Discover Seneca Village

Between 1825 and 1857, before the city built Central Park, this area was the location of Seneca Village—a community composed predominantly of African Americans, many of whom owned property. This was the most densely settled section of the acreage slated for Central Park; by 1855 the community numbered approximately 225 and had 52 homes and three churches.

Explore the history, community, and landscape of Seneca Village in a series of interpretative signs. Begin at the information kiosk △, then visit the sixteen signs throughout the area, in the order suggested. Download or photograph a map of the signs here or pick up a brochure at one of our visitor centers.

To learn more about Seneca Village, visit: centralparknyc.org/senecavillage

Map Key

1. AME Zion Church
2. African Union Church
3. The Wilson House
4. All Angels’ Church
5. Irish Americans
6. Summit Rock
7. Lanes, Lots, and Streets
8. Housing
9. Tanner’s Spring
10. Receiving Reservoir
11. Livelihoods
12. Geology
13. Reservoir Keepers
14. Downtown Connections
15. Andrew Williams
16. Gardens

△ Introduction

■ Welcome Information

Photographs: Courtesy of All Angels’ Church.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information, visit centralparknyc.org/senecavillage
Seneca Village Community

This kiosk marks the center of Seneca Village, a predominantly African-American community that existed from 1822-1857. The village originated when African Americans began buying property between 62nd and 68th Streets and Seventh and Eighth Avenues. Among the earliest purchasers were prominent African-American church leaders, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, who easily acquired land for a burial ground. Members of the church purchased additional property and began to build houses. More African Americans joined the community in the 1850s, and in the following decade Irish immigrants began to settle in the village. In the 1850s, the city used eminent domain to acquire the land as part of Central Park; by 1857, residents were required to leave and all structures were razed.

Researchers believe that African Americans may have begun to settle in the area to create an autonomous community far from downtown. Although New York State abolished slavery in 1827, African Americans still faced discrimination and threats of violence, among other grave obstacles to freedom and citizenship. Some established their own institutions – schools, churches, newspapers, and aid organizations – as well as separate neighborhoods where they could build community. In a sparsely-settled area, about three miles from the developed part of Manhattan, Seneca Village was a refugee from both the racist climate and the overcrowded and unhealthy conditions of the rapidly growing city.

Seneca Village was the most densely settled part of the 776 acres slated for Central Park, land that was home to approximately 1600 people. By 1855, roughly 225 individuals lived in Seneca Village, which consisted of fifty-two houses, three churches, at least one school, and several burial grounds. Roughly two-thirds of Seneca Village residents were African-American, about half of whom owned their homes.

The Significance of Seneca Village

The high rate of property ownership in Seneca Village made it an exceptional community for 19th-century New York. For African Americans, buying property was not only a source of economic security, it was also a path to suffrage. By 1855, New York State freed African-Americans to own property worth at least $250 worth of property in order to vote. While European-American men were eligible to vote without having to own property, some African Americans owned property in Seneca Village but did not actually live there, instead renting out their houses for the rent.

That many residents opened their homes and lived in the village for a long time defines the typical 19th-century departure of a community as a shortterm settlement inhabited by a diverse group of people. The village’s existence has given the neighborhood a special character and identity, and it has become an important part of the history of New York City. In contemporary areas of African-American and African-Indian neighborhoods.

Seneca Village was far from a slum – while some residents were poor and lived in buildings described as shanties, most lived in two-story homes. Also in defiance of stereotypes, most African-American residents were gainfully employed, typically as skilled laborers or service workers. Among the occupations listed in the census records are cook, washer, tailor, barber, grocer, jeweler, and tailor. Records also indicate that many children living in the village attended school, suggesting that families prioritized education. All of these factors led researchers to understand Seneca Village as a predominantly middle-class community, one that was more stable and prosperous than other African-American enclaves in the city at the time.

Seneca Village’s churches were popular meeting places for state politicians, including not only religious but also political and social life for African Americans. African Union Church (built around 1836) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (built in 1842) were two notable locations for church-related activities downtown. All Angels Church (built in 1840) was established as a mission by St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, a congregation on the Upper West Side, and was attended by both African-Americans and African Americans.

What happened to Seneca Village?

When the city began planning for Central Park in 1853 and land through eminent domain – the right of governments to take private land for public use. Those who owned property were compensated for their role, and residents were moved to a new location. A long process that ended in the fall of 1857. The construction of Central Park began in 1858 with the clearing of the land, including the demolition of buildings and removal of those interested in the burial grounds. Records show that some residents were compensated for their homes, but most were not. Many structures were razed, and the remains of the village were lost to the city.

