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Parks, People, and Property Values: The Changing Role of Green Spaces in Antebellum Manhattan

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Parks, People, and Property Values

The Changing Role of Green Spaces in Antebellum Manhattan

Abstract: The role that parks played in Manhattan changed dramatically during the antebellum period. Originally dismissed as unnecessary on an island embraced by rivers, parks became a tool for real estate development and gentrification in the 1830s. By the 1850s, politicians, journalists, and landscape architects believed Central Park could be a social salve for a city with rising crime rates, increasingly visible poverty, and deepening class divisions. While many factors (public health, the psychological need for parks, and property values) would remain the same, the changing social conversation showed how ideas of public space were transforming, in rhetoric if not reality.

When Andrew Jackson Downing penned his famous essays between 1848 and 1851 calling for New York City to build a great public park to rival those in Europe, there was growing support among New Yorkers for a *truly* public green space. Landscape designers, politicians, and newspaper editors alike began calling for park spaces where rich and poor could peacefully interact for the better of society and American democracy. Few took a moment to notice, however, just how new this idea was for New York. During Manhattan's first park boom in the 1830s, equitable access to the parks was not a top priority for city leaders. If anything, previous efforts to build parks had been focused on keeping them exclusive and using them as a tool to develop fashionable neighborhoods. In the short period of approximately two decades, much of this would change. Central Park has long dominated the histories of New York's early parks. By putting it in contrast to earlier plans, though, it is possible to see both what was revolutionary at the time and what was not.ⁱ

When three state-appointed commissioners—Gouverneur Morris, Simeon DeWitt, and John Rutherford—finalized the 1811 Commissioners' Map that laid out New York City's grid, they

barely saw a need to include parks at all. Believing that parks were necessary primarily for the circulation of air, the Commissioners argued that New York City hardly required them:

Certainly, if the City of New-York were destined to stand on the side of a small stream, such as the Seine or the Thames, a great number of ample spaces might be needful; but those large arms of the sea which embrace Manhattan Island, render its situation in regard to health and pleasure, as well as to convenience of commerce, peculiarly felicitous....ⁱⁱ

To save the city from having to pay for parks they deemed unnecessary, the Commissioners conservatively chose to reserve land for only a handful of open spaces. Despite the proposed parks having modest footprints, the city and state would eventually whittle them down even further. Situated primarily on privately owned farmland, the parks would have to be purchased by the city government in order to become a reality. As owners of park property pressured the cash-strapped city government to allow them to develop their land, politicians began to erase the largest proposed space, a 260-acre park between 23rd and 34th Streets known as the Grand Parade, from the map.ⁱⁱⁱ Few New Yorkers bemoaned the loss and the Common Council was happy to not have to pay for increasingly expensive real estate to create the park.

However, New Yorkers would begin to see parks in a new light after the city experienced a burst of immigration and economic activity following the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. By the 1830s, it seemed as though more New Yorkers—especially developers—had a newfound appreciation for the role parks could play in urban design, whether they were a site for beauty, a source of fresh air, a place for exercise, or an antidote to the increasing congestion and chaos of a fast-growing city. The opening of Washington Square marked an important turning point. Once a potter's field, Washington Square was planted with trees, surrounded by a "pale fence," and opened to the public in 1827.^{iv} City politicians watched in amazement as the addresses around the

park became some of the most desirable in the city. In 1831, they wrote: “It is a fact of material importance to the City Treasury, that the taxable value of lots fronting on squares, is at least double what it would be, if those squares had not been opened; for lots on Fourth-street, now fronting Washington Square, which in the year 1825, were taxed at only \$500, are now taxed at \$2,100....”^v Parks had the power to transform a neighborhood and, in turn, increase property taxes.

As New Yorkers came to embrace parks and their potential, several benefits were touted beyond the tax boon for municipal coffers. When cholera swept through the city beginning in 1832, doctors and residents alike blamed miasmas or bad odors for spreading the pestilence.^{vi} Many believed parks and open spaces could counteract these evils. In 1833, when a group of neighbors petitioned the city to create a park in the Eleventh Ward (what is now the Lower East Side), they argued that the open space they hoped would become a park was the sole reason why there had been few incidents of cholera in the area. Though they were ultimately unsuccessful in creating a park due to resistance from neighbors, the petitioners had hoped to preserve that space so that it could continue to have such a healthful impact on the neighborhood.^{vii} Parks also promoted health by giving people, and especially children, spaces to exercise. A writer to the *New-York Evening Post* contended that children confined to their nurseries would inevitably grow into sickly adults but parks could fix that: “It is quite certain, that the health of our children cannot be preserved, unless they have plenty of exercise, and an opportunity of breathing a pure atmosphere.” The author argued that parks should be no more than a mile apart so all children could reach them and have the “privilege of romping and playing.”^{viii} While the writer prioritized

children's health, he or she believed adults would also benefit from the ability to take walks and breathe fresh air.

