A GUIDE THROUGH SENECA VILLAGE

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Envisioning Seneca Village is a project depicting what this significant nineteenth-century village might have looked like in the spring of 1855, about two years before it was destroyed by the City of New York to build Central Park. Online, it features an interactive 3D model and non-interactive tour through the model as well as supplementary materials including references and methods. The project is anchored in extensive scholarship and aims to make the village's history visible to a wide audience. The project is also a work in progress with updates, additions, and new features planned soon.

Seneca Village was a community established by African Americans in 1825, two years before emancipation was completed in New York State, Seneca Village. By the mid-nineteenth century, the village was the home of at least 50 families—about ⅔ Black and ⅓ white, mostly Irish. It was situated on an approximately four-block area east of present-day Central Park West between 82nd and 86th Streets, which was then a few miles north of the city's urban core and between the villages of Bloomingdale to the west and Yorkville to the east. This location offered Africans Americans a safer, freer environment to live than downtown. Villagers built a thriving, complex, and heterogeneous community with core institutions including three churches and a school. Seneca Village's destruction by the City in 1857 abruptly ended 30 years of successful efforts to nurture families, sustain livelihoods, and create community. It was also the first instance in a long history of the City's abuse of eminent domain to sacrifice Black neighborhoods for urban development projects—in this case, to build a world-famous park.

As residents scattered to different parts of New York and the Northeast, the Park construction crew buried building debris, covering it with landscaped lawns, hills, and paths. The community's memory faded for a century and a half. Yet the lives the villagers made there left both an archival paper trail and extensive material traces underground. Since the 1990s historians, archeologists, educators, descendants, and artists have mined the fragmentary sources, excavated the site, and sought new ways to recover the village's history and memory.

Despite all of the information that researchers have unearthed, there is a lot that is still unknown about the village and its community members. It is hard to imagine what it was like to live there. No photos or drawings survive, the present-day Central Park site is devoid of above-ground traces of Seneca Village's built environment, and this region of New York City was quite different in the nineteenth century than today. *Envisioning Seneca Village* addresses these blindspots by creating a visual interpretation of the village that integrates social historical, archival, and archeological evidence into digital cartographic and architectural reconstruction. Through this approach we seek to amplify existing scholarship, help visitors to learn more about the village's history, catalyze new research with the questions the model raises, and above all, keep the memory and spirit of this past community alive in the present.

Image of the Envisioning Seneca Village 3D interactive model

Envisioning Seneca Village is a collaborative project between Gergely Baics, Meredith Linn, Leah Meisterlin, and Myles Zhang that integrates our expertise in archaeology, social history, historical geographic information system (GIS), and digital architectural reconstruction. The project has been aided by research assistants, additional support from the Central Park Conservancy, and generous guidance from a diverse group of Seneca Village advisors and stakeholders.

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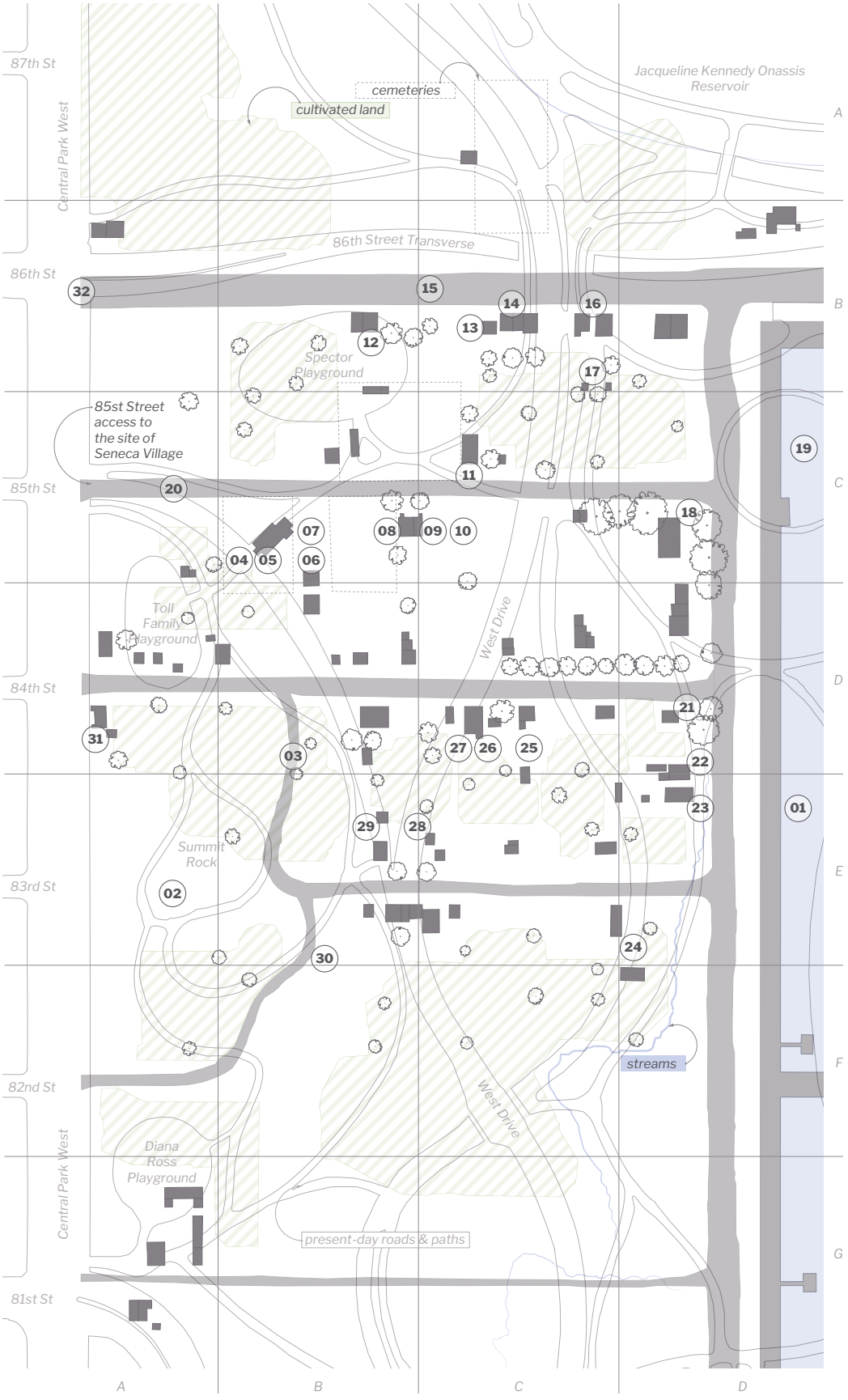

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VISUALIZING A VILLAGE

The model envisions how Seneca Village might have appeared just before its destruction in 1857. No photos or drawings survive, so our team integrated decades of historical and archaeological research with new digital mapping methods. (1) We used old maps and geographic information systems (GIS) to make an accurate map of lost roads, cemeteries, buildings, historic elevation, farmland, rock outcrops, and trees. (2) We modeled buildings with 3D software, basing their size and appearance on archival sources, archaeological finds, and informed assumptions about 19th-century architecture. (3) We added visual details and notes about villagers, drawing on social historical and archaeological research into documents (census, tax, church, etc.) and material evidence from excavation.

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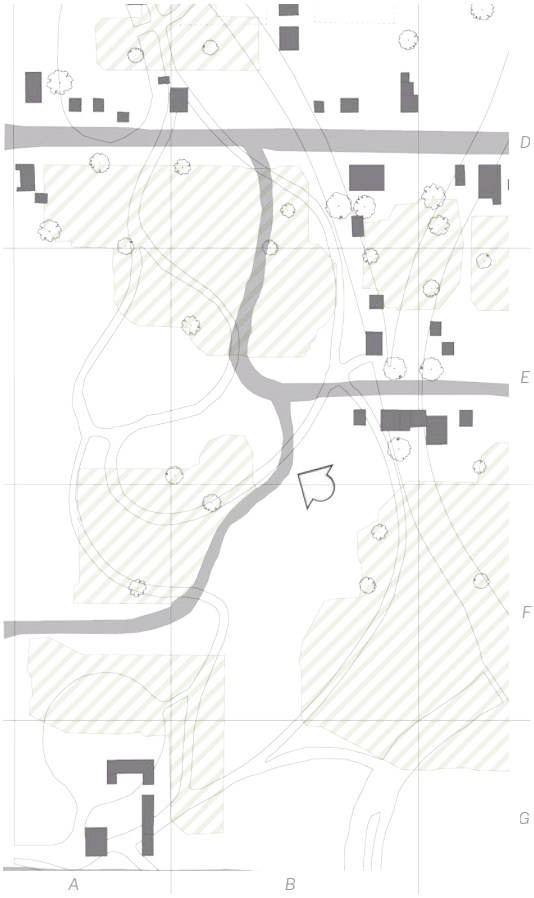
NANNY GOAT HILL

The highest point of natural elevation in Central Park is a giant outcrop of schist bedrock, 142 ft above sea level, today called Summit Rock. Seneca Villagers reportedly called it Nanny Goat Hill, likely reflecting how they used it to graze animals. From it, visitors today can still see the many bedrock outcrops that distinguish the landscape and made large-scale farming and construction difficult in the past, partially explaining the area's slow real estate development. The hill offered views of the rolling terrain of the nearby village of Bloomingdale, the Hudson River, and the Palisades of New Jersey to the west and the imposing Croton Receiving Reservoir and Yorkville to the east. To the south, the urban core of the city grew closer, reaching approximately 14th Street when Seneca Village began in 1825 and 42nd Street when the city destroyed the village in 1857. For more than 30 years, the hill sheltered a thriving community founded by African Americans.