Timeline

1815 Seneca Village established
1817 Southern Presbyterian Church established on 6th Avenue
1821 Seneca Village Cemetery organized
1824 John and Elizabeth Whitehead purchased the 66 block
1825 African American purchased land from the Whitesides
1826 African American purchased land from the Whitesides
1827 African American purchased land from the Whitesides
1830 6th Avenue and 8th Avenue area was razed for development
1833 St. Michael’s Episcopal Church built
1836 African-American newspaper established
1839 African-American newspaper established
1840 First record of Irish immigration to the area
1842 Central Park (now known as Central Park) opened
1845 Public School
1849 St. Michael’s Episcopal Church
1853 Seneca Village demolished
1857 Building restoration
1861 The Civil War begins

Some residents resisted the city’s expansion of land through eminent domain, which was seen as an act of aggression. In response, Seneca Village residents and African Americans greeted them with protests and demonstrations. The city was given a $12,000 donation in 1857 to build a new Central Park.

Seneca Village was torn down by the city in 1858, but its memory lives on through the Seneca Village Community Center, which opened in 1986. The center offers cultural programs, community events, and services to residents of Central Park. The Seneca Village Community Center is located at 114th Street and Central Park West in Manhattan.
Seneca Village Landscape

Historical accounts portrayed those living in Seneca Village and the entire area slated for Central Park in derogatory terms. They also disparaged the landscape, emphasizing its rocky, swampy, and diseased. Park promoters presented the site as a wasteeland to justify taking so much land for a recreational purpose, and to emphasize the creation of the park as an extraordinary transformation. Closer study reveals that sections of the landscape were indeed swampy and rocky, but its acreage also contained small gardens, woodlands, and hills that some characterized as beautiful and productive.

Uncovering the history of Seneca Village has involved a closer examination of the landscape and its natural and built features. Researchers have tried to imagine how residents lived on the land and also discern what still remains of the mid-19th-century pre-park landscape. This process has illuminated Seneca Village as a place shaped by the actions and agency of residents as well as by the forces of urban growth and change.

Seneca Village and Central Park

The dramatic urban growth that impacted Seneca Village also spurred the city to create Central Park. City leaders conceived of a large park to counteract the detrimental effects of urban life—overcrowding, disastrous impacts on public health, and lack of open space for recreation. Some park supporters and businessman also hoped that a park in the sparsely settled section of Manhattan would stimulate real estate development in the surrounding area.

The construction of Central Park seemingly erased all traces of Seneca Village—residents were forced to move, houses were leveled, and the site was graded and landscaped. Even so, the site did not experience the total refurbishment that produced iconic landscapes such as the Mall or Sheep Meadow. The presence of the reservoir and theilly and rocky topography made such radical transformation too challenging. The original design for the site consisted largely of paths and mounds and the construction of a new reservoir for the needs of the pre-existing one. In the 1830s, the Parks Department added the two playgrounds north and southeast of the sign and filled the original reservoir to create the Small Lake.

Natural Features

Although it appears that all traces of Seneca Village were lost when the city built Central Park, some natural features do remain. Most prominent are the numerous rock outcrops throughout the site. The contours of the geology of the Seneca Village area likely contributed to park designers Friedrich Law Hildreth and Calvert Vaux’s decision to preserve some of the site’s natural character and existing natural features. These features also contributed to the designers’ ideal of scenic beauty and the park’s purpose as an escape from the city. The Seneca Village site contains some of the area’s most impressive landforms including a massive outcrop now known as Summit Rock, the highest point in the park. The rocks, virtually impossible for park builders to remove, is a defining feature of the area and would have been quite prominent in the landscape of Seneca Village. Nearby is a natural spring, called Tanner’s Spring, believed to have been a principal water source for the village.
Searching for Seneca Village

Since the early 1990s, historians and archaeologists have been working to uncover and reveal the story of Seneca Village. The historians Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar were the first to study Seneca Village in detail and included it in their book The Park and the People: A History of Central Park (1996). Soon after, in 1997, the New York Historical Society organized an exhibit curated by Grady Turner and Cynthia Copeland, Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village, which further expanded on this history for the public.

