

Beneath Central Park: The Preservation of Seneca Village

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Introduction and Context

Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux in 1857, Central Park is a natural alcove amid the urban landscape of New York City (NYC). It became a National Historic Landscape almost a century later in 1963 and continues to be a cornerstone of NYC culture and community. However, what few New Yorkers—let alone the general public—know, is that before the construction of Central Park, the land from West 82nd to West 89th street was home to a well-established African American community called Seneca Village (the detailed map is pictured below).

Seneca Village provided residents not only an escape from the densely populated downtown Manhattan but also an enclave safe from the extreme racism of NYC. The area created the opportunity to establish African American schools, churches, businesses, and a way of life where Black culture could be celebrated and not hidden. However, in 1857, the NYC Government requisitioned the land that was Seneca Village through eminent domain, displacing its approximately 250 residents.¹ For the next hundred and fifty years, Seneca Village was seemingly forgotten.² These are stories of individual people that were removed from their homes and whose existence in Seneca Village was erased. Whose stories are we promoting when we study and share NYC history, and who are we forgetting?

¹ Though these residents made up less than 1% of the NYC population, the establishment of an entirely African American neighborhood in NYC was incredibly culturally significant.

² Wayback Machine, Seneca Village Project, last modified July 18, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20160506153141/http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/seneca_village/.

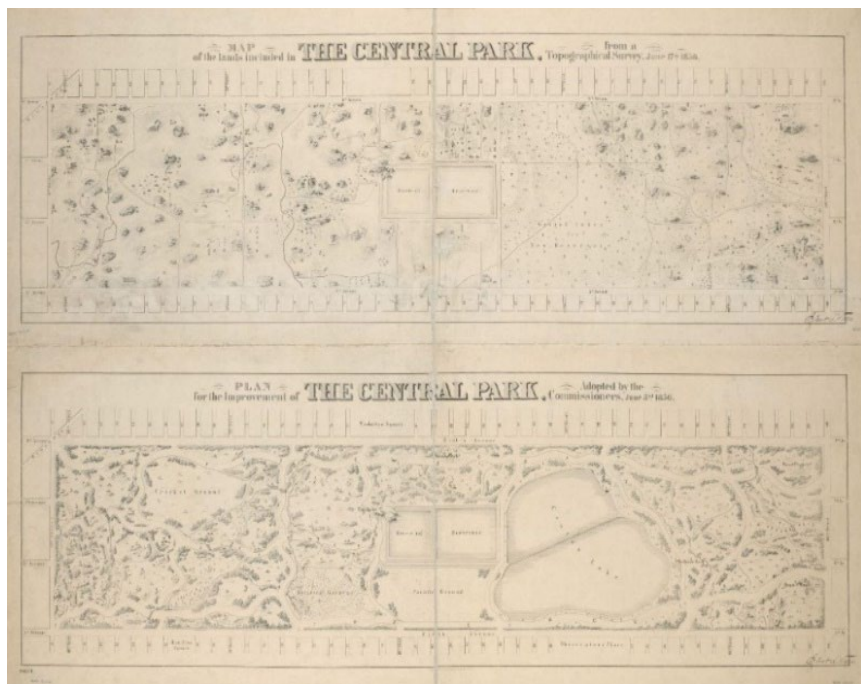


Figure 1: Egbert Ludovicus Viele, “Map of the lands included in the Central Park, from a topographical survey, June 17, 1856; [Also:] Plan for the improvement of the Central Park, adopted by the Commissioners, June 3, 1856.,” map, 1856, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6850fc74-5e61-8806-e040-e00a18067a2c>.

In the late 1990s, historians rediscovered Seneca Village and vowed to conduct new archaeological and historical research into this seemingly forgotten community. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar’s 1992 book *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* reminded the NYC community of the lost history of Seneca Village. The Seneca Village project was established shortly thereafter, and in 2011 archaeologist and historian Cynthia Copeland led an excavation of the land. Copeland, along with Diana DiZerega Wall, Nan Rothschild, and Meredith Linn, published their archaeological findings in 2018 in a report titled “Seneca Village, A Forgotten Community: Report on the 2011 Excavations.” To truly understand the realities of history, it is often helpful to physically see the past—to place yourself in the shoes of those who lived before. The Seneca

Village Project unearths artifacts, objects, and even the lives of those who have come before us to help us better understand our history.