Elite New Yorkers did more than take walks: they promenaded. On evenings as well as Sundays after church, New York's high society participated in an elaborate theatrical spectacle that involved parading slowly up Broadway or through a park in their finest clothing. With a tip of their hat or a nod of their head, promenaders would acknowledge other New Yorkers they deemed worthy and ignore those they did not. During a time when immigration and rapidly changing fortunes upended New York's social ranks, this ritual helped to cement hierarchies. However, other New Yorkers repeatedly challenged these rituals and spaces. Rowdy, working-class militiamen and their families caused a ruckus near the promenade in the Battery. African American women and men conducted their own promenade to the bemusement of other promenaders.^{ix} In order to preserve the exclusiveness of the ritual, elite white promenaders wrote to politicians and newspapers calling for racial segregation, increased monitoring of park use, and even new parks. With a new park in their neighborhood, perhaps they could lay claim to and exert control over a more exclusive space.

These same New Yorkers were also hoping that the parks might serve as "an ornament" that would reflect well on the city and the young country. In newspapers, guidebooks, and travel writings, authors compared New York's parks negatively to Europe's. Many New Yorkers looked enviously overseas as they lamented the state of their city's parks, streets, and culture. In an 1836 article describing London in the *New-York Spectator*, the author contended that "The English far excel the Americans in the matter of arranging the streets of their cities, so as to have abundance of unoccupied ground to be used as public places, adorned with beautiful verdure and shrubbery,

and promotive [sic] of a free circulation of pure air, and consequently of health.”^x Should New York ever want to achieve similar success and sustainability, the city would have to follow London’s example.

However, when Samuel Ruggles set out in 1831 to create Gramercy Park (see Figure 1), he likely hoped the park would raise property values more than anything else. Ruggles was a lawyer turned real estate developer who purchased a large swath of what would become the Gramercy Park neighborhood. He leveled the ground, filled in morass, and prepared it for construction, hoping to turn what was essentially marginal land into an elite residential neighborhood. He petitioned the city to pave the streets, an improvement that was paid for with special assessments, or fees charged to nearby landowners in order to fund infrastructure such as roads, sewers, or even parks. What could have been prohibitively expensive for any developer, ultimately became a financial opportunity for Ruggles. Ruggles finessed the system by teaming with a contractor to compete for and win many of the contracts in what was supposed to be an anonymous bidding competition. He and his partner laid the streets, making most of the money back that they had to pay the city government. Essentially, through a possibly corrupt arrangement, Ruggles got the roads at a significant discount. In order to make his neighborhood even more attractive and accessible, Ruggles went so far as to add an extra avenue. Cutting one block in half, Ruggles created Irving Place and what would later become known as Lexington Avenue, ultimately changing the face of the east side of Manhattan Island.^{xi}