These projects inspired a group of archaeologists and historians to wonder if evidence of Seneca Village still existed in Central Park. Led by Diana Wall and Nan Rothschild, they formed a group called the Seneca Village Project, now called the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History (IESVH). After years of planning, research, and preliminary testing, they conducted an excavation in residential areas of the village in the summer of 2011 and uncovered significant remnants. In 2016, the Central Park Conservancy conducted additional research and archaeological testing while planning for reconstruction projects in the two playgrounds in the village area. This work added to the body of knowledge about Seneca Village, specifically its relationship to the history and landscape of Central Park. The IESVH also advocated for the commemoration of Seneca Village and worked with the Parks Department, Conservancy, and Community Board 10 in Harlem to erect the nearby sign that has marked the site since 2001.

We know more about Seneca Village now than ever before, but there is more to learn. Research is ongoing to uncover the history of this exceptional community.

Historical Records

Our understanding of Seneca Village is based on various historical records. When the city began planning Central Park, it commissioned maps to document who owned and inhabited the land slated for the park, with details about the type of house and other structures. Called the "condemnation maps," they were created in 1859 and used to determine who owned how much land and how much to pay for each property. In the same year, New York State conducted a census, which can be compared with the maps to better understand who lived in the various houses in the village. The census includes information about race, profession, age, place of birth, and relationships among household members.

There is also evidence of Seneca Village in federal censuses, church records, tax records, municipal death records, newspaper articles, and documents related to the creation of Central Park. No photographs of the village have been found.

Archaeology

Archaeological excavations offer new insight into Seneca Village and provide a tangible connection to its residents. The excavations of 2011 involved eight weeks of work in the park. During which archaeologists and students collected several thousand artifacts and other cultural materials such as bones and shell, many of which reflect the residents' daily lives, diet, clothing, and tools. The remains include many items such as clothing, shoes, and other items used by the villagers. Analyses of these materials support the understanding that Seneca Village was a community of poor squatters, which was once home to a relatively stable and underserved residential community.

Central Park is a protected historic landscape; it is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and designated as a New York State Landmark. All work in the area is planned with consideration of the site's exceptional history and its potential for additional archaeological research.

The Name “Seneca Village”

The exact origin of the name “Seneca Village” is unknown, but it was recorded by Thomas McClure Peters, an assistant priest and later rector of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, who started a mission to serve the poor in the community, he later established All Angels Church. In a letter documenting the history of the church, Peters refers to the name “Seneca Village” to describe “a respectable settlement of low whites and colored people” in the “west end” that became Central Park, a depiction that perhaps served to justify the church’s missionary work. Considering the site’s derogatory characterization, one theory is that the name refers to the Native American Seneca people and was intended as a slur.

If the name “Seneca Village” originated in the African-American community, it could have been chosen for the following reasons:

- The theory that the name was intended to refer to a Seneca Nation village in upstate New York and the allusion to Seneca to denote the Seneca Nation.
- Another theory is that the name was lifted from the Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca because some African-American activists were known to have been inspired by his anti-slavery work.

Some 19th-century sources refer to the community as a part of Yorkville, the village that developed in the early 19th century further east and expanded in the 1820s following the construction of the New York and Harlem Railroad. The present alignment to Seneca Village was identified as located in Yorkville.
Seneca Village Community AME Zion Church

Near this sign was the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion), built in 1853. It was one of three churches in the center of Seneca Village. Although AME Zion was the last church to construct a building in the village, it had a much longer affiliation with the community. The church was one of the earliest purchasers of land here, initially for a burial ground.

The AME Zion’s involvement in Seneca Village demonstrates how this remote settlement had highly significant connections to the African-American community living downtown. AME Zion was New York City’s first African-American church, founded in 1796 by members of the John Street Methodist Church who wanted to form an independent congregation. Initially, they met in a rented hall until 1800, when they established their first “mother” church on Leonard Street. The congregation grew rapidly and established satellite churches not only in Seneca Village but also in other eastern cities and towns. In the early 20th century, the mother church moved uptown to Harlem, where it still holds services today.

The first AME Zion Church, shown on this map from 1853, was located at Church Street and Leonard Street in the city’s Fifth Ward (present-day Tribeca), near where the city’s African-American population was concentrated.

By the time AME Zion constructed their church in Seneca Village, the congregation had grown considerably. They had rebuilt their original church and constructed two other churches in Manhattan, including one in Harlem, and numerous others along the east coast. Around 1864, the mother church had an annex and second building on Church Street and was using the large building shown here, located in what is now the West Village.