When Central Park was created, NYC officials purported the myth that Seneca Village was an impermanent residence, full of people who did not live up to the standard that white New Yorkers wanted for their new park. In creating a permanent memorial to Seneca Village, archaeologist Cynthia Copeland wanted to reinforce the idea that Seneca Village needs a commemoration that represents its true history and connects seamlessly with the Central Park landscape, because the two can coexist together. She wants a contemplative space, one where you can both celebrate the achievements of the Black community and wonder what would have been if the almost overwhelmingly white New Yorkers in power had not forced the immigrant communities to leave. “Seneca Village is important because its history and its residents do not conform to the conventional historical narrative of Central Park, New York City, or even the United States,” the 2011 report begins. “Most Americans...are unaware of the existence of middle-class African Americans in New York in the 19th century. This project helps to expand the American narrative so that it is both more accurate and more inclusive. It challenges current misperceptions by calling attention to the presence of a Black, middle-class community in the heart of today’s New York City.”³ While most Americans today are unaware of Seneca Village’s existence, the work of prominent NYC archaeologists, historians, and educators, are finally telling its story.

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) is the largest preservation agency in any city in the United States. The LPC protects NYC’s architecture, history, and culture, through creating historic districts or landmark designations. The LPC was created in 1965 by Mayor Robert F. Wagner in response to the “losses of historically significant buildings in New York City, most notably, Pennsylvania Station.”⁴ The Archaeology Department of the LPC that opened in 2014 is responsible for regulating archeological studies throughout NYC. However, since it opened after the Seneca Village excavation, the LPC and Central Park Conservatory

³ Diana DiZerega Wall et al., *Seneca Village, A Forgotten Community: Report on the 2011 Excavations* (Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History, 2018), 4, http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch_reports/1828.pdf.

⁴ City of New York, “About LPC,” NYC.gov, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/about-lpc.page>.

supervised the 2011 Seneca Village dig. The New York City Administrative Code's Title 25 Chapter 3 called "Landmarks Preservation and Historical Districts" describes the criteria for creating and maintaining a historic district or landmark when "distinct areas may be similarly uprooted or may have their distinctiveness destroyed," which perfectly describes Seneca Village since the community there was "uprooted," and the "distinctiveness" of the village was destroyed by the creation of Central Park.⁵

Publicizing the history of Seneca Village provides an ideal opportunity for NYC to improve its displays of public history. With a local acknowledgement of the existence of Seneca Village in Central Park—whether by the establishment of an official landmark or signage at recently-excavated locations—New Yorkers will become more aware of the challenging history of their beloved park.

The History of Central Park

Seneca Village is neither recognized as a historic landmark by the LPC nor by the National Parks Service. Central Park, however, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 15, 1966, and then designated as a National Historic Landmark on May 23, 1963.⁶ On the nomination form for Central Park's National Historic Register status, no mention of Seneca Village exists aside from a short sentence description of the conditions of Central Park's land upon the arrival of architects. The nomination form describes how Olmstead and Vaux were "confronted with a squatters' town of some three hundred hovels set in an open plain interspersed with outcroppings of rock, swamps and meandering waterways." The report then goes on to describe the dramatic "embellishments" that were made to the park to turn the scene into a "romantic and picturesque" landscape.⁷ The 1965 report capitalizes on

⁵ "Chapter 3: Landmarks Preservation and Historic Districts," New York City Administrative Code, <https://nycadmincode.readthedocs.io/t25/c03/>.

⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Seneca Village, New York City," National Parks Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/seneca-village-new-york-city.htm>.