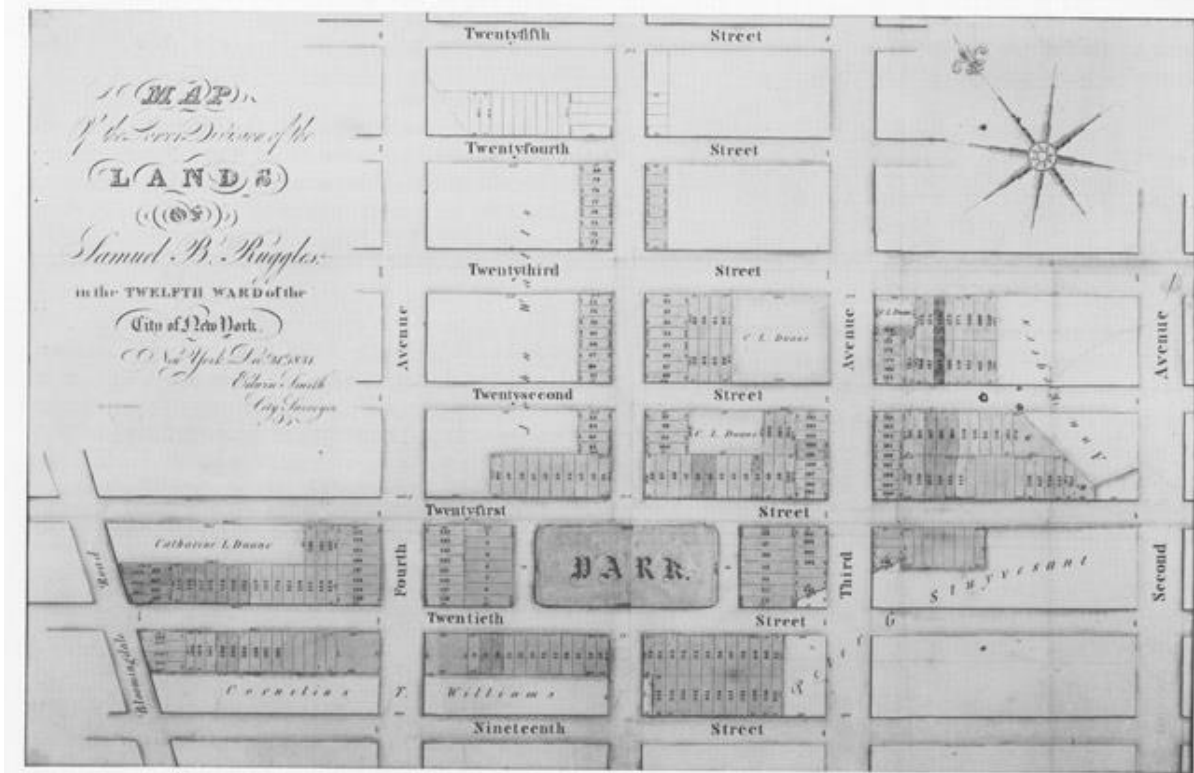


Figure 1: Gramercy Park, a private park, stood as the linchpin for Samuel Ruggles's real estate development. Map of Samuel Ruggles's Lands in 1831, drawn by Edwin Smith, city surveyor [Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society]

The linchpin for Ruggles's development, though, was not the streets but rather a private, gated park where only adjacent residents would have keys. The city aldermen were so enchanted with the idea of the property taxes they were going to rake in that they did as much as they possibly could to encourage and praise Ruggles's work, providing tax breaks for this exclusive space that would benefit only a handful of New Yorkers.^{xiii} Ruggles deeded the park, which encompassed 40 lots, to the purchasers of the land surrounding it. In the deed, dated December 17, 1831, he signed the park over to four trustees, who were charged with surrounding the park with an iron fence and laying it out with walks, trees, and shrubberies. Trustees were responsible for keeping "the said grounds, plantations and decorations in proper order." Neighbors paid \$10 per year for a key to

the gate that kept the rest of the city out.^{xiii} It would be impossible to dream up a more exclusive location to promenade.

While the park alone may have secured the neighborhood's property values, Ruggles went even further and attached a restrictive covenant to each of the properties. He declared that neither he nor any purchasers could erect

any livery stable, slaughter house, smith shop, forge, furnace, steam engine, brass foundry, nail or other iron factory, or any manufactory of gunpowder, glue, varnish, vitriol, ink, or turpentine, or for the tanning, dressing or preparing skins, hides or leather, or any brewery, distillery, public museum, theatre, circus, place for the exhibition of animals, or any other trade or business dangerous or offensive to the neighbouring inhabitants.^{xiv}

In short, the covenant protected the neighborhood from industries and nuisances, as well as any attractions that might draw large crowds. In this way, Ruggles was able to essentially zone the area in order to shield it from the transformations that would affect other fashionable neighborhoods as industries and railyards inched closer to residential addresses later in the century.

At the same time that Ruggles was developing his private Gramercy Park, he joined other local landowners in petitioning for the city to open a public park just blocks away. Union Square, or Union Place as it was briefly known, was one of the handful of parks that the Commissioners set aside in 1811 when they laid out the grid. While Union Square was never intended to be private like Gramercy Park, the public parks that the city government opened during the 1830s were developed within a funding structure that essentially turned them into partially privatized spaces, explicitly intended to benefit real estate developers, local landowners, and the government's tax revenue. The way the city financed public parks laid the foundation for the unequal distribution of green spaces throughout the urban landscape.^{xv}

Just like the streets in the Gramercy Park neighborhood and elsewhere in the city, parks were funded through special assessments. Special assessments had been legal in New York City since the late seventeenth century, but they only gained widespread use in the 1830s when the city found itself needing to finance infrastructure for a fast-expanding city.^{xvi} This taxation arrangement was not unique to New York, though New York did provide a model for other cities and states considering different methods for financing public works.^{xvii} While New York's aldermen had the legal right to initiate their own projects, in practice the Common Council waited for the petitions of private individuals, preferably nearby landowners, before they took action. With government and neighborhood support, the Commissioners of Estimate and Assessment would determine which properties would benefit from the improvement, and how much money to assess based on the cost of the park. In short, public improvements were funded locally by the landowners most likely to see a rise in the value and desirability of their holdings.

Landowners near Union Square had many reasons to press the city government to open the park, once and for all. With their property located in a neighborhood politicians described as "a shapeless and ill-looking place," landowners hoped the city would not only purchase and design the park, but also improve the area's streets and sewers, making it easier for them to develop their own properties and transform it into an elite residential neighborhood.^{xviii} Ruggles, like many landowners, had high ambitions for the area. Not only would his property in the nearby Gramercy Park neighborhood benefit, but so too would lots he owned directly abutting the proposed public park. Ruggles even tried to convince the municipal government to build new government buildings on the northern edge of the park and aldermen seriously considered the idea. Though

this plan fizzled, it was further evidence of the ways the city government and private developers joined together to profit from the island's real estate.^{xix}

With sufficient local support and state approval, the city began the work of estimating the special assessments they would need to collect so that they could purchase, regulate, and expand Union Square. By 1833, the aldermen made plans to remove rocks and buildings on the property. Enclosing it with an iron fence and landscaping it with grass, shrubbery, and trees, the city ornamented the park “for the embellishment of the city, and the common use, benefit, and enjoyment of its inhabitants.” The language the politicians used made it clear that they had begun to appreciate parks as more than just a way to circulate air; they were aesthetically pleasing places to appreciate nature.^{xx}