This article from 1853 in the New York Daily Tribune announces the laying of the cornerstone for the AME Zion Church in Seneca Village. The coverage of this event in a major newspaper reflected the prominence of this religious institution in the African-American community and in the city.
Seneca Village Community African Union Church

Near this sign stood the first church in Seneca Village, African Union, a Methodist church built around 1840. The original congregation formed in and around Wilmington, Delaware, and its leaders built their first church in Manhattan around 1836, on 15th Street near Sixth Avenue. Their second church, in Seneca Village, appears to have been a satellite location built to serve the growing African-American population there. The small churchyard was used as a burial ground. William Matthews, a man from Delaware who lived in Seneca Village, worked as the sexton, looking after the church and churchyard.

Next to the church was a small primary school, Colored School No. 3. Based on census records, a comparatively high percentage of African-American families in Seneca Village sent their children to school. Although little is known about this church and school, they represent the important role of African-American institutions in establishing Seneca Village as an autonomous community.

The school in Seneca Village was a city school with roots in the abolitionist movement. This engraving depicts the African Free School No. 2 located on Mulberry Street, one of several schools erected beginning in the late 1700s by the New York Manumission Society. This anti-slavery organization led by influential white New Yorkers provided education to the children of slaves and free African Americans. In the 1830s, these schools became part of the city’s public school system.

This map shows the African Union Church and Colored School No.3 as small buildings located on an irregularly-shaped lot. They are highly significant as the first institutions in Seneca Village.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information visit centralparknyc.org/seneacommunity.

Maps: Dorothy A. Sage, Central Park Conservancy, N.Y.C., 1925. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.
Seneca Village
The Wilson House

Near this sign and adjacent to All Angels’ Church was the home of the Wilsons, an African-American family consisting of William Wilson, his wife, Charlotte, and their eight children. Wilson worked as a porter and was also a sexton for the church, responsible for maintaining the building and yard. Archaeological investigations conducted at the site of the Wilson house in 2011 uncovered numerous artifacts, remnants of both domestic objects and architectural features. These artifacts allow researchers to imagine the lives of the Wilsons and contribute to the understanding of Seneca Village as a largely middle-class community.

A large number of artifacts were discovered within the buried ruins of the Wilson house in part because of how it was demolished. Those clearing the land for the park removed all the above-ground structures, often recycling the wood. In the process, abandoned or broken objects and object fragments were buried underground.

Photograph: Courtesy of The Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History.

In 2011, archaeologists conducted excavations on the site of the Wilson house, a three-story building whose approximate footprint, 21 x 30 feet, is shown here outlined with bricks.

Some of the artifacts discovered during excavation of the Wilson house suggest that the family was able to purchase more than the bare necessities and was concerned with appearances. Clockwise from top: fragment of the stem of a goblet, stoneware jar lid, bone morter/muller handle, fragment of Chinese porcelain.

Scan QR code to locate other signs.
For more information visit: centralparknyc.org/seneacottage
Seneca Village Community All Angels’ Church

Those aware of Seneca Village have speculated as to whether the stones visible in the lawn just beyond this sign are the remains of a building foundation from the village. In fact, they are remnants of a sandbag that was installed in the 1930s. Coincidentally, they mark the approximate location of All Angels’ Church, one of the three churches in the heart of Seneca Village.

Unlike the other Seneca Village churches, which were branches of African-American churches located in downtown Manhattan, All Angels’ was created as a result of missionary efforts by a local church, St. Michael’s, an Episcopal church located at Amsterdam Avenue and 99th Street, first established a Sunday School in the area in 1833 and in 1849 built the church to serve the community. Both African Americans and European immigrants attended services and were baptized, married, and buried by the church.

All Angels’ recorded all baptisms, marriages, and burials. These baptisms of children indicated an “Indiam” took place in 1830. Frederick Douglas, too, lived in Seneca Village; we do not know if the Thompson children, Joshua, lived in the village.

When the city built Central Park, church leaders moved the building from Seneca Village to 16th Avenue between 85th and 86th Streets. Pictured here is All Angels’ Church in its second location. This is the only known photograph of a building that existed in Seneca Village.

All Angels’ Church was the largest of the three churches in Seneca Village. Unlike the other buildings in the village that were aligned with the street grid, this church was oriented closer to the east-west, perhaps for religious reasons or because its site was constrained by the underlying bedrock.

Irish-American families were scattered throughout Seneca Village, accounting for roughly one third of the population during the 1850s. In the vicinity of this sign, the western side of the village, was a cluster of at least three Irish-American households headed by John Gallagher, Mike Barlow, and Jane Allen. Gallagher and his family occupied a one-and-a-half-story frame house with a stable nearby, while Mike Barlow and his wife lived in a much smaller shanty. Jane Allen and her daughter are thought to have lived in another shanty owned by Mike Riely.