⁷ United States Department of the Interior National Parks Service, *National Register of Historic Places Inventory -- Nomination Form: Central Park*, report no. 10-300 (Rev. 10-

dehumanizing language, such as referring to Seneca Village inhabitants as “squatters,” that was used throughout the 1850s in order to justify the forced removal of the neighborhood. A depiction of this “squatters’ town” can be seen in Figure 2, an illustration published in an 1872 book titled *New York and its institutions, 1609-1871* that included information about the creation of Central Park, among other things NYC-related. The image very clearly shows Seneca Village as a rundown and rudimentarily built collection of homes, with no reference to the infrastructure or community organizations present (pictured below).

No mention of the thriving Seneca Village community was ever included in the documents preserving and memorializing Central Park. Through her efforts to make the finds of the archaeological excavation accessible to the public, Copeland hopes to change the narrative. Now, with the archaeological evidence, Copeland and other historians can facilitate active, hands-on learning, which will allow New Yorkers to gain a better understanding of Seneca Village’s complex history.



Figure 2: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. “Squatter settlement, 1855 - now Central Park,” New York Public Library Digital Collections.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-2cb0-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

When understanding the legal history of Seneca Village’s creation and lack of commemoration, it is important to understand how NYC was able to requisition the land to create Central Park. In 1853 the New York State Legislature enacted a law that allotted 775 acres of land (from 59th to 106th Streets, between Fifth and Eighth Avenues) in Manhattan to create Central Park. The city used the process of eminent domain to acquire the land. Eminent domain has a long history of use in the mid-to-late 1800s when many American public parks were being created. In fact, eminent domain was used to build much of Manhattan’s grid just a few decades prior. The Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states, the government has the ability to seize property through eminent domain; however, “private property [shall not] be taken for public use, without just compensation,” so whenever the government acquires property through eminent domain, it has a constitutional responsibility to “just[ly]” compensate the owners.⁸ But from this, it is unclear which party involved gets to decide what merits just compensation.

⁸ “The Constitution of the United States,” Amendment 5. <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/full-text>.

From the beginning, the establishment of Central Park through eminent domain created an exclusive site, where white New Yorkers could escape the stress of urban life, not caring that the creation of the park meant to make their lives less stressful caused enormous stress and strain on the Black community living there. These Black New Yorkers were unfairly removed, and NYC did not fully compensate inhabitants for the property they lost in the razing of Seneca Village. In the 1840s, in the aftermath of disease outbreaks, lack of space, and the monopolization of public lands for private development, civic-minded New Yorkers wrote letters in local newspapers arguing that it was important to set aside open spaces for the public amid the rapidly-growing city.⁹ The Central Park Conservancy, a nonprofit organization that is entrusted with the day-to-day operations of Central Park, is clear that “there is no evidence that the City or State’s decision on the park location was directed by an interest in destroying Seneca Village.” However, journalists and others arguing in favor of the creation of Central Park depicted the site as “a wasteland and those lying on the land as impoverished squatters.” This portrayal was likely an attempt to justify NYC’s unprecedented possession of the land—to show that the creation of the park was “the utmost transformation, one of beauty replacing blight.”¹⁰ As shown in Figure 2, the landscape of Central Park in the 1940s was not one of “blight.” It was simply more convenient for observers to portray it in this negative light. The strongest language used against Seneca Village inhabitants is from an 1856 *New-York Daily Times* article that denigrate the village as a “N***** Village.”¹¹ This language further demonstrated the city’s devaluation of Seneca Village as a community.

The Common Council of the City of New York took the recommendations of these citizens’ editorials, and on June 11, 1853, they settled on the land for the park (seen in Figure 1). Interestingly, as NYC

⁹ Central Park Conservancy, *Discover Seneca Village*, 2019, sign 13, https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.centralparknyc.org/new_images/programs/Seneca-Village-Signs.pdf?mtime=20200207092028.

¹⁰ Central Park Conservancy, *Discover Seneca Village*, sign 14.