Drawing of the view from Nanny Goat Hill looking west toward the Hudson and New Jersey.



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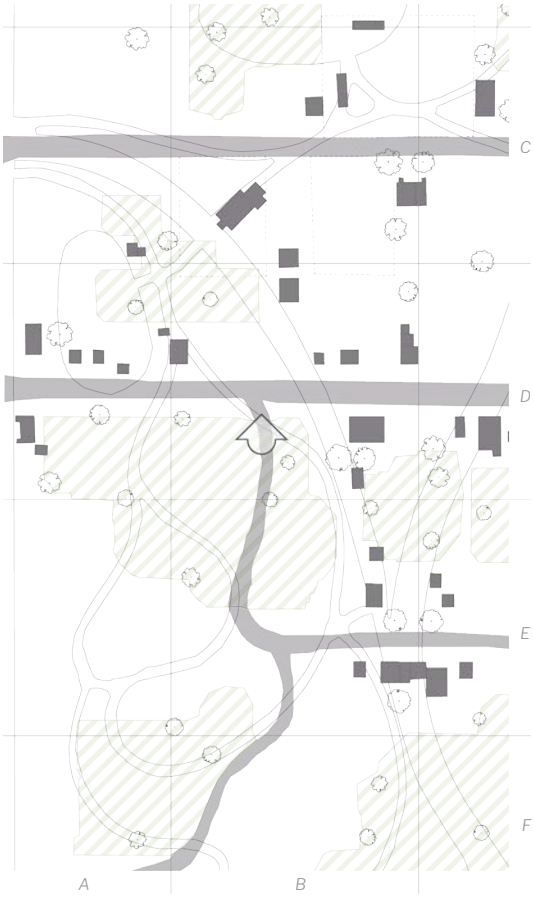
ORIGINS OF SENECA VILLAGE

In 1825, just before emancipation in NY state, a few African American men and women and the AME Zion Church purchased land from John and Elizabeth Whitehead, a white couple. Others followed. By 1857 about 50 families lived here—about ⅔ were Black and ⅓ white, most from Ireland. There were also three churches and a school. The village offered a safer environment than downtown, where epidemics and hostility to Black integration were rife. Property enabled Black men to vote (a requirement not applied to white men) and offered some economic freedom. Families provisioned themselves and supplemented wages by raising crops and animals. Some rented plots for income or to help relatives. Some journalists sought to diminish the place out of prejudice or to justify its destruction to build Central Park, but the village was not the poor shantytown they described. It was a flourishing, heterogeneous, and complex community. These notes highlight just a few of the village's features and families.



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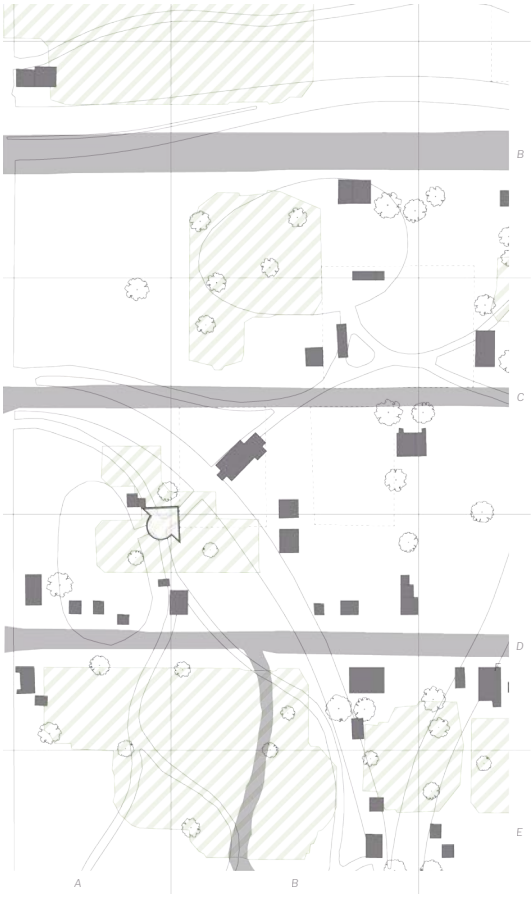
ALL ANGELS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH & CEMETERY

The village's three churches and a school were located at its center. All Angels' Episcopal Church was a racially integrated "mission" church of the wealthy white St. Michael's Church in Bloomingdale, whose clergy created a Sunday school in the village in 1833. By 1847, Rev. Thomas McClure Peters held church services in the home of white villagers William and Frances Evers. The church was built in 1849 for $2000 on property four Ludlow family sisters deeded for $1 to "always be used...solely for a site of a Protestant Episcopal Church...and for a place for the burial of deceased members of the Church." In 1857, the church was moved and reassembled at 81st St. and 11th Ave. Photos from 1887 and an 1850 Christian Witness and Church Advocate article inform our model that includes a fence, "quatrefoil window, peaked gable, and turret enclosing a small bell." The cemetery was the final resting place of many villagers.

Photograph of All Angels' Church in 1887.



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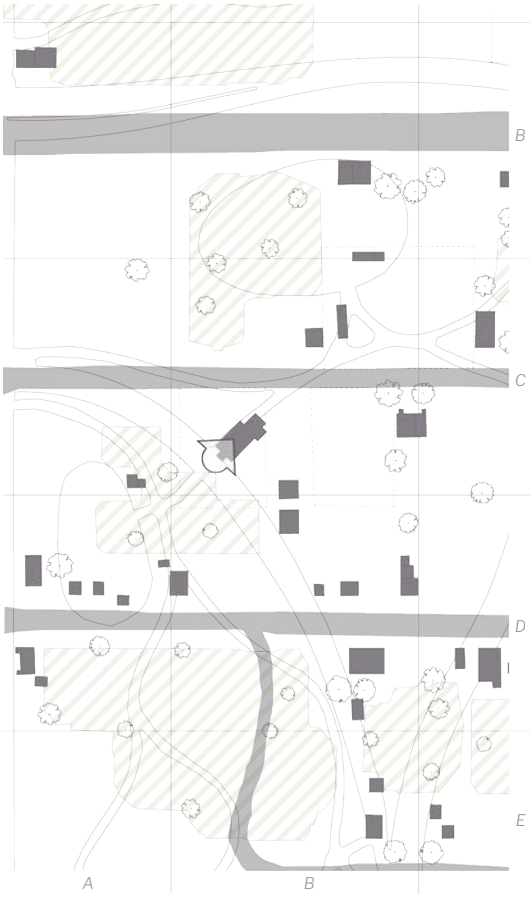
ALL ANGELS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH INTERIOR

According to the *Christian Witness and Church Advocate*, inside, there were three windows on each side of the nave and a triplet 7-by-9 ft. east window. The woodwork was pine painted to look like costlier black walnut. The interior of the church probably looked a lot like the photo of the interior in 1887. The 1855 census estimated that the building could seat two hundred people, but about thirty attended regularly. This church was cardinally aligned, with the altar facing east, unlike all other buildings in the village oriented to the city grid. All Angels' Church is the only village church with surviving parish records noting baptisms, marriages, and burials. These records provide us with invaluable information about relationships between villagers; a page from 1850 includes burials and baptisms of members of the interrelated Morris, Riddles, and Wilson families.

Photograph of the interior of All Angels' Church in 1887, looking toward the east-facing altar.