Irish immigrants began to settle in Seneca Village beginning in the 1840s. They most likely came to the United States as part of a wave of immigration that began in the 1820s and peaked during the late 1840s in response to the Irish Potato Famine. Many rural Irish families, fleeing desperate living conditions in their homeland, poured into the major port cities of the eastern United States. Over a million refugees left Ireland for North America during this period, with approximately three-quarters of them entering through New York City. Irish immigrants lived in other parts of the future park site, including a smaller settlement further south between 58th and 72nd Streets, which one newspaper called “Pigtown.”

Although Mike Riely’s name is on this map, researchers believe that Jane Allen actually lived in this shanty, perhaps coming from Reva. Allen, 46, lived with her 10-year-old daughter, Ann. Both came to the United States around 1850. Nothing is known about Reva. He does not appear in any of the census records and this absence is a reminder that the historical record is often confusing and unreliable.

Mike Barlow, a laborer, and his wife, Ann, occupied a shanty barely 170 square feet in plan, which was quite sized by today’s standards but comparable in size to other houses in Seneca Village. They came to the United States around 1847 and 1851, respectively. It is unclear if they owned or rented this house.

John Gallagher owned a more substantial house than some of the others in the immediate vicinity. He lived with his wife, Ann, and their young children, Edward and Edward. Ann’s father, Patrick Donohue, lived with the family. John made his living as a shoemaker, perhaps working from his home and serving his neighbors and passers-by on Eighth Avenue.

Census records reveal that John Gallagher was a naturalized citizen and suggest that his family were the first Irish immigrants to settle in Seneca Village. John and his wife, Ann, emigrated to the United States prior to 1840 and their children were born in New York.


Scan the QR code to locate other signs.
For more information visit centralparknyc.org/sencavillage

24x18IrishAmericans-86204.pdf
Seneca Village Landscape Summit Rock

At 142 feet above sea level, this hill is the highest elevation in Central Park and was a prominent feature of the Seneca Village landscape. The hill, now called Summit Rock, is actually a massive bedrock outcrop. Just below, on Central Park West, you can see a cross-section of this enormous rock, which was blasted to create the avenue. The rough and steep terrain made it a difficult place to build, and maps show that no one lived here.

This location offered extensive views in all directions. From the top, village residents could take in the surrounding landscape: to the north and east was their community, and to the west was the Hudson River and the hills of New Jersey beyond. The rock provided a sense of prospect: it was a place to take in the village as a whole and perhaps also spot approaching visitors.

A survey of the park site from 1856 depicts the rock as a prominent feature in the landscape with Seneca Village sprawling below to the north and east.

Central Park’s designers preserved the rock and its perspective on the surrounding landscape. They designed a scenic overlook at the top, with a concourse as a resting place for carriages.

Map: Robert Hare, Map of the lands included in the Central Park, 1857. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.
Map: Robert Hare, Map of the Central Park, 1857. Department of Parks, Museum of the City of New York.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs.
For more information visit centralparknyc.org/senecavillage
Seneca Village Landscape Lanes, Lots, and Streets

The path on which you are standing roughly follows part of the main street through Seneca Village. A map from circa 1838 identifies it as “Spring Street” because it led to a natural spring just south of here, likely the primary water source for the village. A later map, from 1856, calls the same street “Old Lane,” possibly to distinguish it from the grid of new streets and avenues that the city was still constructing based on the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811.

Although the street grid was represented on maps of Seneca Village, it had not been fully implemented on the ground this far north. By 1856, only 66th Street and Eighth Avenue were open. The street grid did impact the layout and development of the settlement, determining uniform building lots and property lines, which guided the location of buildings.

This map created around 1830 shows the street grid laid out over the existing landscape of farms in the area that would become Seneca Village. To mark the future streets, surveyors placed a stone marker or “monument” at the southwest corner of each block, where a corner coincided with exposed bedrock, they drilled a hole and set an iron bolt instead.

This circa 1830 map shows how the grid plan impacted the development of Seneca Village. Although most of the streets were not yet built, they seem to have been laid out systematically. Silvestre Lane and Spring Street stand out as remnants of older settlement patterns.

In 2014, archaeologists documented the surveying survey marker in Central Park, installed to mark the future intersection of 103rd Street and 5th Avenue. These markers protruded from the ground about one foot and were inscribed with the relevant street and avenue numbers on two sides. They were very likely a presence in the Seneca Village landscape, a sign of potential urban development and change.