¹¹ “The Present look of our Great Central Park. Tired of Life. POLICE INTELLIGENCE. The Statue of Washington. The Children that Went West. The Wilson Industrial School, No. 137 Avenue A. Monthly Report of the Dispensaries. Double Names for Streets. Trial of a fire Engine. Miscellaneous.” *The New York Daily Times* (New York, NY), July 9, 1856, 3, <https://nyti.ms/40HBq9I>.

urban historian Alexander Manevitz describes, “despite its size and significance, Seneca Village made up only six blocks out of the 141 initially taken to create Central Park.”¹² While Seneca Village may not have physically been a large section of the land being converted to Central Park, the local spirit and community identity were to be completely wiped out by the creation of the park. After the plans for the park were approved, the city ran a piece in the *New York Times* asking anyone who was “interested or affected” by the proposal to come forward and state their claim. Every Seneca Village resident came forward, but the most outspoken were William Mathew, Thomas Scudder, and Alan Cook.¹³ Mathew was invited to speak to the New York Supreme Court, and on November 5, 1855, he gave a deposition claiming that his property was worth much more than what the city awarded him. NYC valued his property at \$1,235, but he asserted that the “estimate is not sufficient,” demanding at minimum \$2,000.20.¹⁴ It is important to note that Mathew’s engagement with the structural system that worked to destroy his community was not his endorsement of it. Instead, he hoped that by working within the system he could change the way that his community was treated. Unfortunately, his plea was unsuccessful.

Mobility as the gateway to freedom for African Americans is a popular historiographical argument but is only true of voluntary mobility. For Seneca Villagers and other free Black communities in the North, mobility also signified a threat to their freedom. In the beginning years of Seneca Village, being kidnapped and sold into enslavement was the dark, looming form of forced mobility that hung over every Black New Yorker. Locally, urban development (like Central Park) and economic instability made it difficult for African Americans to create permanent neighborhoods and establish communal social institutions across generations. These were

¹² Alexander Manevitz, “‘A Great Injustice’: Urban Capitalism and the Limits of Freedom in Nineteenth-Century New York City,” *Journal of Urban History* 48, no. 6 (January 23, 2021): 1375, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144220976119>. Throughout his article, Manevitz cites the Central Park Benefit and Condemnation Files located in the New York County Clerk Division of Old Records. These are inaccessible digitally, so I am citing Manevitz’s work knowing that if readers would like to see the original documents the exact citations for those exist in Manevitz’s citations.

¹³ Manevitz, “A Great Injustice,” 1355.

¹⁴ Manevitz, “A Great Injustice,” 1371.

the very challenges that pushed people to Upper Manhattan and to Seneca Village.¹⁵ Mathew, for example, lived in Seneca Village for 23 years, which contradicted Central Park supporters' claims that park-dwellers were temporary residents and could therefore be easily displaced. His wooden home was like what most New Yorkers lived in and was certainly not a domicile for "squatters" or temporary residents, as the public had said.¹⁶ While there are no clear records that show where residents went after 1857, it is likely that some people may have gone to other African American communities in the area, like Skunk Hollow, New Jersey or Sandy Ground, Staten Island.¹⁷

Mathew's deposition appealed to the longevity and permanence of Seneca Village, which starkly contrasted the surrounding narratives of the inhabitants. He emphasized that NYC was not treating him fairly, simply because the existence of his community was seemingly at odds with the image of the city that New Yorkers wanted to perpetuate. His deposition in support of fair compensation for Seneca Villagers highlighted the importance of the Village to residents amid the backdrop of 1850s NYC.

The History of Seneca Village

The first record from Seneca Village was a NYC tax record from 1829, where the community consisted of nine houses. In 1840, 25 buildings existed. By 1856, when the area was surveyed to prepare for demolition, over 60 buildings were documented. Historians often rely on the 1850 Federal Census for a representation of what the community looked like upon its removal: 230 residents living in two-story wooden frame houses, some with sheds and barns. Surprising to many, the census notes that one third of the Seneca Village population were Irish immigrants.¹⁸ In 1825, John and Elizabeth Whitehead, a white couple who owned farmland in the modern-day West 80th-90th streets put their land up for sale. It is unclear

¹⁵ Manevitz, "A Great Injustice," 1371.

¹⁶ Manevitz, "A Great Injustice," 1372.