Similar to their enthusiasm for private parks, the aldermen were elated that “the *pecuniary interest* of the public will be promoted by the liberal embellishment of Union Place.” With property taxes accounting for two-thirds of the city's tax revenue, the aldermen saw that it was in their best interest to hasten “the erection of valuable houses on the square.” Opening Union Square, the assistant aldermen calculated, would result in an annual increase of \$16,200 into the city treasury. They had other hopes as well. By establishing desirable residential neighborhoods, the aldermen hoped Manhattan would stop losing New York's elite to Brooklyn suburbs. They wanted to “retain within our reach that portion of our population which contributes most largely towards the public burthens, by increasing the attractions of our own city.”^{xxi} Wealthy New Yorkers were beginning to move to Brooklyn Heights and commute to their jobs in Manhattan via ferry. City leaders hoped that tony neighborhoods around parks might be more of a magnet than an

address on the other side of the river. Everything about Union Square seemed to benefit the city and its tax revenue.

By the end of the decade, Union Square was thriving. In 1839 *The New-York Mirror* would proclaim: “Around Union-Place new blocks of houses, capacious and stately, are springing up with surprising celerity.” The neighborhood, at least for the time being, was an elite residential area that drew in some of the city’s wealthiest residents. The new public park coupled with the private Gramercy Park nearby helped secure the area’s real estate values and the city’s property tax revenue.^{xxii}

The aldermen, however, did not have such an easy time with all proposed parks. The Eleventh Ward Park, for instance, that petitioners praised as having saved them from cholera, was ultimately blocked from becoming a park by other neighbors who complained to the city government that they could not pay the special assessment fees. Their petition ultimately contained a greater number of signatures and the majority’s opinion won. Though the special assessment system functioned well in wealthy areas or near properties owned by developers, it also made parks in working-class neighborhoods less likely to succeed if they were even proposed.^{xxiii}

Supporters of special assessments praised a system that had those who benefitted most paying for neighborhood improvements. A growing body of discontented New Yorkers, however, worried about the government power involved in forcing unwilling neighbors to fund projects that had been proposed by speculators and developers who had the money and desire to bring in expensive improvements.^{xxiv} Ultimately though, special assessments did less to increase government power than diminish it. While the government was able to trumpet that they had not paid for the

park with a dime of public funds, therefore avoiding the politically unpopular step of raising taxes, they also handed over a good deal of power to local residents.^{xxv}

In the city government's quest for refinement and higher property tax revenues, they disregarded the needs of the urban masses that lacked equal access to these spaces. Ultimately the special assessment funding model led to the unequal placement of parks throughout the city. This system, which left private citizens to initiate public works such as parks, inevitably meant that certain areas of the city were favored with more parks than others. Neighborhoods where residents, or, more likely, speculators hoped to exact expensive change and reap the benefits in resale, often found the government eager to develop parks. However, there was almost no incentive for landlords in poorer neighborhoods to push for expensive improvements like parks, especially if they had little chance in recouping the costs of the assessments from rents.^{xxvi} The placement of parks in the urban landscape, then, became an expression of social and political inequity. While promenaders certainly did their best to make their spaces exclusive, the city's funding structure also helped. By funding parks with special assessments, the Common Council essentially represented the interests of developers, speculators, and landowners, and the conversations about the existence of certain parks happened exclusively among these individuals who were not particularly concerned about equitable access.

The 1840s would usher in significant social changes, however, that would change the way people talked about parks and their purpose. Over the course of just that decade, Manhattan's population increased remarkably from 312,710 to 515,547, with nearly half of New Yorkers foreign born by decade's end. Though New York received newcomers from every part of the world, at mid-century the majority came from Ireland and Germany. The recent Irish immigrants were at

a particular disadvantage, coming from an already impoverished agrarian economy that had been further devastated by the potato famine. With over 200,000 new residents in the city, immigrants struggled alongside the rest of New York's poor to find jobs and affordable housing. Lacking adequate welfare systems to match the constant flow of immigrants, New York's institutions such as the almshouse, orphanages, hospitals, and prisons were practically filled to capacity. New York's safety net was not wide enough to catch these struggling newcomers.^{xxvii}

Nativist New Yorkers' fears of the urban immigrant masses extended in many directions from politics to public health. There were worries that the recent European revolutions might influence discontented Americans and further threaten social hierarchies. Additionally, immigrants' visibility in public spaces was an uncomfortable reminder of the growing social disparity afflicting the city. As the number of ragpickers sifting through the city's uncollected garbage rose, hawkers' cries became more cacophonous, wooden shantytowns on the outskirts of town grew denser, and exposés dramatized the conditions of the notorious Five Points neighborhood, immigrants and their poverty became impossible to ignore. With health officials blaming cholera outbreaks and other urban ailments in part on their crowded, subpar housing, it seemed as though the poor threatened to spread disease as they spilled outdoors and through the streets. State politicians described tenement housing as "oozing with pollution" and "reeking with filth." All of this, coupled with rising crime rates, fueled the idea that the city's poor threatened to infect the urban body politically, biologically, and morally.^{xxviii}

