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A Village Dies, A Park Is Born

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

IN today's world, it is hard to imagine even a progress-minded city administration evicting a well-established minority community after arbitrarily paying its residents for their possessions. But that's how Central Park was made, with most newspapers cheering the removal of "the insects."

All that was left behind were cemeteries, and these, too, were soon so forgotten that nobody knows whether the bodies were ever removed. Making a great park, like making an omelet, involves a few broken shells.

The biggest shell was called Seneca Village, which in the 19th century was one of the principal black settlements in New York City. At the time of its destruction in 1855, it had 264 residents, three churches, two schools and three cemeteries. Just a few blocks from where Seneca Village stood, the New-York Historical Society opened an exhibition this week of what is known about the settlement.

"Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village" is an understated but piercingly emotional show. You hear voices repeating long-ago words suggesting that the park was being built mainly to benefit real estate tycoons. You stand in a church sanctuary and ponder the names of the 589 people who records show lived in Seneca Village. Blue ribbons on a wall are decorated with the 45 names of those known to be buried in the cemeteries. Newspaper accounts of the day praise the police violence in removing residents. Finally, and maybe for a long time, you stand in the shadow of large ghostlike faceless human forms and ponder why you know so little about what you have seen.

Then, you think: Wait a minute. Central Park, the nation's first great municipal park, is the supreme achievement of New York City. It is where New Yorkers go to walk, to touch grass, to play. It is where they go to breathe. Without Central Park, life in the nation's biggest city would be incalculably poorer, in some respects almost unlivable, particularly for the poor who cannot easily journey elsewhere.

But all these thoughts are value judgments, and it is possible to come to all kinds of different conclusions, many of them at the same time. Accordingly, the society's show deals in facts, using property, tax, voting, church and other records in an attempt to weave a sensible tapestry. At the end, envelopes are placed on a table, each labeled with the names of a family known to have lived in Seneca Village. They contain all that is known about each, and visitors are asked to add anything they know.

But the show indisputably amounts to a full-barreled attack on the ideology long reflected in histories of Central Park, that it was a "wasteland" inhabited by "squatters" living in "shanties." This notion facilitated the eviction of the 1,600 residents displaced from the park site, including those who lived in Seneca Village, which was situated on the park's west side, from the Great Lawn to Central Park West, between 82d and 88th Streets.

Seneca Village began in 1825 as a community of blacks. By the time it was razed in 1855, 30 percent of its 264 residents were Irish-American. This was no ragtag encampment; records show most residents paid taxes. Most who were living there in 1840 were still there 15 years later. This picture of Seneca Village was revealed in "The Park and the People," a history of Central Park written by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar in 1992 and published by Henry Holt. Since then, the work has been expanded by the Historical Society, working with archeologists and school groups.

The first room in the exhibition is painted bright red and has an impressive wooden table. It is meant to reflect the boardrooms and salons of rich and powerful decision makers. On the wall are pictures of men who advocated the park, including The New York Post's publisher, William Cullen Bryant, and the less-well-known Robert Bowne Minturne, a merchant who returned from a grand tour of Europe eager to replicate the impressive parks there. Bryant himself gave him credit for the idea.

A passage from The Commercial Advertiser gives a flavor of the prevailing sentiment: "Give us a park, be it central, or sidelong, here, there, anywhere . . . a real park, a large park."

But the sentiment was far from unanimous. Hal Guernsey, a social reformer, expresses the dissenting view in a modern-day recording of his words that can be activated by manipulating a map of the original park proposal. He asked, "Will anyone pretend the park is not a scheme to enhance the value of uptown land, and create a splendid center for fashionable life, without regard to, and even in dereliction of, the happiness of the multitude upon whose hearts and hands the expenses will fall?"

Perhaps the most arresting images in the room are the most modest. Drawings of the land that was to become the park contain structures that clearly appear to be houses.

Confronting the Names

The exhibition leads next into a larger room. There is no street sign, because there were no streets then. But where you are is on the village's main street, West 85th Street in today's grid. On one side is African Union Church, which had Colored School No. 3 in the basement. By cross-referencing records, the name of the schoolteacher is even provided, Catherine A. Thompson.

"What we can't find out is what exactly the kids were being taught," said Cynthia Copeland, co-curator of the show with Grady Turner. "Who were they, and what were they learning?"

There are no photographs of Seneca Village: photography was just getting started; only places thought to be like the village are depicted.

You then enter All Angels' Church, which is suggested by nothing but a skeletal structure, painted a soothing blue. Beginning with the first letters of a name at the top of the triangular church wall, you read down a list of all the names of the 589 people known to have lived in Seneca Village over a 30-year period. There is nothing else in the church.

The ribbons on another wall carry the names of people known to have been buried in the cemeteries of All Angels' Church and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Seneca Village. Many burials in 1849 can be attributed to a cholera epidemic that year. There is no record that these cemeteries were relocated when Central Park was built. In fact, written explanations say that several graves were inadvertently uncovered in the decades following the opening of the park.



Jack Manning/The New York Times
Silver from All Angels' Church, one of three churches in Seneca Village.

As elsewhere in the exhibition, curators are as careful to say what they don't know as what they do know. For instance, they say A.M.E. Zion's burial records before 1839 were lost in a fire. There are no records to indicate whether the third church, African Union Church, had a cemetery.

Generations Entwined

In another area of the exhibition, visitors are asked to imagine they are in the house of James and Nancy Moore. Then using ropes with names of 30 family members, visitors can literally tie together the generations. First come their two daughters, Angelina and Charlotte. Then, their husbands, Peter Riddles and William Godfrey Wilson. The Wilson family, it turns out, stayed close to home. James and Nancy's grandson Charles was baptized in his home at 85th Street and Eighth Avenue on April 28, 1868.

But this exercise ultimately suggests the overall frustration one cannot escape: to date, no living descendants of Seneca Villagers have been found.

Then comes the harshest part of the exhibition. Newspaper articles, blown up and posted, describe the removal of the villagers. Following the surveying of 34,000 lots in the park, the villagers were evicted in 1855, some violently.

One article expresses the hope that the removal of the inhabitants "will be effected with as much gentleness as possible" while at the same time describing them as less than human. On another wall are photocopies of protests sent to the New York State Supreme Court about the amount residents were paid. One asks for \$3,500, rather than the \$2,335 for which his property is assessed.

Tangible History

The last area of the exhibition has an entire wall depicting an imaginary cross-section of soil. There are fragments of dishes and other objects of daily life. This is the archeological dig that has never happened in Seneca Village. On the other side of the room are the large envelopes with each of the families' names.

If the weather is nice, you might want to cross Central Park West when you leave the society. You can walk north eight blocks and enter Central Park at 85th Street. You will see a playground with benches on your right. At the ginkgo tree, cross the road and go up the hill. Spector Playground is on your left. Walk farther and look down. You can see what appears to be a stone outcropping. It appears to be the corner of a foundation.

This is believed to be what is left of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Ms. Copeland, the curator, said she felt a sense of eeriness whenever she looked at this. "History changes," she said. "It transcends itself through time's passage and different interpretations."