¹⁷ Central Park Conservancy, "Before Central Park: The Story of Seneca Village," Central Park Conservancy, last modified January 18, 2018, <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/seneca-village>.

¹⁸ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 2.

how the sale was advertised, but Andrew Williams, a Black man, bought three lots. Alongside Williams were Epiphany Davis and John Carter. The settlement of the land after these three Black men was slow, but it was set in motion.¹⁹

One of the strategies that some Black New Yorkers used to withstand the discrimination and racial violence was to establish a community for themselves, complete with a network of separate institutions like churches and schools. The creations of churches and schools in Seneca Village helped the community become permanent—until Central Park was created. The 1821 New York State Constitution imposed a \$250 property suffrage requirement for Black residents (and white property requirements were lifted); in addition, for Black voters to cast a ballot, a three-year residency was required (only a one-year requirement existed for white European Americans). Many Black New Yorkers flocked to Upper Manhattan, inspired by the possibility to own land, and establish their own lasting community, which would allow them to fulfill the residency voting requirements. Little Africa became another popular destination for migrating African Americans, but this neighborhood remained in the downtown, urban, Manhattan landscape.²⁰ Owning property in Manhattan became a gateway towards citizenship and voting rights, as it often was in early America.

Even though Seneca Village provided new opportunities for Black New Yorkers, it did not provide an entire separation from the struggles of the city. The racial, economic, social, and political inequities of capitalist society pervaded the community, regardless of whether they embraced or resisted it. “Property ownership meant a way out of the housing discrimination and segregation they faced in cramped dwellings downtown,” Manevitz wrote. It also meant that churches, which had been forced to move from building-to-building, became reliable community organizations that had permanent cemeteries—a luxury that was lost when the neighborhood was destroyed. Seneca Village became a place to perform republican citizenship during and after the end of enslavement in New York. Just as foundational as physical buildings for religious worship, strong educational opportunities were of the utmost importance for Seneca

¹⁹ Central Park Conservancy, *Discover Seneca Village*, sign 5.

²⁰ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 98-101.

Villagers, since they were the first step to wealth. In fact, the All Angels' Church and the African Union Church were among the few "colored" schools in the City.²¹ As seen on the 1850 census data, compared to Little Africa residents and the standard of the era, Seneca Village boasted extremely high literacy rates.²² Even when having children prioritize school may have meant an overall loss in family earnings, from the census data it was clear that an education was worth the temporary loss in money for the family, since they believed that literacy would lead to future wealth. Further, a proper education would allow Black children to preserve the social status their families were chasing by moving to Seneca Village, buying property, and establishing a permanent home.

While it does seem that there is a fair amount of information about the residents of Seneca Village, the maps and data are mostly because of their active efforts to make their advancements known to the New York community amidst the debate over whether to establish Central Park. The data from before 1855 is minimal, consisting mainly of property records and census data. The most detailed map of Seneca Village is from the 1956 "Condemnation Maps." Though neither of these maps show individual property lots, they do mark the location of certain buildings that suggest that this was a middle-class neighborhood. Just as Mathew stated in his deposition, the homes were mostly frame houses, with one or two stories, not the "shanties" described by their white contemporaries. Despite protests from its residents (and Mathew's Supreme Court visit), Seneca Village was demolished—above ground, that is. For decades, the soil remained untouched, until a 2011 archaeological excavation led by Diana DiZerega Wall, Nan Rothschild, Meredith Linn, and Cynthia Copeland unearthed history.

The Seneca Village Project and an Archaeological Excavation

Before ground was broken in 2011, Cynthia Copeland began investigating the history of Seneca Village. The story of Seneca Village

²¹ Manevitz, "A Great Injustice," 1368.