It was in the context of this increasingly visible poverty that the rhetoric about parks changed. Though there had been almost no discussion in the 1830s about the importance of creating parks for the poor, by the 1850s politicians, landscape designers, and newspaper editors

spoke often about it. Andrew Jackson Downing, landscape architect and editor for the *Horticulturist*, was one of the early proponents of the park. Along with other advocates, including William Cullen Bryant and Horace Greeley, Downing believed that the park would help to civilize the lower classes for the benefit not only of their neighbors but also for democracy generally. A landscaped park, he argued, would help to raise the “social civilization and social culture” of Americans. “The higher social and artistic elements of every man’s nature lie dormant within him,” he continued, “and every laborer is a possible gentleman, not by the possession of money or fine clothes—but through the refining influence of intellectual and moral culture.”^{xxxix} One of several differences distinguishing the discussion of Central Park from that of the earlier parks involved the writing careers of Downing and others. With the growing professionalization of landscape architecture, there were more people philosophizing about the role parks might play.

Downing was not alone in his convictions. As politicians continued to fight over the prospects of an uptown park, their pleas were made much more compelling when they included the needs of the lower classes. At one point when Mayor Kingsland was fighting for the park’s survival amid political clamor, he declared to the Common Council that the city’s investment in a large park would pay richly in the “health, happiness, and comfort of those whose interest are specially intrusted [sic] to our keeping—the poorer classes.” Whether strategically crafted political rhetoric or earnestly espoused, the concept that a park could benefit the city’s poor had gained traction by the middle of the nineteenth century.^{xxx} After Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux began implementing their Greensward Plan, Olmsted wrote extensively about how he envisioned Central Park as a democratic space. He embraced Downing’s philosophy, believing that the park had the power to soothe the deepening chasm between the classes.^{xxxi}

Due to its unprecedented size and prominence in the city, the management of Central Park marked a significant shift from the older downtown parks. Though it would be paid for, in part, by special assessments, the city and state governments took a more active role in driving its creation. While neighbors petitioned for earlier parks, high-ranking politicians, journalists, gentlemen, and lobbyists led the push for what would become Central Park. The process with Central Park was much more top-down than the earlier grassroots efforts. That remained the case in the decades to come, as a state-appointed Board of Commissioners managed the park and its use, setting a bureaucratic example for the development of the city's Department of Public Parks in 1870.^{xxxii}

As with earlier parks, many of the same benefits for elite New Yorkers drove the campaign for Central Park. For instance, speculators and landowners of the surrounding property stood to reap great benefits from the rise in property values even though they would have to pay significant assessments. Wealthy New Yorkers hoped to use Central Park as a refined space, where they could promenade and display their opulence (see Figure 2). The idea that this would also be a space for working classes, however, was new, and to many critics these uses were completely incompatible. The designers and proponents of the park wrestled with balancing these competing interests in an attempt to make their goals a reality.^{xxxiii}

Not everyone was confident that a public space intended for all New Yorkers could satisfy everyone. In 1857, while workers were still in the process of clearing the park for development, James Gordon Bennett published an editorial in the *New York Herald* where he fueled the fear that Central Park would be controlled by the “lower denizens of the city.” He claimed that public parks worked well in European cities because the social hierarchy there was clearly defined and “no

annoyance is caused to the peasant if he be excluded from the places haunted by his recognized ‘superiors.’” In America, however, Bennett claimed that the social order was upended and the poor erroneously saw themselves as equal to the rich. If welcomed into Central Park, Bennett believed working-class men would set their own rules for using the park—fighting, drinking, racing horses, offending upper-class ladies, singing, and generally being loud. The editors of *Harper’s Weekly* similarly expressed concern that the mixing of classes would mean that Central Park “will soon be undistinguishable from the slums, and the benefit of the Central Park will be lost to the rich, the peaceable, and the well disposed.”^{xxxiv}

Olmsted grumbled about these critiques, calling them the “fallacy of cowardly conservatism.” He steadfastly believed that the park could be a public space peacefully used by all classes, particularly if it was well regulated. His method of assuring the happiness of rich and poor alike involved writing park rules and hiring police who would restrict former uses of the park land in order to protect the landscape. This was part of the education he saw the park providing poor New Yorkers. His enthusiasm for policing was so immense that Calvert Vaux bitterly referred to him as “Frederick the Great, Prince of the Park Police.”^{xxxv}