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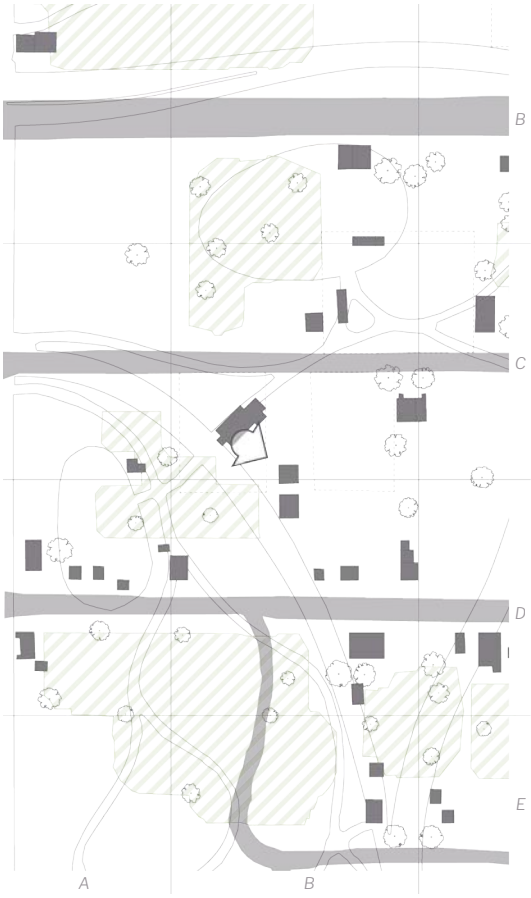
WILSON FAMILY HOUSE

Next to All Angels' Church was the Wilson family's home. Built ca.1849, the three-story, wood-frame structure sat on a foundation of local schist stones and mortar and had a red-brick chimney and a tin-coated iron roof. William Godfrey Wilson, 41 in 1855, was a porter and sexton (caretaker) of All Angels'. His wife, Charlotte Morris Wilson, 39, likely grew up in the village. Her mother, Nancy Morris, had owned land there since 1829, and her sister, Angelina Morris Riddles, later was also a village landowner. By 1857, the Wilsons had 9 children, between 19 years and a few months old, all living in the house. In 2011, a team of archaeologists and students excavated part of the remains of their home.

Photograph of part of the foundation of the Wilson home uncovered by archaeologists.



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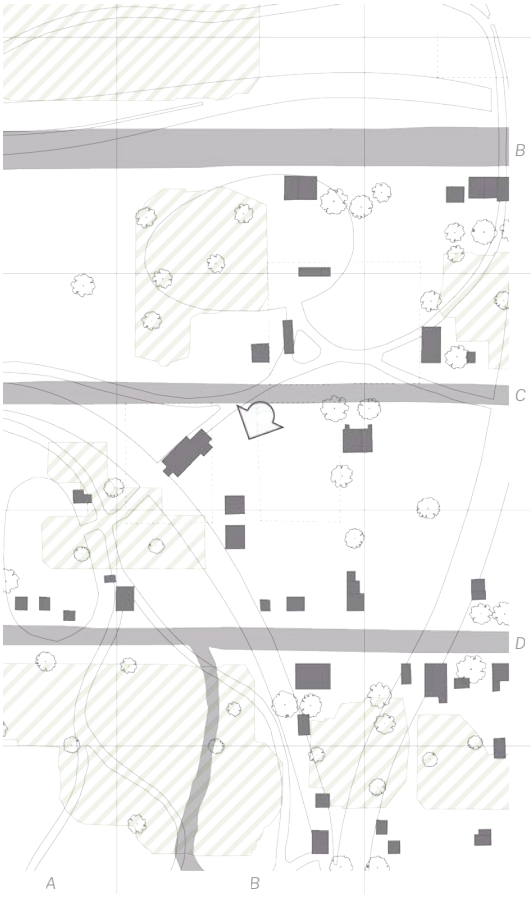
WILSON FAMILY HOUSE ARTIFACTS

Archaeological excavations unearthed possessions the Wilsons left behind when they were forced to leave their home that are clues about things they did, what they liked, what they could afford, and how they presented themselves. Artifacts include blue printed English dishes, a Chinese porcelain platter, flower pots, a bone toothbrush, a wool and leather shoe, and a blue-beaded necklace. These items express genteel taste and concern for hygiene and self-presentation. Stoneware jars, for preserving vegetables and meats, and a lead fishing weight, likely used to catch dinner in the nearby Hudson River, indicate self-provisioning. Slate pencils and censuses show the family's commitment to educating their children; census records indicate Mrs. Wilson learned to read and write alongside them.



Photograph of the archaeological team, mostly students, beginning excavations in the Wilson house area.

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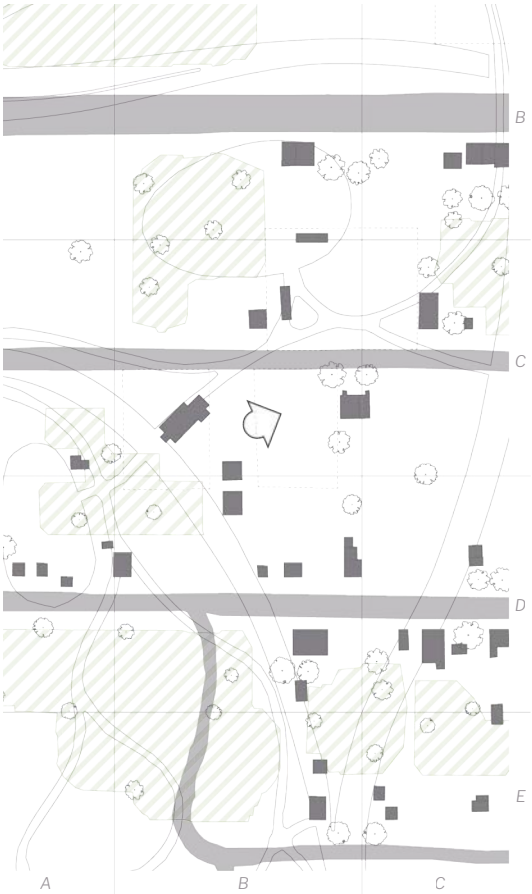
AFRICAN UNION CHURCH

African Union Church was the first church built in the village and one of two Black Methodist churches. Constructed around 1840 on land purchased in 1837, it was the satellite church of a larger one built on 15th St and 6th Ave in 1836. An article in *The Colored American* described the New York congregation as “a plain and exemplary people” and the Seneca Village church as “a small frame building.” The denomination was founded in Delaware, where one of the church’s preachers living in Seneca Village, William Mathew, also originated. By 1855, the state census described the building’s condition as “poor” and noted its capacity to seat 100 worshippers, though 50 usually attended. The church also had a cemetery. NYC death records at the Municipal Archives contain some information about individuals buried there.



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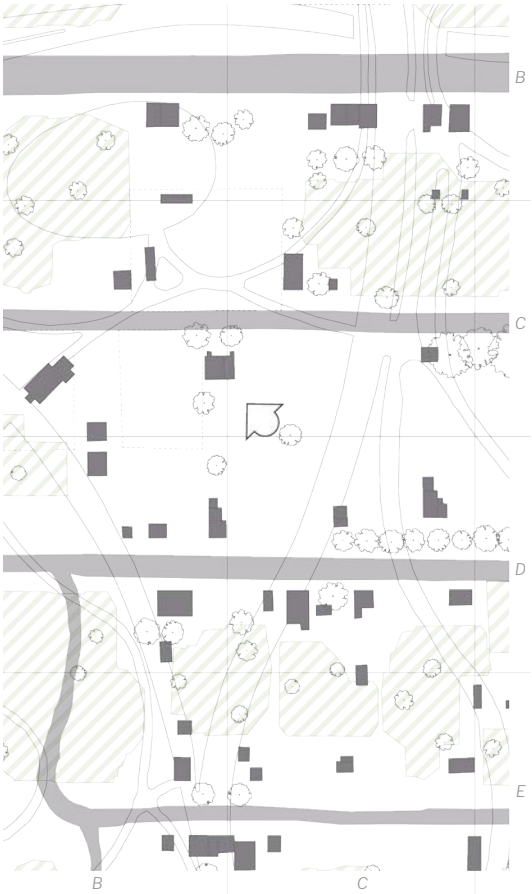
COLORED SCHOOL #3

Attached to African Union Church was Colored School #3, part of the city's segregated public school system. Teacher Caroline W. Simpson instructed children as young as 6 in primary subjects and likely older students in grammar, composition, history, geography, math, and astronomy (important for boys who would be sailors). The school probably hosted night classes in literacy for adults. African Free Schools, the precursor to NYC public schools, were first created by white elites of the New York Manumission Society in 1787. Many alumni became community leaders and advocated for abolition, equality, and education. Even so, inequality prevented many children in the city from going to school, because many families needed income from their children to survive. Evidence from documents and archaeology suggest conditions were better for children in Seneca Village and almost every child of school age (between the approximate ages of 4 and 14) attended school.



