

## ***The Unveiling*** **Our Little known History**



### **Seneca Village and New York City's Central Park's Dark History**

Most visitors to New York City make sure to spend time in beautiful Central Park. Over 42 million come each year to stroll the pathways, picnic in the grassy meadows, row boats on the lake, listen to concerts, and escape the hustle bustle of the city. The view from above--of a large rectangular green space with buildings pushing right up against its edges--suggests that visionaries once claimed and created this natural Eden before development could encroach.

Not quite. Before the park was built, a thriving community of free Black people lived there. They were removed to make way for it.

Many of us are surprised to learn that New York City in the late 18th century was an epicenter of the slave trade, holding more Africans in chains than any other city in the country, with the possible exception of Charleston, S.C. Many of New York's most successful businesses were heavily invested in slavery--from the cotton exchange to the profitable insurance industry that wrote policies on African bodies on slave ships. Because of the wealth it gained from slavery, New York was one of the last Northern states to abolish it.

Afterward, in New York City, African-Americans were typically confined to live in attics and basements along the overcrowded streets of Lower Manhattan. The city posed many other threats to these free Black people as well, including horrific racial violence as they tried to enter the workforce. There were numerous riots in which angry whites attacked, fearing African Americans would take jobs and gain political power.

**Upper Manhattan** though, was sparsely populated countryside. Land was inexpensive to buy. When it was plotted into lots, some landowners were willing to sell to Blacks (which was very uncommon.) So a few Black people bought there, attracting

others--until Seneca Village, as the town came to be called, had a population of over 300. The attractions were many: it was a refuge from the smog and squalor as well as racial terrorism of the city. And very importantly--Black men who owned at least \$250 worth of land were given THE RIGHT TO VOTE. (\*\*White men did not have a \$ amount requirement for their right to vote.)

Thus, Seneca Village became a stable, thriving middle-class community consisting of dozens of homes, 3 churches, a school, and cemeteries. It was a symbol of Black prosperity and also, peaceful integration--as some Irish immigrants also bought homes in the village, worshipped in its churches, and even intermarried in a few cases.

Unfortunately, the village stood where the city decided to build a large municipal park.

To push through their agenda, city leaders first trivialized and condemned the village with a smear campaign. They referred to it as a mere "shantytown," "squatter's village," and, in *The New York Times*, as "N---- Village." There was no real pushback from the white population. Black villagers resisted and appealed, but in 1857, the city used "eminent domain" to evict them and forcibly take the land. They gave landowners some compensation (not nearly what villagers considered it worth). Renters were simply turned out. Such displacement would have been difficult for white people,

but for the Black residents who had few other options, it was most likely devastating.

Still, the village was razed and forgotten. The beautiful, iconic park was built.

Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmstead has been remembered as wanting to create the park because he'd seen wealthy friends enjoy the beauty of their own grounds and gardens, and he hoped the park would provide access to nature's balm for all New Yorkers. But the city's elite immediately began parading through the park themselves and placing restrictions on the lower classes who wished to enter. We get the sense now that ALL New Yorkers did not include all--and certainly not those in Seneca Village whose homes, businesses, and churches were destroyed to create it.

To learn more, watch this short documentary created by VOX.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdsWYOZ8iqM>