Published in the newspapers, posted throughout the park, and kept in the pockets of the police force, the park’s ordinances were intended to “protect the plants and other property, guard against accidents, and otherwise aid the superintendence” of the public space. While some of the ordinances governed traffic and the proper use of the carriage roads and pedestrian paths, other rules sent the message that the park was no longer a commons. With the park having previously been home to a range of evicted communities including the African American Seneca Village and a variety of Irish- and German-owned market gardens and piggeries, park administrators felt they

needed to delineate clear restrictions on the appropriate use of land. No longer could people turn cattle, goats, horses, or swine out in the park to graze. Similarly, administrators made hunting illegal by restricting visitors from carrying firearms. Park visitors were meant to appreciate but not use the park's resources. Olmsted and the commissioners added new ordinances as necessary, such as the law against picking flowers, fruit, and nuts, the law against annoying birds, and laws preventing people from bathing and fishing in the park's lakes and ponds.^{xxxvi}



Figure 2: Despite discussion of Central Park being a park for *all* New Yorkers, rich and poor, elite uses of the space continued to dominate park use. Currier & Ives, “Central Park, The Drive,” 1862 [Courtesy of the Library of Congress]

By closely regulating how people used the park, Olmsted preserved not only the beautiful landscape but also elite New Yorkers' control of the space. As Olmsted and the Board of Commissioners wrote in 1861, “The preservation of order on the Park, and its exemption from the presence of influences that would render it a disagreeable or unsafe resort for all classes of society, is of the very first importance, and requires constant vigilance, as, if it is not well

understood that disorder or obscenity on the Park are promptly punished, the virtuous and orderly will be banished from it.” By preventing unrefined uses of parkland whether the harvesting of food and fuel or use of water, Olmsted and the Commissioners hoped to successfully instill elite values and respectabilities in the lower class visitors. This is not to say that working-class visitors did not appreciate the protected landscape or benefit from Olmsted’s rules. However, for former residents who had traditionally relied on the land for their livelihoods, there was an undeniable loss. Olmsted believed policing could both tame the park and its visitors.^{xxxvii}

While the ways people conceived of parks changed dramatically over the first half of the nineteenth century, from unnecessary spaces valued primarily for their fresh air, to elite spaces for promenading that would lift property values, to spaces that might promote a more harmonious meeting of all classes of New Yorkers, in some ways things also stayed the same. Central Park, touted as the “lungs of the city” was still an antidote for public health issues and impure air. It was still a space for promenading, for improving New York’s standing among sister cities at home and abroad, and for raising real estate values. Nevertheless, the language politicians, journalists, and landscape designers used placed parks as a social salve during a time of immense change, rising crime, and visible poverty. Though the reality did not match their intentions and hopes for Central Park, city leaders were beginning to conceive of public space in a new way. Concerned with the direction the city was taking, a space where the poor could be taught by bourgeois example or park rules to act more like the middle class might soothe growing chasms between those living in brownstones and those living in shanties.

This new rhetoric was really a first step as politicians, reformers, and landscape architects began to recognize the need to give the city’s poor access to green space. The top-down bureaucracy

also opened the possibility for more equitable distribution of future parks, at least compared to the earlier model. It would take at least another generation before parks advocates would embrace something closer to what we might today call “environmental justice,” by pushing for accessible parks in neighborhoods that could not afford special assessments. A variety of reformers interested in public health, child welfare, and improving tenements lobbied for the 1887 Small Parks Act as well as the opening of several playgrounds in dense neighborhoods. Limited as their successes were, the Progressive Era reformers took the idea that parks could solve significant social problems to a new level. Central Park and Prospect Park notwithstanding, the special assessment model that undergirded the early parks would continue to have a lasting impact on the struggle of twentieth-century parks advocates to achieve substantial citywide funding for new parks.^{xxxviii}

In 1825 a writer for the *New York Evening Post* wondered “What, in fact, is a city, but a congregation of nuisances?”^{xxxix} In the decade that followed, as the plants in Gramercy Park and Union Square filled in and elegant homes went up around their perimeters, parks seemed like an escape from the transformations occurring throughout the city. By the 1850s, New Yorkers would firmly believe that parks were not just an escape but also an antidote for the ills of the city whether social, environmental, or otherwise. That shift came, not just because of transformed understandings of public health and the need for fresh air, but also because of social changes affecting the city. Hope began to brew that a controlled public space might diffuse the very tensions that seemed uncontrollable as social changes rippled through the city at midcentury.

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ⁱ The literature on Central Park and Frederick Law Olmsted, one of its designers and administrators, is vast, though the projects rarely look back at the parks that preceded it in any significant way. Olmsted's work on the Central Park received a great deal of attention in the last fifty years in part as a reaction to the decline of the park in the 1960s and 1970s and the quest to restore his vision. A selection of the extensive work on Central Park include Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *Park for the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); David M. Scobey, *Empire City: The Making and Meaning of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); Albert Fein, *Frederick Law Olmsted and the American Environmental Tradition* (New York, G. Braziller, 1972); Geoffrey Blodgett, "Frederick Law Olmsted: Landscape Architecture as Conservative Reform," *The Journal of American History* 62.4 (Mar 1976): 869-889.

ⁱⁱ William Bridges, *Map of the City of New York and Island of Manhattan* (New York: T & J Swords, 1811), 25-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more on this, see Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), chapter 2.

^{iv} I.N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909* (New York: Robert H. Dodd, 1915-1928), III: 520; V: 1670.