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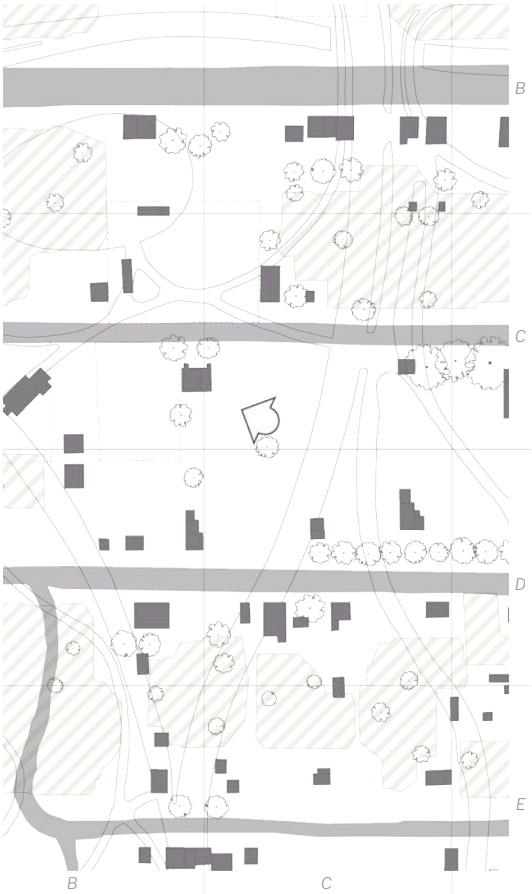
SCHOOL YARD & GAMES

About 60 children between age 4 and 14 lived in Seneca Village in 1855. Most attended school and helped their parents with a variety of chores—such as tending animals, gardens, and younger siblings, hauling water, running errands, sweeping yards, and other housework—but they also played. Compared to dense neighborhoods downtown where children entertained themselves on crowded streets, cramped backyards, or along the waterfront, Seneca Village offered children ample outdoor space, including rock outcrops and trees to climb, a varied topography to run around and play catch or hide and seek, and the school yard to play games during breaks. We interpreted the school yard as a play area showing typical 19th-century games, including two hopscotch courts with period-era layouts, three canvas balls, a wooden hoop which could be rolled on the ground or around the waist like a hula hoop, as well as toys such as dolls made from a corn husk, wooden spoon, and handkerchief, and a drum.



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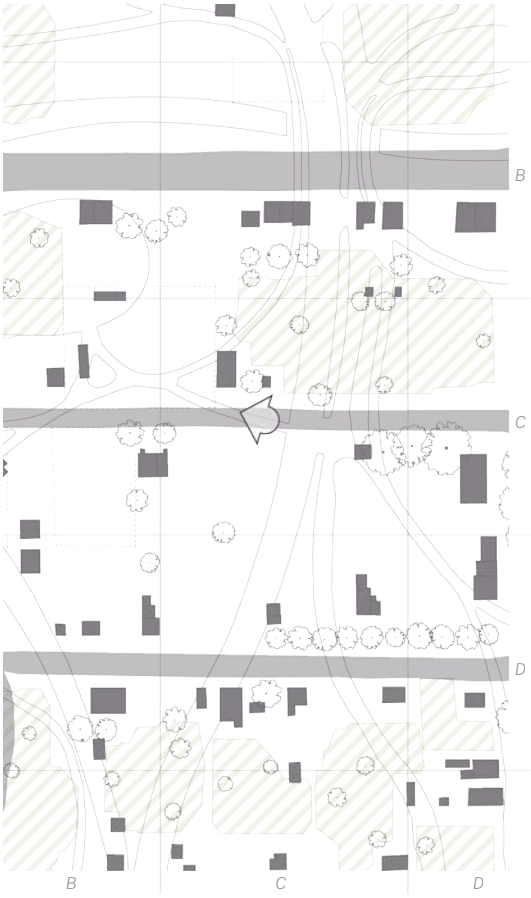
AME ZION CHURCH & GREENHOUSE

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and its members were the first village landowners. AME Zion broke from the John Street Methodist Church in 1796 and was the city's first Black church, dubbed the "Freedom Church" for its abolitionist work. In 1825, the church purchased land in Seneca Village for burial grounds—ground penetrating radar tests confirm burials remain today—but did not construct a building until 1853. This late date is strong evidence that residents did not anticipate the village's coming destruction. A *New-York Daily Tribune* article on laying the church's cornerstone reported 100 congregants and described the future church building as wooden, painted white, with a basement school room for the education of Black children. The 1856 Sage map, assessing properties the city would take for the park, shows a greenhouse on AME Zion's property, possibly owned and used by the neighboring Hampton family.



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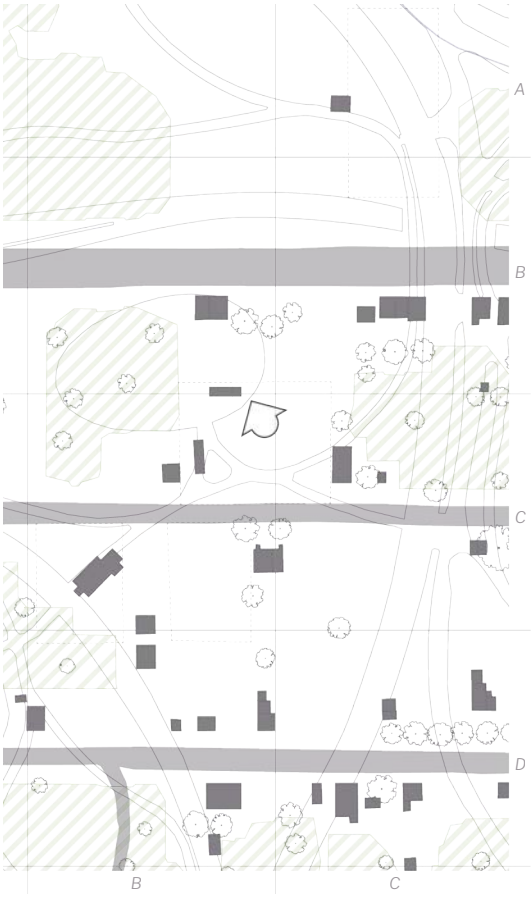
HAFF HOUSE & GARDEN

This large property once belonged to Levin Smith, a deacon and trustee of AME Zion, who built this house ca. 1829. From 1842 to 1857, it was the home of the Haffs, the only known US-born white family in the village in 1855. Mrs. Haff, born Ann Eliza Stillwell, was daughter of Rev. William M. Stillwell of the John St. Methodist Church, who ministered to the church's Black members after they formed AME Zion. Rev. Stillwell acquired the property after Smith defaulted on a mortgage and availed it to his son-in-law, John P. Haff. Haff was a successful gardener, awarded for his turnips at the American Institute of the City of New York's 1843 fair. He was also an innkeeper at Elm Park, an inn and horse racing and picnic ground at 9th Ave and 91st St. With links to AME Zion, Haff likely exchanged agricultural knowledge with neighbors, who had their own gardens and expertise. The 1855 census valued the frame home at $1500 and noted the Haffs' five children, ages 3 to 17.

Portrait of Levin Smith, deacon and trustee of the AME Zion Church, who built and owned the house later owned by the Haffs.



