americans. After the gradual emancipation of African Americans, freed slaves were met with workplace, voting, and employment discrimination, as well as, violence, prejudice, and the threat of being kidnapped and sold illegally into slavery. They were confined to the worst parts of Lower Manhattan, the fifth and sixth wards, where the unsanitary living conditions left many African Americans sick or even dead. It was not until Andrew Williams purchased land uptown that many freed slaves saw hope for a better life after slavery.

Andrew Williams' purchase of land was instrumental to the creation of Seneca Village. Following his lead, almost 260 residents moved uptown to escape the discrimination and violence of downtown. They were a thriving community, and the residents' oasis comprised three churches, a school, and hundreds of honest, working class African Americans, as well as some Irish and German immigrants. It was an integrated community with interracial marriages, showing that it was a progressive village well ahead of its time. Unfortunately, as these people moved from Lower Manhattan to this progressive community, other New Yorkers realized that New York City would never be able to rival the great cities of Europe if it could not expand beyond

¹⁶⁴ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 88.

the intolerable, crowded conditions of Lower Manhattan. Lower Manhattan could not support or contain the massive influx of immigrants who continued to arrive each year.

As described in chapter two, the population of Manhattan grew seven fold between 1820 and 1860, without expanding the physical development of the Island.¹⁶⁵ New York's elites objected to the overcrowding and wanted to be able to breath again. They needed something to give lungs to their city. The elites worked with New York City's politicians to build an oasis for New Yorkers, where they could get fresh air, take nature walks, and ice skate on the reservoir. This new oasis would not be a political or social refuge as was Seneca Village -- though some advocates tried to garner support for the park by claiming it would benefit the working class -- but rather an environmental refuge. Unfortunately, this environmental haven was to be built where the haven of Seneca Village stood. Rather than acknowledging the good qualities of Seneca Village and try to find an appropriate solution that could have saved the community or relocated it as a whole to a new location, New York's media outlets and elites came together to discredit, slander, and minimize Seneca Village and its surrounding areas in order to justify their destruction in favor of the proposed park, as explained in chapter three. And just as quickly as one political and social oasis was formed for the freed African Americans, it was destroyed to make way for an environmental oasis championed by New York's elites.

Today, most park goers do not know the history of Central Park and what was lost in its creation. To many New Yorkers, Central Park is seen as just an area of New York that somehow was protected from development. However, that could not be further from the truth. Central Park is no way, shape, or form a natural park. There were

¹⁶⁵ Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City*, 70.

houses, farms and swamps that made up the land before Central Park was built. The land had to be leveled, trees had to be brought in, and swamps drained before Central Park could have the appearance of being a natural park. Central Park is thus an illusion. Its illusion of unspoiled natural beauty masks the reality that Central Park is the result of enormous planning, labor, and money. Moreover, it was not built on empty land, but rather on land where at least one thriving community of citizens who fled racial discrimination, was displaced. Only by studying the history of the park and closely examining the original settlers of the land where the park was built, and why those people built their homes there, can you appreciate that while something was certainly gained by building Central Park, something was lost as well. It is important to not forget the politically expedient trade-offs that gave rise to the destruction of Seneca Village. Doing so would not only dishonor its innovative legacy, it could also blind us to not see similar seemingly benign acts of destruction impacting other communities that may be occurring today, that instead could be addressed with more creativity and compassion.

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