Photographs: Courtesy of Historic Resources.
Map credit: John Rendel, Farm Map, 1816-1820. Courtesy of Manhattan Borough President’s Office.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information visit centralparks.org/senecavillage
Seneca Village Community Housing

In 1855, Seneca Village was comprised of 52 dwellings concentrated in the area between 52nd and 56th Streets. On a lot near this sign stood two homes—a two-story house and a shanty—illustrating the diversity of housing types in the village.

While many contemporary accounts depicted Seneca Village as a shantytown comprised of small and poorly constructed buildings, inhabited by squatters, it had a range of building types and residents either rented or owned their homes. Most residents lived not in shanties, but in one-, two- or three-story wooden houses. Archaeological excavations revealed that at least some of those houses had substantial stone foundations and metal roofing, indicating that they were well-built.

Many of the dwellings were quite small by today’s standards and residents lived in crowded conditions—sometimes two families in one house. But they had more space than had they lived downtown, as well as access to outdoor space. Many properties had sheds, and several had stables and/or barns.

Although this photograph does not depict a house in Seneca Village, but one further south, it does give us a sense of what a two-story house in the village may have looked like. This house appears to have an attached shed, a deep-pitched dormer, and a parapet window.

The two African-American families living on this plot were close neighbors, both renting from Lucy Cella Waddill. Salmon Hackett, a laborer, lived in the two-story house with his wife and five children. Although it was much smaller, the shanty also had seven residents: John White, a sailor, and his wife and five children.

This photograph depicts a cluster of buildings, considered shanties, adjacent to Central Park in the 1850s. These were simple wood structures, typically with one room and built without cellars or fireplaces. Ten Seneca Village families lived in buildings comparable to these.
Seneca Village Landscape Tanner’s Spring

Through these trees in a small clearing is a pool of water fed by a natural spring. This was likely a water source for Seneca Village. Access to fresh water would have been essential to the health and prosperity of the community. The city’s receiving reservoir, completed in 1842, stood approximately 700 feet away from this spring but did not supply water for local residents. Water from the reservoir was piped south to the distributing reservoir at 42nd Street, and from there piped into homes, businesses, and other facilities.

This spring is one of several still preserved in Central Park. During the late 19th century, some of the park’s remaining natural springs became attractions because they offered visitors a taste of fresh water in the midst of a rapidly growing metropolis. This spring was named for Dr. Henry S. Tanner, who became famous during the 1880s by fasting for 40 days, drinking only water from springs in Central Park.

The location of Tanner’s Spring is identified on this map from 1885. It shows the original streets and watercourses on Manhattan Island, overlaid by the street grid and park. The spring fed into a drainage system that ultimately connected all the way to the East River.

Archaeological investigations in 2011 uncovered evidence of many vessels, including some that were used to transport, save, and store water. This image shows the handle of a pitcher and was discovered during the excavation of the house of Seneca Village resident William Wilson. It was one of several fragments of pitchers and jugs found that were used for serving liquids and for personal washing.


Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information visit centralparknyc.org/senecavillage

24x18TannersSpring-86204.pdf
Seneca Village Landscape Receiving Reservoir

These stone blocks protruding from the ground beyond this sign are remnants of the western wall of the receiving reservoir, a critical component of the original Croton Aqueduct water supply system. Largely completed in 1842, the aqueduct delivered fresh water from Westchester County to the rapidly growing city. Prior to its construction, city residents drew water from wells or received deliveries from private companies. Contamination of the water supply, prior to the building of the aqueduct, caused many devastating disease outbreaks in the early 19th century.

The reservoir was an example of how urban growth disrupted the community of Seneca Village, despite its remote location. The construction involved trenching and installing pipes along 89th Street and then building the 180-million-gallon stone holding tank, which stretched from 79th Street to 86th Street. Its fortress-like walls, 30 feet high in some places, formed a barrier along the east side of the village.

This illustration depicts the receiving reservoir shortly after its completion and shows how it became a local attraction. While most of the system was underground, this and other structures served as prominent expressions of an unprecedented scale of engineering and public infrastructure. The houses of Seneca Village would have been in the foreground.

This illustration shows two reservoirs in Central Park, the original receiving reservoir and the second reservoir, constructed in the 1880s on a ravine site to the north. Engineers designed the latter reservoir with a curved outline to harmonize with the design of the park. In the 1930s, the city built the Great Lawn on the site of the original reservoir.


Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information visit centralparknyc.org/seneacville.
Seneca Village Community Livelihoods

In this area lived several African-American families whose individual occupations give us further insight into the lives of residents of Seneca Village, as well as the types of jobs available to them. Following emancipation, access to economic and political opportunities for African Americans remained limited, with most confined to working primarily unskilled and low-paying jobs. Men typically worked as laborers or in service jobs, while women worked as domestics. Census records show that most African-American residents of Seneca Village held these types of jobs. Yet, compared to African Americans living downtown, they seem to have been better off, and some researchers consider them middle class.

For African Americans, middle-class status was defined less by profession than it was for European Americans, who associated skilled, non-manual jobs with pettying ahead. In Seneca Village, the markers of middle-class status include the fact that almost half of the African-American population owned their homes. It was further defined by education, and census records also show that most African-American men were literate and that most children attended school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Wilson, 50</td>
<td>Houseman</td>
<td>A cooper, someone who makes and repairs barrels. He lived with his three children, the oldest, 18-year-old Elizabeth, was a domestic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ishmael Ables, 43</td>
<td>Kitchen Porter</td>
<td>A man for a church, someone who maintains a church and churchyard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Moore</td>
<td>Housemaid</td>
<td>Died in 1854, the Webber family rented their large house. George, 32, worked as porter. His 18-year-old companion, Melvina Hall, was a domestic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William and Matilda Phillips</td>
<td>Young couple, 29 and 19 respectively</td>
<td>Married shortly after leaving England, they rented a house from Elizabeth Harding. William worked as a laborer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doris (Delia) Wilson, 59</td>
<td>Owner of her home</td>
<td>The census lists her occupation as &quot;washing&quot; likely meaning that she did laundry for others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanny Garnett</td>
<td>Housemaid</td>
<td>A housemaid, she was a domestic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip Dunn, 33</td>
<td>Houseman</td>
<td>His Irish descent, lived in a house owned by William Passas, an African American who also lived in the village and worked as a grocer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The Silver family shared this house with another family called the Remmers. Charles Silver, the Haitian-born head of the household, worked as a cook. His son, Peter, 22, was a coachman, and his wife, Catherine, 25, was a domestic. John Remmersen was listed as "sold physician, Merchants" on the census, but it is unclear which church he worked in.

For more information visit centralparknyc.org/senecavillage
The geology of this area, still visible throughout this section of the park, was a daily part of the lives of Seneca Village residents. Descriptions of the village in the 1850s noted numerous outcrops of Manhattan schist – the island’s bedrock, formed around 500 million years ago – including the most massive outcrop in the area, now known as Summit Rock.

We know that this rock was used in the construction of some of the buildings of Seneca Village. Archaeological excavations in 2011 and 2016 uncovered foundations made of schist possibly quarried nearby. This same rock contributed to the city’s ascendance as a modern metropolis, providing the support for its skyscrapers.

The designers of Central Park preserved many of the existing outcrops, both because they were difficult to remove and because of their scenic beauty. The park is now one of the few places in Manhattan where you can still see the island’s ancient foundation.

This cross-section through the north end of Central Park shows how the underlying geology shapes the park’s topography. Greens, a generic term for the Manhattan schist, is overlain by sediment and rocks that were deposited by the movement of a glacier.

During the excavation of the house of Seneca Village resident William D. Wilson, archaeologists discovered a portion of the foundation wall, composed mostly of local schist, with some river stones and broken bricks, and held together with mortar.

Photograph: Courtesy of The Institute for the Preservation of Seneca Village History.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs. For more information visit centralparkny.org/seneacvilage.
Seneca Village Community Reservoir Keepers

In 1842, the city completed construction of one of its most consequential public-works projects, the Croton Aqueduct system, which supplied the city with fresh water from upstate New York. This system included a large reservoir adjacent to the community of Seneca Village. The north end of the reservoir was 86th Street, near this sign.

In addition to the physical presence of this massive structure, the reservoir impacted the community in other ways. Two men, John Beary and John Wallace, were employed by the city to take care of the reservoir and lived in Seneca Village with their families. They were part of a group of employees who lived adjacent to important pieces of aqueduct infrastructure in order to maintain it. Both Irish immigrants, Geary and Wallace were also part of the growing Irish-American community who, by 1855, made up approximately one-third of the population of Seneca Village.

Although we are uncertain where exactly reservoir keeper John Beary lived, we do know he had a large family. Census records show he lived with his wife, ten children, a cousin, and two boarders who were young children.