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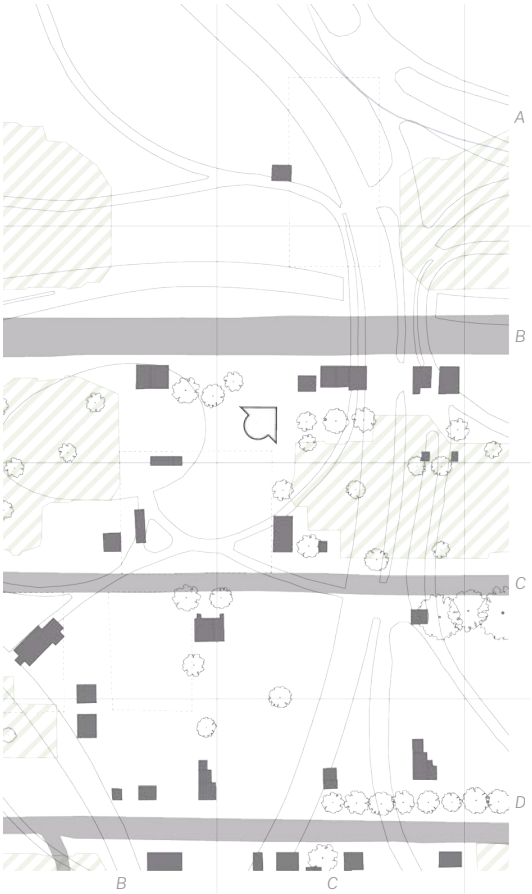
WILLIAMS HOUSE

Andrew Williams was the first person to buy land in Seneca Village in 1825, then a young NJ-born bootblack. In 1855, he was about 60 and a cartman. He and his wife, Elizabeth, 45, shared their home with son Jeremiah, 19, a waiter; his wife Ann, 28; and grandson Andrew Elias, 8, son of daughter Ellen. The Williamses were AME Zion members. Mr. Williams was also a member of the African Society for Mutual Relief. His property included two adjacent lots and a structure labeled "shanty" on the 1856 Sage map. The Williamses' daughter Ellen, 28, and her husband John F. Butler, 29, a laborer, lived there just beyond the trees—one of several cases where people listed as renters in the census were family members of village landowners. Mr. Williams objected in a formal letter to the small sum the city offered to compensate him for seizing his property. The only known descendants of Seneca Villagers are members of the Williams family.



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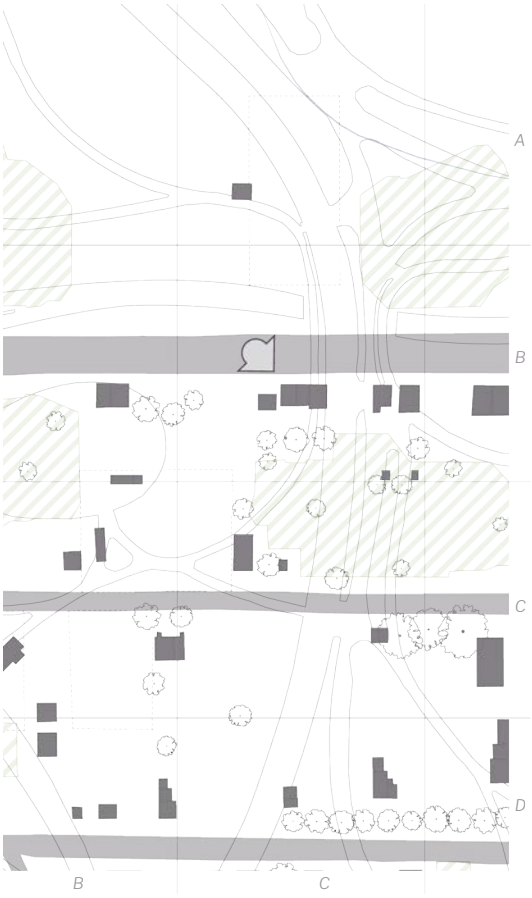
LANDIN HOUSE & STABLE

Next to the Williamses lived the Landins, whose three-story house was built in the 1830s. It included a two-story portion apparently rented to the Jackson family from Westchester Co. and an attached stable, one of only five in the village. Josiah Landin, 50 in 1855, was born in Georgia, while his wife Dinah (or Diana, records vary), 40, was born in New York. They had a large family, with at least six children of their own, many baptized at All Angels' Church. In 1855, their household included three of their own children, 18, 16, and 11, and two adopted grandchildren, infant sons of daughter Sarah, who had married John Peterson in 1852. An ambitious purchaser of land (owning $5000-worth in 1850), Mr. Landin became overextended and lost this property in a financial downturn, but rented it from the new landowner, white NJ merchant Andrew C. Zabriskie, whom he seems to have known. Landin was resourceful and also had a business planting ornamental shrubs.



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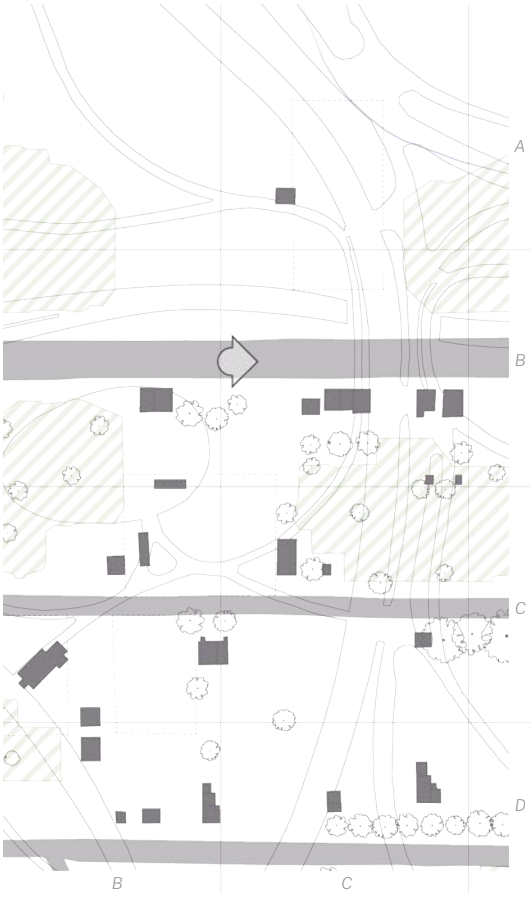
86TH STREET

The Williams, Landin, and McCollin houses fronted 86th Street, the busiest in the village. According to the 1855 Viele map, which assessed the topography and built environment of lands taken for Central Park, it was the only street wide enough for horse-drawn vehicles to cross Manhattan between 59th and 106th Streets. Running along the Croton Reservoir's northern side, 86th Street connected Yorkville on the East side with Bloomingdale on the West side. Contemporaries often referred to Seneca Village as Yorkville, reflecting its status as the most significant settlement north of 42nd Street. Seneca Villagers had ties to Yorkville–some had personal relations and others may have worked there as laborers or domestics. After Seneca Village's destruction, a few families moved there. We depict 86th Street with horse-drawn traffic to show how this street connected the village to other nearby villages and resources. Today, the 86th Transverse Road is one of three arteries crossing Central Park.



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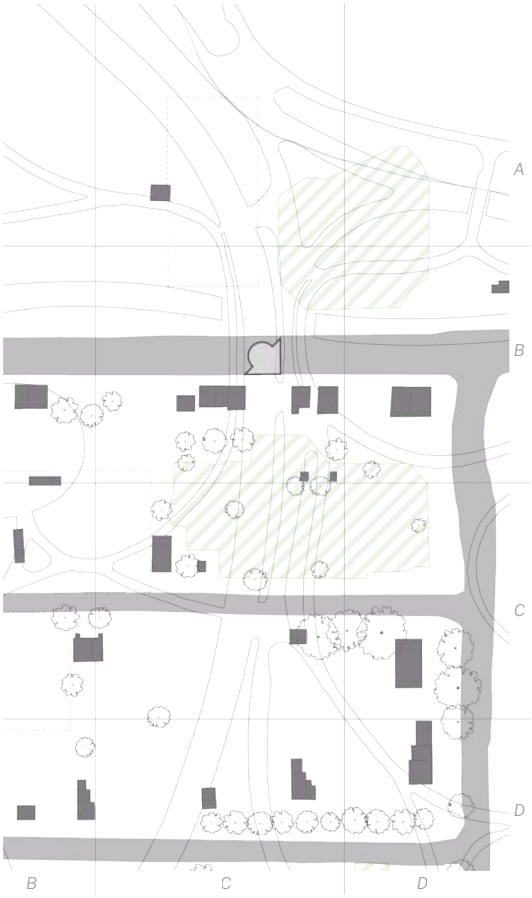
McCOLLIN HOUSES

This 1830s home was one of the village's three highest-valued in 1855 at $4000, owned by Westchester-born cook Obidiah McCollin, then 63. The high value was likely due to its better materials and looks, as it was no larger than other homes valued less. Next door was a house owned by his wife, Elizabeth Harding McCollin, 50, one of the first landowners in the village, who rented out this and at least one other property. They married in 1826 in the Methodist Church and were likely AME Zion members. Behind these houses were their outhouses and planted fields merging into land once belonging to Elizabeth's mother, Diana Harding. Her father, Samuel Harding, 94, may have been born enslaved on Staten Island. He lived with them in 1855, along with Frederick Riddles, 6, son of Charlotte Wilson's sister. The McCollins brought real estate savvy and food management skills to the village and were among several families who took relatives and friends into their home.