²² Nan A. Rothschild, Diana DiZerega Wall, and Cynthia Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa: Two African American Communities in Antebellum New York City," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 1 (2008): 104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25617485>. This information was taken from Table 8 in the article, which uses data from 1850 Federal Census records.

picks up 136 years after the 1856 movement, in 1992, when Elizabeth Blackmar and Roy Rosenzweig published *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, in which an entire section was devoted to the history of Seneca Village. Two years later, in 1995, Cynthia Copeland, then working at the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS), began to use primary sources from the N-YHS collection relating to Seneca Village as a tool for middle and high school educators to introduce their students to historical research.²³ In an interview for the New York Preservation Archive Project in 2017, Copeland discussed her involvement in Seneca Village. She mentioned how students at local NYC schools partnered with N-YHS curators and educators to “discover” Seneca Village for themselves: “we were able to basically set them up on a journey and we kind of presented it as a detective kind of story. So, we never really revealed what this place was,” she said.²⁴ Copeland realized that her research into Seneca Village contained more than just curriculum, and, building on her own research and that of Blackmar and Rosenzweig, in 1997 she curated an exhibit at the N-YHS titled: *Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village*. Copeland said, “We were able to create an exhibit that kind of stumped New Yorkers. They were like, ‘Wait a second, I’m a New Yorker. I’m supposed to know all this stuff. How come I didn’t know it?’”²⁵ That same year, Associate Professor of History at the City College of New York Diana DiZerega Wall attended one of Copeland’s workshops. She was enthralled by the history and by Copeland’s research, and the two began to collaborate. The team was joined by Nan Rothschild, an archaeologist from Barnard College, and in 1997 the three women founded the Seneca Village Project. Now, the project has transformed into the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History.²⁶ In 2001, the Seneca Village Project’s first task was completed: erecting a sign in Central Park to acknowledge the forgotten

²³ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 6.

²⁴ Cynthia Copeland, “Historian Cynthia Copeland Speaks about the Process of Rediscovering the History of Seneca Village and the Archeological Excavation of Its Former Site in Central Park.,” interview by Liz H. Strong, New York Preservation Archive Project, last modified October 13, 2017, <https://www.nypap.org/oral-history/cynthia-copeland/>.

²⁵ Copeland, “Historian Cynthia,” interview, New York Preservation Archive Project.

²⁶ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 6.

community. Fittingly, the sign was placed in February during Black History Month.

While the Seneca Village Project was being created, topographical and preliminary archaeological studies were being conducted on Central Park soil. Bruce Bevan's 1997 remote sensing survey determined that archaeological potential existed on the former Seneca Village sites, and Susanna Selby's 2004 soil sampling confirmed that these naturally formed, intact layers of soil from Seneca Village's time survived the creation and subsequent use of Central Park. The final study that confirmed the need for a full archaeological investigation was geophysical archaeologist Lawrence Conyers' ground penetrating radar tests in the area that Selby identified as having archaeological potential. Conyers identified what he believed to be several house floors, middens, shafts, features, and burials.²⁷ In an interview with the Central Park Conservancy, Wall described her elation at learning that Central Park would approve an archaeological excavation and how she began to narrow down grid proposals for the dig. "We knew where the village and its buildings had been in the park because we were able to superimpose detailed maps of the village over maps of the modern Park," she began. Once they knew exactly where the Village had been, they followed Selby's method, taking soil borings at the area she and Conyers identified. They established clear areas where floors of old buildings or privy shafts from old outhouses existed underneath the modern Central Park.²⁸ The archaeological study began with two research questions. First, do remains of Seneca Village exist? And second, if they do, how can we use the archaeological evidence to better understand the community at the time of its razing? The first question was solved by their preliminary scientific studies: "architectural, stratigraphic, and artifactual remains [exist] from the village."²⁹

In addition to physical questions, the archaeologists were interested in exploring what it meant to be a middle-class Black community in mid-nineteenth century NYC. Historical research has recently begun to focus on

²⁷ Rothschild, Wall, and Copeland, "Seneca Village and Little Africa," 105.

²⁸ Marie Warsh, "Dishes, Shoes, and Tiles: The Excavation of the Seneca Village Site," Central Park NYC, last modified February 7, 2019, <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/uncovering-seneca-village>.