^v "Document No. 47," *Documents of the Board of Assistants, From May 21, 1832, to May 12, 1834* (New York: Printed by Order of the Common Council, 1838) II&III: 289-291.

^{vi} Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

^{vii} *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen* (New York: Printed by Order of the Common Council, 1835), 30 September 1833, 5:246; 11 November 1833, 5:367; 26 November 1833, 5:390; 23 December 1833, 6:40; 6 January 1834, 6: 94-95, 97-100.

^{viii} "City Improvements," *New-York Evening Post for the Country*, 6 June 1828.

^{ix} "The Battery," *New-York Spectator*, 22 June 1830; Asa Greene, *A Glance at New York* (New York: A. Greene, 1837), 216-217; "For the New York Enquirer," *New-York Evening Post for the Country*, 26 September 1826; Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (London: Printed for Whittaker, Treacher, & Co., 1832), 279. The most detailed work on antebellum promenades can be found in David Scobey, "Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York," *Social History*, 17.2 (May 1992), 203-227.

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- ^x “Letters from Europe,” *New-York Spectator*, 15 September 1836.
- ^{xi} For more on the background behind Samuel Ruggles and the development of the Gramercy Park neighborhood, see McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, chapter 2; D.G. Brinton Thompson, *Ruggles of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946); Stephen Garmey, *Gramercy Park: An Illustrated History of a New York Neighborhood* (New York: Balsam Press, 1984).
- ^{xii} McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, 69-70; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, 28 December 1831, 2:32, 43, 48-9; 6 February 1832, 2:121, 131-133; “Document No. III,” 1, 2, 8.
- ^{xiii} Original Deed of Gramercy Park (1831), reproduced in Stephen Garmey, *Gramercy Park: An Illustrated History of a New York Neighborhood* (New York: Balsam Press, 1984), Appendix.
- ^{xiv} Original Deed of Gramercy Park (1831). Other local landowners, such as Peter G. Stuyvesant and Cornelius Williams followed suit adding restrictive covenants to their deeds when they sold their property in order to ensure its status. New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *East 17th Street-Irving Place Historic District Designation Report* (New York: City of New York, 1998), 12.
- ^{xv} *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York* (New York: Published for the City of New York, 1917), 18 October 1831, 19:291; 29 November 1830, 19:369-70.
- ^{xvi} Stephen Diamond, “The Death and Transfiguration of Benefit Taxation: Special Assessments in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 12.2 (June 1983), 202, 205; Robin L. Einhorn, *Property Rules: Political Economy in Chicago, 1833-1872* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87.
- ^{xvii} Stephen Diamond, “The Death and Transfiguration of Benefit Taxation: Special Assessments in Nineteenth-Century America,” 204; Robin L. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 101.
- ^{xviii} Documents of the Board of Assistants, 1: 153-61, quoted in I.N. Phelps Stokes, *Iconography of Manhattan Island 5: 1705*. D.T. Valentine lifts this description, almost word for word in D.T. Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York for 1857* (New York: D.T. Valentine, 1857), 480-481; *Minutes of the Common Council*, 29 November 1830, 19: 369-370.
- ^{xix} *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, 2 January 1833, 4:107-8; 21 January 1833, 4:130; 4 February 1833, 4:189; 14 February 1833, 4:208-9.
- ^{xx} *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, 24 October 1834, 7:317-320; “Document No. 8,” 69-74.
- ^{xxi} “Document No. 8,” 71-2; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, 24 October 1834, 7:317-320.
- ^{xxii} “New York and its prospects,” *The New-York Mirror*, 9 March 1839.
- ^{xxiii} *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen*, 26 November 1833, 5:390; 6 January 1834, 6:97-100; 6 January 1834, 6:94-5, 97-100.
- ^{xxiv} A group of anti-assessment New Yorkers began publishing *The New-York Municipal Gazette* in 1841, declaring their goal to reveal the abuses of the assessment system. In their inaugural issue they claimed that the source of these abuses was a combination of the “extravagant anticipations of those engaged in real estate speculations” and the excessive powers of the municipal government. *The New York Municipal Gazette*, 11 March 1841.
- ^{xxv} This, of course, was a matter of semantics. Assessments were essentially another form of taxation but the government prided itself on not using the citywide property taxes to pay for local improvements.
- ^{xxvi} For more on the ways class divisions played a role in the distribution of New York’s public works, see Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 158-169.

^{xxvii} Robert Ernst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1949); Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), chapter 2; Hasia Diner, "The Most Irish City in the Union': The Era of the Great Migration," in Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 87-106; Asa Greene, *A Glance at New York* (New York: A. Greene, 1837), 12-13; Charles Dickens, "American Notes for General Circulation," *The New World*, Park Benjamin, Editor. (New York: J. Winchester, 1842), 40; E. Porter Belden, *New York, Past, Present, and Future; Comprising a History of the City of New York, A Description of its Present Condition, and an Estimate of its Future Increase* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1849), 44-45.