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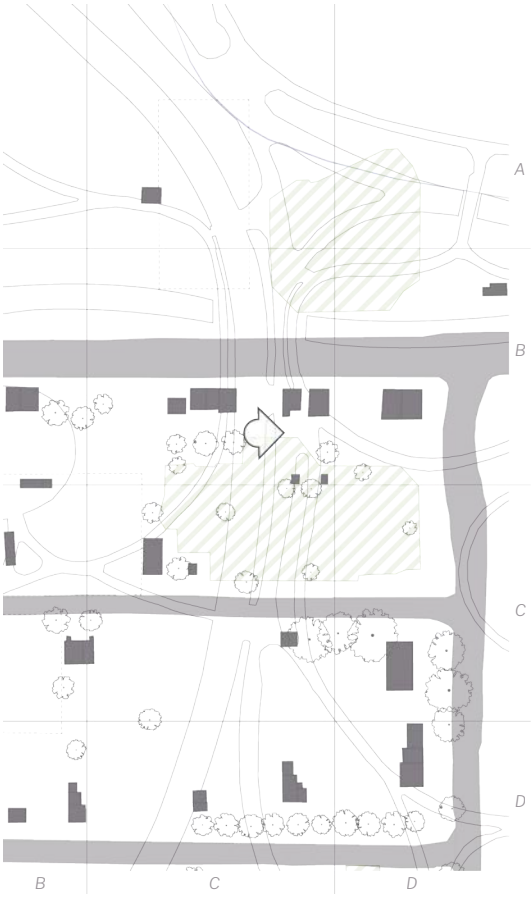
McCOLLIN OUTHOUSES

Two structures on the McCollins' properties are not labeled on the 1856 Sage map, but their size and location suggest they are outhouses, small wooden structures with one or more seats over a pit serving as a toilet. Village houses, like many in the city then, did not have indoor plumbing, and the city's patchy sewer system had not yet reached the area. Outhouses, or privies, were used by all social classes, as were chamber pots, vessels used indoors and emptied into privies. Growing concerns about hygiene and privacy, especially among the middle class, led people to place outhouses on property edges as far as possible from their homes. "Night-soil men" were paid to excavate privy shafts when full and cart away waste, which they dumped in the rivers or sold for fertilizer. Human and animal waste were valuable for enriching agricultural soils, and likely used in that way by Seneca Villagers. The McCollins' privies are among the few shown on the map and were thus likely more substantial than most.



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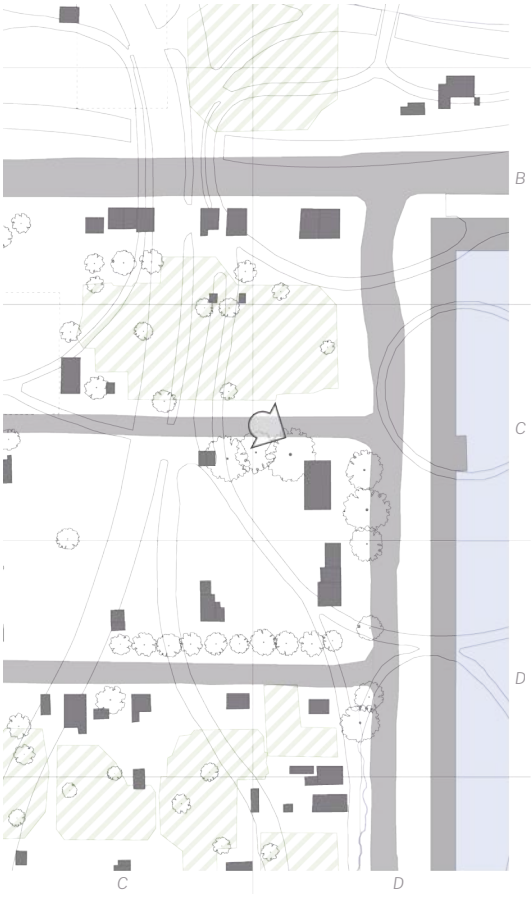
GEARY HOUSE

This home on a large property purchased in 1849 by the Corporation of the City of New York was dignified by a “piazza,” or covered porch. It was for use by the Croton Reservoir keeper, John Geary, 62 in 1855. Geary immigrated from Cork, Ireland, as a child and married NY-born Catherine McGlade in 1826. They had 14 children, per their family Bible, and were Roman Catholic. In 1855, their household was the largest in the village: 10 of their children, between 25 and 2 years old; a cousin, 46, working as a domestic; two step-grandchildren, 8 and 7; and a neighbor’s child, 8. Two of their older daughters were teachers, another a dressmaker, and a son a stonecutter. On the property south of the house were a shed, barn, and stable for domestic animals. To what extent the family was integrated into the village community is hard to know. The reservoir’s imposing structure was a visible footprint of the city, and the Gearys lived in the village because of John’s position as a city employee.



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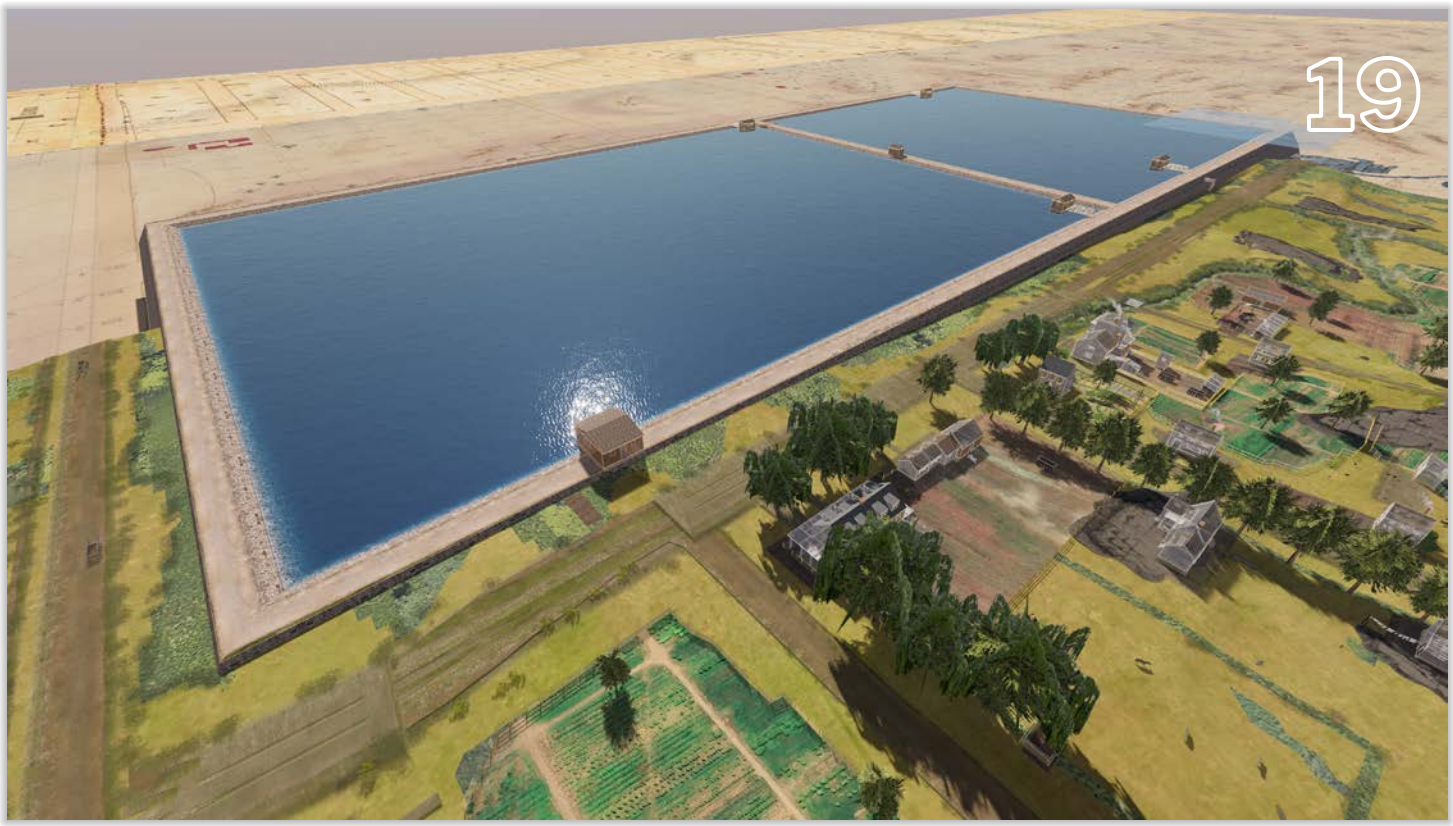