The gatehouse depicted in this illustration was originally located in this general vicinity near the northwest corner of the reservoir. The important component marked the place where the major inflow pipes entered the reservoir. These pipes were arranged along what would have been 66th Street, a distinctive terrace curve, labeled "Croton Aqueduct Dock" on the plan, the north side of the West 66th Street entrance still marks the presence of this infrastructure.
Seneca Village Community Downtown Connections

Near this sign were four plots owned by Albro Lyons, Peter Guignon, and Rebecca Marshall, Guignon’s wife. Related by marriage, the Lyons and the Guignon families were part of a small, tight-knit group of African Americans who prospered in New York City before the Civil War. Despite numerous obstacles, they became community leaders committed to racial uplift and made notable contributions to the cultural, economic, and political life of the city.

The Lyons and the Guignons did not actually live in Seneca Village. Many African Americans owned property in the village but lived downtown. Purchasing property in Seneca Village was an investment for the future. Many were also likely motivated to buy property as a path to suffrage. In 1821 New York State passed a law requiring that African-American men own property valued at $250 or more in order to vote. The link between Seneca Village and these families and other downtown residents illustrates how, despite the settlement’s geographical remoteness, it was still connected to the city’s larger African-American community.

Albro Lyons (1814-1860) and his wife Mary Joseph Marshall (1825-1908) are depicted here around 1860 in a pair of rare photographs of African Americans connected to Seneca Village. Albro, a noted abolitionist, operated a boarding house for African-American labor on Pearl Street in downtown Manhattan.

Peter Guignon (1795-1862) worked various jobs, including as a hairdresser. In 1860, he moved to Brooklyn, where he worked at a pharmacy. He was a member of the Phœnix Society, a literary society for African Americans that established a library and organized lectures and discussion groups.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs for more information visit centralparks.org/senecavillage

Map: Gotham A. Sego, Central Park Conservancy Maps. 1858. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.
Photograph (Lyons): Williamson Photograph Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.
Seneca Village Community
Andrew Williams

Near this sign stood the house of Andrew Williams and his family. Williams is an important figure in the history of Seneca Village — he was the first African American to purchase land in the area, in September of 1825.

Williams, who was a bootblack (someone who shined shoes) and lived in downtown Manhattan, was likely affiliated with the AME Zion Church, which also purchased the initial parcels of land in the area. Thirty years later, when plans for Central Park were underway, Williams still owned the same three plots he had originally purchased. Information from an 1855 map and the state census allows for a closer look at Williams and some of his neighbors, giving us a better sense of the makeup of the Seneca Village community, which included large extended families and numerous property owners.

Like the map to the right, which lists property owners, residents, and house types, the state and federal censuses are an essential source of information on the residents of Seneca Village. This state census record documents the Williams family in 1855. It indicates that Andrew was working as a common, a better position than bootblack, the job he had 30 years prior.

Maps: Garthwaite A. Sage, Central Park: Consolidation Maps, 1855, Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.

Scan the QR code to locate other signs.
For more information visit centralparknyc.org/senecavillage
Seneca Village Landscape Gardens

Near this sign was a large garden maintained by John P. Haff, a noted horticulturist and local innkeeper of German descent. Although it is unclear if Haff was growing food for consumption by the village, contemporary maps and descriptions suggest that other residents tended gardens, growing fruits and vegetables for their families. Descriptions of other parts of the area that became Central Park mention numerous gardens and access to outdoor space for this purpose was one of the benefits of living this far north.

These gardens were an important way for the community to be more economically self-sufficient. Maps show that in addition to gardens some Seneca Village residents had stables, barns, and sheds, which could have been used to support horticulture as well as for raising livestock. Archaeological excavations uncovered evidence of the remains of sheep and goats that may have been raised in the village.

This map shows "Haff's Garden," a large area comprised in plots to Spencer Penrose, the map also indicates a greenhouse on the property to the south owned by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Considering Haff's horticultural expenses, it is possible that he was involved in the greenhouse.

This map of Seneca Village from 1865, made just before Central Park was created, shows what appear to be small cultivated plots, enclosed areas for livestock, and trees scattered throughout the village. As some of these plots are large, it is possible that they were tenanted communally.

This photograph from 1902 does not depict Seneca Village, but a house and garden just outside the park's southern border at 56th Street. It gives an idea of what a garden in Seneca Village might have looked like. The wood structure on the right in the park, and a similar one, called the Gap Cut, still stands in that spot today.

Map Credits: Eggers, View Map of the Village, included in the Central Park, 1865. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.
Photograph: Victor Freyberg Photographic Collection, Rare Book Division, New York Public Library.
Map Credits: Gardner, A. Sage, Central Park Conservancy Maps, 1936. Courtesy of NYC Municipal Archives.