²⁹ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 4.

material culture in the hopes that it can help us understand how people expressed their ethnic, racial, and class identities. The 2011 report describes their analysis: “Although some harbored the dream that they could achieve equality as Americans by assimilation through moral uplift, others did not think this was possible.” Wall and her team believe that the Seneca Village community was split. Some, like Mathew, believed that “assimilation through moral uplift” —proving that Black New Yorkers were active, important members of their community—and fighting for his property rights and value was the best way to be American. Others disagreed. “Many of the latter looked to their African roots and some even considered emigration to Africa or Haiti.” The authors mention “emigration to Africa or Haiti,” but no other sources about Seneca Village discuss this movement in the community. Much historical scholarship, however, exists devoted to the phenomenon. “We believe that some Black New Yorkers established Seneca Village as an autonomous Black community because they felt equality and assimilation within American culture were not realistic goals in the racially charged antebellum climate,” the authors affirm. Seneca Village as an “autonomous Black community” is another central point in the authors’ arguments for why they chose to excavate the site and why the site merits further recognition.³⁰

Through her entire interview with the New York Preservation Archive Project, Copeland stressed the importance of creating historical analysis and understanding grounded in the newly-discovered material culture—she was amazed by the number of objects that the excavation unearthed. “The historical record is a wonderful thing, and it gives us information, it gives us names. But when you find the stuff people were using, it just really—that’s what humanizes these people. They touched it, they felt it,” Copeland said.³¹ Through her archaeological work, Copeland “humanizes” history, creating real connections between people of the past and present. History can often seem overwhelming, especially when your only lens through which to interact with the past is “historical record.” Having access to material culture—to “the stuff people were using”—is a way to make connections across centuries. If you can touch the same artifacts that people in Seneca Village in 1850 were using, then you have a

³⁰ Wall et al., *Seneca Village*, 4-5.

³¹ Copeland, “Historian Cynthia,” interview, New York Preservation Archive Project.

completely new path towards understanding, empathizing, and learning, which are the tasks Copeland set out to accomplish with her 1995 curriculum planning using Seneca Village sources. Hopefully through public access to material culture from Seneca Village, New Yorkers can begin to learn about the lives of these former residents, creating a bond that will help them truly understand the history.

Looking Towards the Future: Commemorating Seneca Village

The narrative of Central Park that historians often want to tell is not in line with the actual history. How can we as New Yorkers enjoy the benefits of Central Park while also acknowledging the realities behind how it was created? The first step, Copeland believes, is to ensure that all the stories of those who lived in Central Park before the land was seized are told. “Telling the African American story of Seneca Village...is the essence of the community, but there is no story without the others who were there. So we still have to look into the Irish community, and we have to look into the Germans and do a better job of trying to find out information about those folks and integrating that into the story,” she said. Further, Seneca Village was not the only community uprooted by Central Park. Harsonville, Jupiterville, and the Convent of the Sisters of Charity all existed in the northern region. Different smaller family neighborhoods, houses, and other buildings were sprinkled through the entire modern-day park.³² Similarly, little-to-no effort has been made to study the history of these communities.

A few important movements have worked to publicize the findings of the 2011 report and the often-hidden history of Seneca Village. The NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission’s online exhibit and collection *Seneca Village Unearthed* will give the public access to nearly 300 artifacts from the archaeological excavation. Through this resource, people will get a “glimpse of what life was like for the Seneca Villagers in the mid-19th century,” a press release about the exhibit’s opening stated. “Being able to view and explore this invaluable historic material will be a great benefit to those seeking to learn about this extraordinary community,” Marie Warsh, Historian for the Central Park Conservancy said.³³ This exhibit is a part of

³² Copeland, “Historian Cynthia,” interview, New York Preservation Archive Project.

³³ Landmarks Preservation Commission, “LPC Launches Seneca Village Unearthed, an Online Exhibit and Collection of Artifacts,” news release, February 20, 2020,

the LPC's continuing efforts to make the city's archaeological research and artifacts accessible to as wide of an audience as possible. Like Copeland said, the objects provide a human tangible connection to the residents of Seneca Village. The online exhibit complements the Central Park Conservancy's outdoor exhibition of interpretive signs about Seneca Village. The exhibit was on view in Central Park starting in 2019, but it was mysteriously removed, with no mention to residents.