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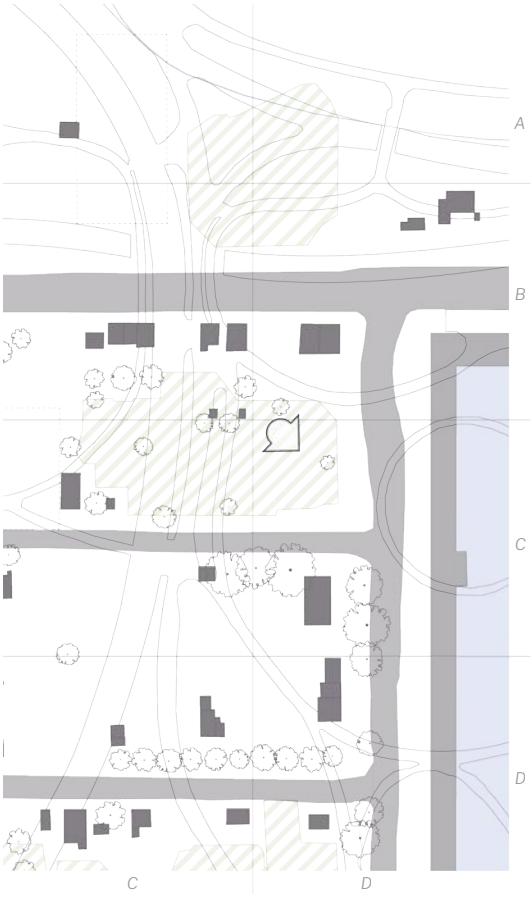
CROTON RECEIVING RESERVOIR

Opened in 1842, the Croton water system that brought clean water from upstate was an engineering marvel, and by far the city's costliest and largest public works, consisting of above and below-ground aqueducts, a Receiving Reservoir near Seneca Village, and one for distributing at today's Bryant Park. Visitors traveled by omnibus or private carriage to walk atop the fortress-like stone wall of the Receiving Reservoir. Seneca Village was in their view, but a contemporary sketch tellingly omits it. The reservoir impacted the village, however. It was a major construction site for years. Some villagers, many laborers, may have helped build it. The Croton system's excellent water was never piped to their homes, but they may have obtained it informally because the embankment was close to street grade at 86th Street. If so, they had a valuable resource, for Croton water was rarely available to working-class New Yorkers in downtown tenements or modest uptown homes until decades later.



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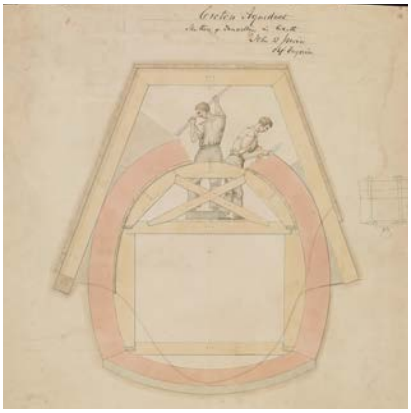
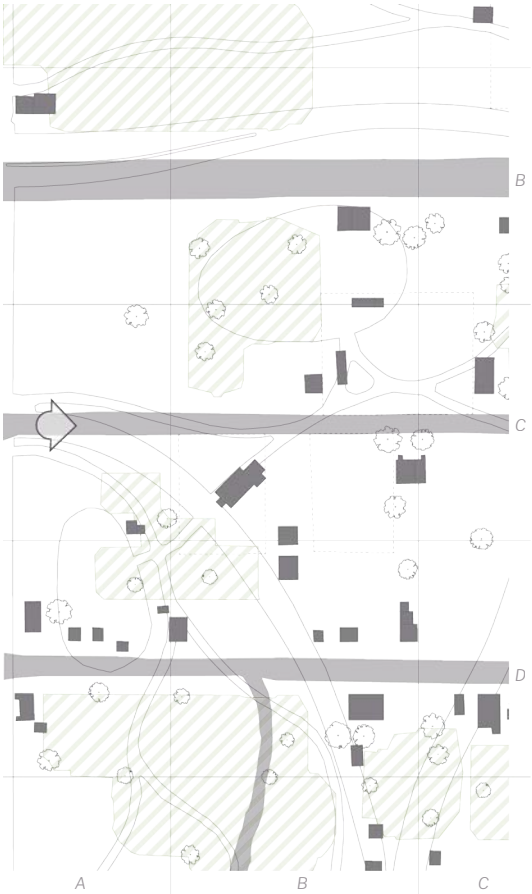
85TH STREET

The Receiving Reservoir was supplied with fresh water by the gravity-fed Croton Aqueduct, a 38-mile long brick masonry tunnel, with dimensions of circa 8 feet wide by 8 feet high—allowing aqueduct keepers to walk inside and inspect the structure.The aqueduct ran under or close to ground from the Old Croton Dam in Westchester County to the reservoir's influent gate at 85th Street. 85th Street was also the main public street of Seneca Village, with all three churches, the school house, and several homes, including the Wilsons', Gearys', and Hamptons' fronting it. To construct the aqueduct, which ran 5 to 10 feet beneath 85th Street, the street had to be excavated and then covered with a new surface sometime before 1842. To reflect this, we have depicted 85th Street with a better maintained quality and texture of dirt, and indicated the aqueduct underneath in dotted lines.



Drawing by John B. Jervis, Chief Engineer, showing how the underground Croton Aqueduct tunnels were built.



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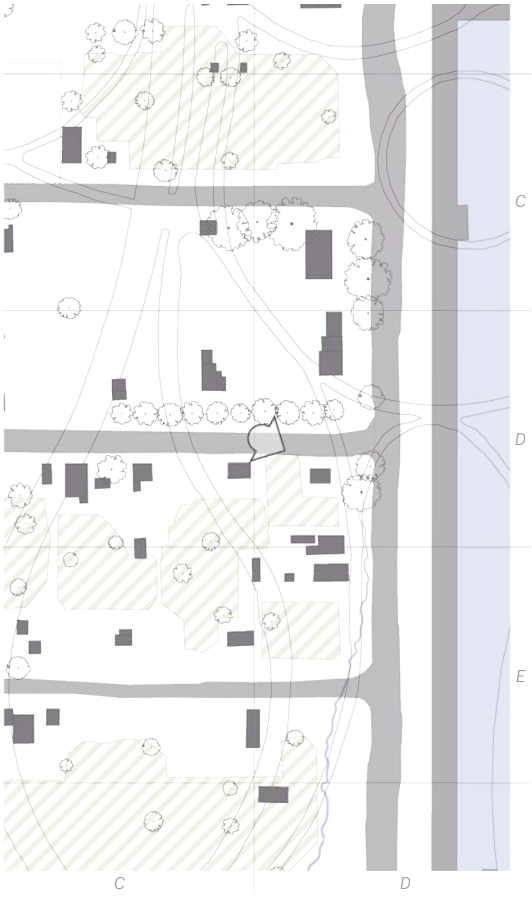
MATHEW HOUSE

Owned by William M. Mathew, this home was one of the three highest-valued in the village: $4000 in 1855. Mathew, 43, a whitewasher and African Union Church preacher, and his wife Ann, 30, were from Delaware. They shared their house with another Black family from Maryland, the Snowdens: Darius, 39, a waiter; wife Matilda, 28; and their two daughters, 11 and 9. Like Andrew Williams, Mathew petitioned the city for more compensation than the $1235 offered for taking his home of 23 years to build the park. He detailed improvements he had made “with a view to a permanent home”: he rebuilt the original (ca.1832) house in 1845, costing between $400 and $500; installed a well, $50; planted shrubs and fruit trees, $100; and raised the property to street grade, $50. Agricultural fields and fruit trees on the south side of the property and willow-like trees on the east side may have provided privacy from the Croton Reservoir. A stream also ran just east of the property.



