INTRODUCTION

“A Work of National Interest”: The Book and the Men behind It

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If you have picked up this book, you probably know something already about New York City’s Central Park. If you have paged through this book, you probably have found yourself seduced by its illustrations. Published in 1869, it features dozens of wood engravings that represent scenes and highlights of the park, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for the competition they won in 1858. Familiar attractions include the elm-lined Mall, the Bow Bridge, and the Balcony Bridge. At the same time, the modern reader is intrigued by hoop-skirted Victorian women accompanying well-behaved charges, a couple riding in a sleigh, or, on one of the last pages, a shepherd tending tranquil sheep. The reader may be struck by how the park has changed, perhaps noticing that there wasn’t always a sculpture in the Bethesda Terrace fountain or that the music stand at the head of the Mall no longer exists. In a similar vein, as the text leads the reader from one area to the next, observations about architectural and natural elements give rise to thoughts about what continues to be the same and what has changed or vanished altogether.

A Description of the New York Central Park, reprinted here, was not the first book to have been issued about this now cherished place. Nevertheless, this is one of the most important books ever to have been produced on the subject, and it continues to be both memorable and authoritative. Its author, Clarence Chatham Cook, is recognized today as one of the nation’s earliest and most prominent art critics.
The artist, Albert Fitch Bellows, was a well-regarded painter and illustrator. Less well-known yet also deserving recognition is the publisher, Francis Junius Huntington, who brought the book to fruition. It was he who committed the resources to create a volume of the highest quality, paying for superior engravings, printing, and binding. Huntington also made up his mind that he wouldn’t rush the process. Work on the book began in the middle of 1865, and after three and a half long years, it was on the market in December 1868.¹ From the beginning, the book was going to be special in every respect. Who then were its creators and what were the motivations behind its publication?

STRUGGLES OVER THE PARK

Before turning to these questions, we would do well to take stock of how the park and its designers were faring during the mid- to late 1860s. At the time when Bellows was sketching, Cook was writing, and Huntington was lining up the engravers and printer, debates were being waged over the character of the park and proposals that would affect it. Indeed, struggles over the development of the park are integral to its history, having started soon after Olmsted and Vaux won the design competition and construction got under way in 1858.² The partners’ authority and the status of their employment changed frequently. At first Olmsted was appointed architect-in-chief and Vaux was paid as his assistant, and then Vaux was more formally employed as consulting architect.³ But by 1861, the Central Park Commission limited the role of the designers, placing Andrew H. Green, the park’s comptroller, over them. In June of that year, with the onset of the Civil War, Olmsted left New York for Washington, D.C., to serve as executive secretary of the U.S. Sanitary Commission, established to meet the medical needs of the Union Army, and Vaux carried on under Green. Two years later, an exasperated Vaux submitted his resignation; however, by 1865 he and Olmsted sought to be reinstated, and they were reappointed as landscape architects of the park in July, positioning them to pursue their vision.⁴
Although the basic plan prepared by Olmsted and Vaux was secure, several troublesome issues emerged during the 1860s that demanded attention. At the beginning of 1865, the most disturbing threat to their overall concept was a proposal to erect gateways at the southern end of the park. Designed by the distinguished architect Richard Morris Hunt, who had trained in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts, they were lavishly sculpted, very much in line with the civic projects being erected in Second Empire France. But Vaux considered the gateways inappropriate for the image that he and Olmsted had developed for an American park, which he believed should welcome visitors without imperial fanfare. The park was to emphasize nature, not architecture. Vaux made his case into a cause, writing a letter in May that was published on the front page of the New York Evening Post. Not coincidentally, the paper’s editor was William Cullen Bryant, an early champion of a major park for New York City. Two days later, the park board decided to set the matter of the gates aside, but no one could be certain that the debate was over for good.

Another concern for the park’s designers was the donation of sculpture, often commemorative, which threatened to intrude upon landscapes that were conceived as retreats into nature. The commissioners shared the view that these monumental gifts were problematic. A third issue was the desire by various groups for programmed spaces. For example, certain city residents wanted to claim the expansive southwestern lawn, called the Green, for military drills, which did not mesh well with the pastoral vision of the landscape architects or the park board. To counter this pressure and preserve the quiet in the contested territory, sheep and a shepherd were installed there around 1864.

FRANCIS JUNIUS HUNTINGTON, PUBLISHER

In the meantime, as the decade progressed, visitors thronged to the park, and publishing a fancy book about it promised to be a smart
venture. In September 1865 the firm of Bunce and Huntington announced in a trade magazine that a book called *The Central Park* was “in press.”10 The following March, the magazine reported that the title would come out in May.11 It would be illustrated by Albert Fitch Bel lows “of the National Academy” and “elegantly printed and bound.” It also would be sold at a “moderately low price.” The announcement was a bit optimistic, although the publishers surely didn’t expect that the book would take so long to appear and would cost so much. By the end of 1868, following the dissolution of the partnership between Bunce and Huntington, F. J. Huntington and Company issued a prospectus, offering a book “for the holiday season” now titled *A Description of the New York Central Park*.12 It would be “a work of national interest” and could be bought as a cloth edition with gilt ornament at ten dollars or bound in morocco leather, “full gilt,” at fifteen dollars. To impress potential buyers with the quality of the artwork, three sample pages and four of the 101 wood engravings that had been completed were reproduced. The book would measure 6½ by 9 inches, and it would include two maps, one of the southern end and the other of the northern end of the park, representing “every winding road and minutest footpath.” Decorating its front and back covers would be a round emblem with the monograms of the park’s designers and the letters C and P in the center. It had become a luxury product. When perusing lists of books for sale during this period, we find that most books cost between pennies to a little over a dollar, and a well-illustrated book could be purchased for around five dollars.13

In July 1866 *Miller’s New Guide to Central Park* came out, published by James Miller and written and illustrated by T. Addison Richards.14 The clothbound book, which included a map, targeted the mainstream market and was priced at $1.25. Richards was an artist of little distinction, and his name would not have been a selling point. He produced seventeen drawings, two engraved and signed by “Richardson,” likely James H. Richardson, which were relatively coarse in execution. For the most part, the text was flat, but occasionally the author volunteered