Inspired by Seneca Village history, two additional exhibits have opened in NYC. First, the *Say Their Names Memorial Exhibition*, presented by the San Diego Museum African American Museum of Fine Art, is an augmented reality experience that uses photography, technology, and art to engage visitors with the faces of hundreds of forgotten figures from the past. The traveling exhibit was located at the physical location of Seneca Village for one month in September and October of 2022.³⁴ It used the physical remembrance of Seneca Village history to inspire conversation about African American histories that may have been lost over time, much like Seneca Village. Second, *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room* is a fabrication of what a domestic space in Seneca Village would have looked like. Unlike traditional historical recreations, the rooms "reject the notion of one historical period and embrace the African and African diasporic belief that the past, present, and future are interconnected." The artists ponder what Seneca Village might have been, had it been allowed to survive into the present and future.³⁵

A false dichotomy exists where people feel like they need to pick between preserving Seneca Village by returning the location to its original standard or preserving Central Park. It is unnecessary to pick between these two options. There is a way for these narratives to coexist. Copeland believes that educational spaces must be created to show New Yorkers that

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/pr2020/lpc-launches-seneca-village-unearthed-an-online-exhibit-and-collection-of-artifacts.page>.

³⁴ PRNewswire, "Say Their Names Memorial Exhibition Honoring Those Lost to Racial Injustice Debuts in Historic Seneca Village Site in Central Park September 2022," PRNewswire, last modified September 6, 2022, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/say-their-names-memorial-exhibition-honoring-those-lost-to-racial-injustice-debuts-in-historic-seneca-village-site-in-central-park-september-2022-301618063.html>.

³⁵ Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/afrofuturist-period-room>.

they can enjoy spending time in Central Park while still acknowledging the complex history of how the park came to be. She hopes that the Central Park Conservancy or the Parks Department formalize an institution like the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History where a handful of people can dedicate themselves to keeping the memory alive so that we can continue to pass the stories on.

Considering these challenges, and thinking about physical commemoration, Cynthia Copeland has an unconventional suggestion:

We understand that the beauty of the park is its natural beauty, the naturalness of it all...So in collecting the dirt and the soils and trying to have that analyzed, perhaps seeing what kind of flora and fauna were there at that time...Then it would be in the spirit of the park. We don't want just the typical traditional plaque or statue. That doesn't work for us. But something that would be really sort of a contemplative space where you could sit and meditate and kind of sit and breathe and smell and feel the ghosts of the people of Seneca Village. We think that could be a form of historic preservation and the best way to work within the park itself, which is already a landmark.³⁶

She is clear that a “typical traditional plaque or statue” is not the right way to memorialize Seneca Village. Copeland believes that the best way to remember Seneca Village is to create a space in which the “natural beauty” of Central Park can be appreciated but the story of Seneca Village can be placed with it. A “contemplative space where you can sit and meditate...and breath and smell” and immerse yourself in the 19th-century “flora and fauna,” just as the inhabitants of Seneca Village would have done. She proposes a completely new way of thinking about preservation and landmarks, and certainly not something that has been done before. But, to Copeland and to the other archaeologists and historians on the project, a space like this would be the best way to honor what Seneca Villagers would want. Which, at the end of the day, is the question we should be asking when planning all our historic landmarks: how would this individual—or this community—want to be remembered? And, if we can think of an answer, we must make sure we can place it in the current landscape, so that

³⁶ Copeland, “Historian Cynthia,” interview, New York Preservation Archive Project.

we are able to partner the historic with the modern and create a space where visitors can feel a tangible connection to history. Hopefully, after Copeland and her team are done, no one will walk through Central Park and say, like they did when they visited the initial N-YHS exhibit, “Wait a second, I’m a New Yorker. I’m supposed to know all this stuff. How come I didn’t know it?”³⁷

³⁷ Copeland, “Historian Cynthia,” interview, New York Preservation Archive Project.