^{xxviii} Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986); *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New-York, Eightieth Session-1857* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen, 1857), III: Doc. 205, 14, 22; Graham Hodges, "Desirable Companions and Lovers': Irish and African Americans in the Sixth Ward, 1830-1870," in Bayor and Meagher, *The New York Irish*, 107-124; Robert W. Snyder, "Crime," in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 298; Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: The Free Press, 2001). Jason Jindrich, "The Shantytowns of Central Park West: Fin de Siècle Squatting in American Cities," *Journal of Urban History* 36.5 (September 2010), 672-684; "Our Squatter Population," *The New York Times*, 15 July 1867. For more on cholera, see Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); McNeur, *Taming Manhattan*, chapter 3.

^{xxix} Andrew Jackson Downing, "The New-York Park," *Horticulturist*, 1 August 1851, 315-319.

^{xxx} *New York Evening Post*, 10 July 1851; "Parks for the People," *New-York Tribune*, 22 June 1853; "The Two Parks," *New-York Tribune*, 28 June 1853; New York (N.Y.) Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *First Annual Report on the Improvement of the Central Park, New York: January 1, 1857* (New York: Chas. W. Baker, Printer, 1857), 77-78. For more on the range of goals leaders set out for the park, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 15-36.

^{xxxi} New York (N.Y.) Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Tenth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park, for the Year Ending December 31, 1866*. (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., Printers, 1867), 39-40; New York (N.Y.) Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Third Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park: January, 1860* (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1860), 7-29; New York (N.Y.) Board of Commissioners of the Central Park, *Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park, for the Year Ending with December 31, 1863* (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., Printers, 1864), 28; New York (N.Y.) Board of Commissioners of the Central Park. *Fourteenth Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park or the Period from January 1 to April 20, 1870* (New York: The New York Printing company, 1871), 16-17.

^{xxxii} For more on the complicated politics, see Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, chapter 4.

^{xxxiii} Charles Loring Brace, "Parks and Chapels for the Poor," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 3 May 1855; Frederick Law Olmsted, "The People's Park at Birkenhead, Near Liverpool," *The Horticulturist*, May 1851. *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen of the City of New York* (New York: McSpedon and Baker, 1851), 7 January 1850, 38:18-19; *Proceedings of the Board of Aldermen* (New York: McSpedon

and Baker, 1855), 6 March 1854, 53:421-435; Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *First Annual Report*, 79-80, 116-129.

^{xxxiv} “The Central Park and Other City Improvements,” *New-York Herald*, 6 September 1857; “The Central Park,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 28 November 1857, 756-757.

^{xxxv} Frederick Law Olmsted to James T. Fields, 21 October 1860, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Creating Central Park*, Charles E. Beveridge and David Schuyler, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 3: 63, 219-221, 269-274; “Cities and Parks: With Special Reference to the New York Central Park,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 7 (April 1861): 428; “Central Park Report: Report of the Minority of the Select Committee on the Bill Relative to a Public Park in New York,” in Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *First Annual Report*, 178-9; Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Fourth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park: January, 1861* (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., Printers, 1861), 99-101.

^{xxxvi} Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Fourth Annual Report*, 99-101, 106-109; Frederick Law Olmsted to Andrew Haswell Green, 3 November 1860, in *Forty Years of Landscape Architecture: Central Park*, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Theodora Kimball, editors (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1928), 412-413; Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Third Annual Report*, 7-29; *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted: Creating Central Park*, 3: 279-280; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 90-91. The transformation of hunters into poachers and the like is similar to what Karl Jacoby describes in the creation of the national parks in Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

^{xxxvii} Board of Commissioners of Central Park. *Fourth Annual Report*, 99-101; Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park: January, 1863* (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., Printers, 1863), 42-43; Board of Commissioners of Central Park, *Seventh Annual Report*, 29-32; Matthew Lumb, *Journal of Three Voyages from England to America and Back* (1863), James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Several scholars write about the decline of public space in twentieth century America, often looking back nostalgically to Olmsted’s vision for Central Park as a more democratic use of space while overlooking the level of social control involved in its administration. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future of Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1992); Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989). Mona Domosh has done work to counter this nostalgia in “Those ‘Gorgeous Incongruities’: Polite Politics and Public Space on the Streets of Nineteenth Century New York,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88.2 (June 1998): 209-226, as has Don Mitchell in “The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of Public, and Democracy,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85.1 (March 1995): 108-133.

^{xxxviii} “Report of the Tenement House Committee,” in *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York, One Hundred and Eighteenth Session, Vol. 9* (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1895), 41-46; Playground Association of America, *The Playground*, No. 17 (August 1908): 1-8; Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Julia Guarneri, “Changing Strategies for Child Welfare, Enduring Beliefs about Childhood: The Fresh Air Fund, 1877-1926,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and*

Progressive Era 11.1 (Jan 2012): 27-70. For working-class leisure in early twentieth-century Chicago, see Colin Fisher, *Urban Green: Nature, Recreation, and the Working Class in Industrial Chicago* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

^{xxxix} “The Butchers,” *New-York Evening Post for the Country*, 17 June 1825.