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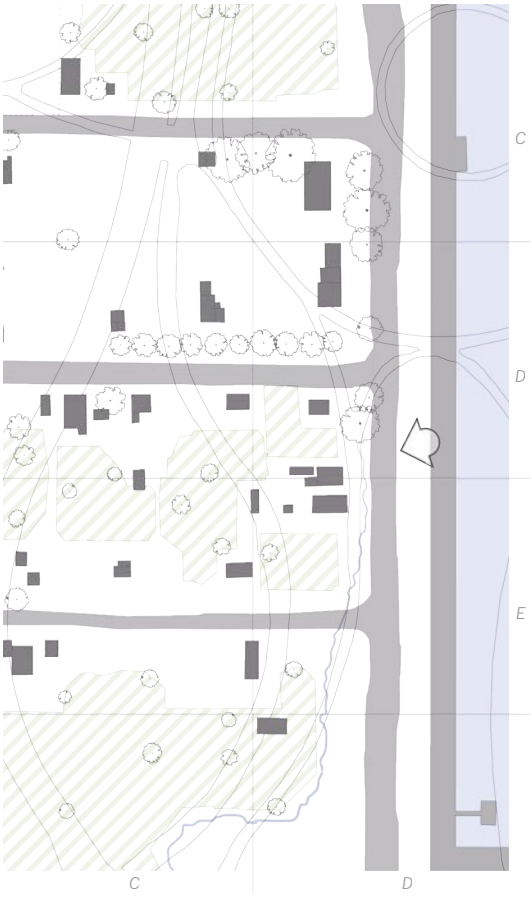
GARNET HOUSE

The home the Garnets built in 1837 was valued at $4000 in 1855 and was among the village's highest-valued (with the Mathews' and McCollins'). In 1855, Henry Garnet, 88, and wife Eliza, 61, both born in Maryland, lived with their niece, Mary Harris, 15 and a domestic, and a younger couple from Maryland, William and Anna McClaury. Mr. Garnet was a gardener and cultivated nearby fields. The Garnets fell into financial trouble in the 1840s, likely because Mr. Garnet's age limited the amount of work he could do and women's wages were very low. All Angels' Church assisted them: first, a wealthy member of St. Michael's paid their taxes; then, in 1851, Mr. Garnet took out a mortgage from Father Thomas McClure Peters of All Angels; and in 1853, the Garnets gave their property deed to him. The church's willingness to help the Garnets stay in their home suggests they were respected and valued members of the community.



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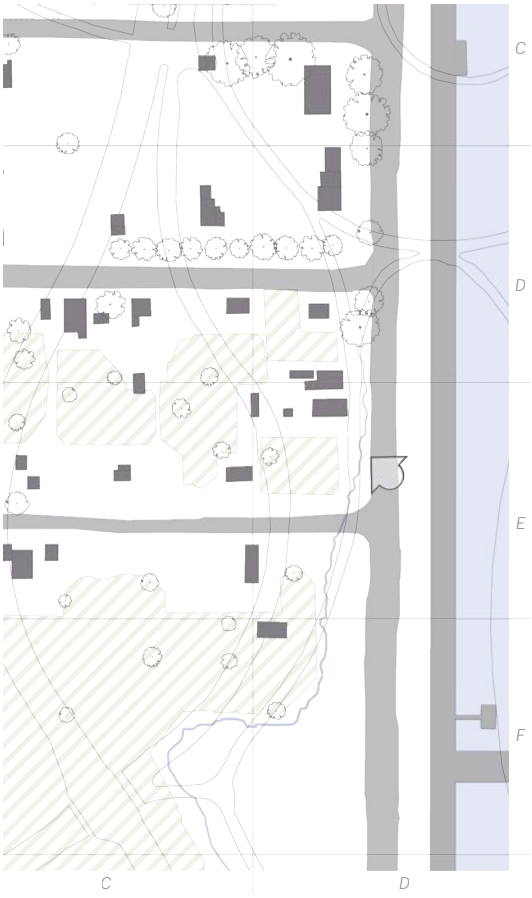
SYLVAN HOUSE

The Sylvan's home had a basement as well as front and back stoops, but was valued at half of the Garnet's. Charles Sylvan, 75, was a Haiti-born cook, who could have migrated during the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). We have interpreted his house with elements of Caribbean style. Sylvan likely spoke French, which might account for the variety of spellings of his surname in records made by English-speaking clerks: also Silvan, Silver, Silbon, Silben. Sylvan lived with his daughter, Charlot, 30, a domestic; son, Peter, 22, a coachman; daughter-in-law, Catherine, 25, also a domestic; grandson, George, 4; and another family: Virginia-born Methodist preacher John Jimmerson, wife Mary, and their young son, Isiah Stevens, from Mary's first marriage. The Sylvans rented on their former property, bought in 1829 and sold in 1840. Sylvan had a barn, suggesting they were among many families in the village who raised domestic animals. Barns provided housing for animals and storage for animal feed.



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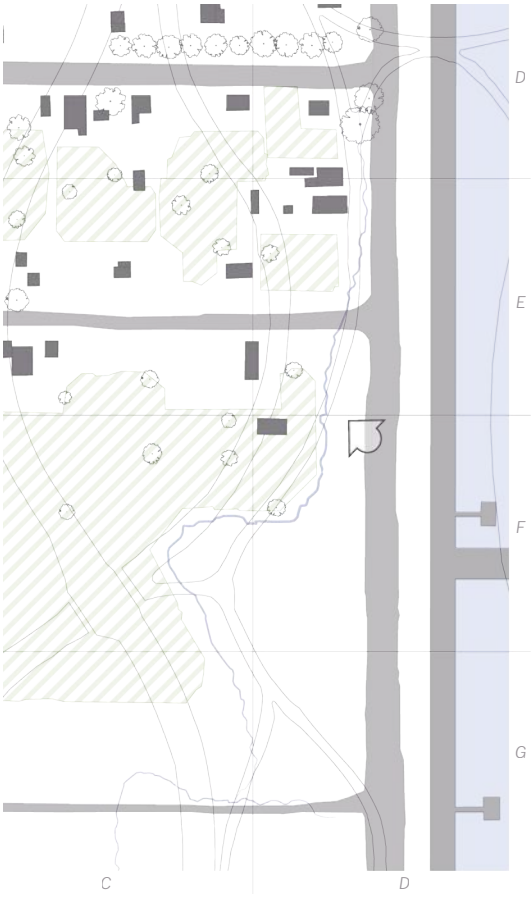
DUNN SHANTY, BARN, & STABLE

East of the Sylvans' was one of many homes labeled "shanty" on the 1856 Sage map. The term was often used pejoratively to mean informally built and run down, but evidence indicates shanties in the village were simply small one-story wooden houses. This one was anchored to a rock outcrop and sat above the fields. It was rented by Philip Dunn, 37, a milkman and policeman, and his wife Mary, 40, along with a boarder, all Irish-born. Mr. Dunn's business provided fresh milk for villagers—rare in the city where tainted milk was a major problem. His stable and barn (for horses to transport milk and for cows and hay) were nearby, close to the stream running near the Matthew, Garnet, and Sylvan homes. The Dunns were part of the village community. They rented land from Black landowner William Pease and were affiliated with All Angels' Church, as were the Peases, Wilsons, Landins, and the nearby Philipses and Websters. Their newborn son, John, was buried in the church's cemetery in 1850.



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SALLY WILSON HOUSE

A few steps north of the Dunns lived Sally Wilson, 59 in 1855, a Black washerwoman from Virginia, and her adopted Staten Island-born daughter Sarah Tredwell, 6. Advertised as a "handsome two-story frame house" when built in 1829, the 1855 census taker valued it the same as small village "shanties," $500, underlining inconsistent valuations. Here we interpret Mrs. Wilson's shed as a chicken coop, based on the cultural and economic importance of raising chickens and feasibility for an older woman and girl. Excavations did not find chicken bones, but village dogs would have eagerly consumed them. Planted fields were nearby. The land here still collects rainwater due to shallow clay and bedrock. Evidence from maps and archaeology indicate villagers' wise land use more broadly: damp areas for plants, drier areas for homes, rocky areas to graze animals. This directly refutes pro-park-construction newspaper articles that portrayed pre-park residents and their land as unproductive and dangerous.

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WEBSTER & PHILIPS HOUSES

George Webster purchased this large highly valued home with a basement, built ca. 1835, and shed in 1854, not long after its former owner, elderly widow Nancy Moore, died and only about a year before the first news of evictions. Webster, 32 in 1855, was from Virginia, his wife Eliza, 35, from New York. They had a young child together, George Jr., 2, and four older children from Eliza's first marriage: Malvina, 18; John, 16; Benjamin,13; and Edward, 7. George Sr. and John were porters. Malvina was a domestic and not much younger than the couple renting the small "shanty" next door, William Philips, 23, a laborer, and Matilda, in her early 20s. The Philipses had been married by All Angels' priest Father Peters in 1851. Their landlord, Elizabeth McCollin, likely had known Matilda as a child, because Matilda's family, the Scudders, long owned land in the village. The proximity of the Websters and the Philipses highlights the diversity of villagers' homes and life stages.

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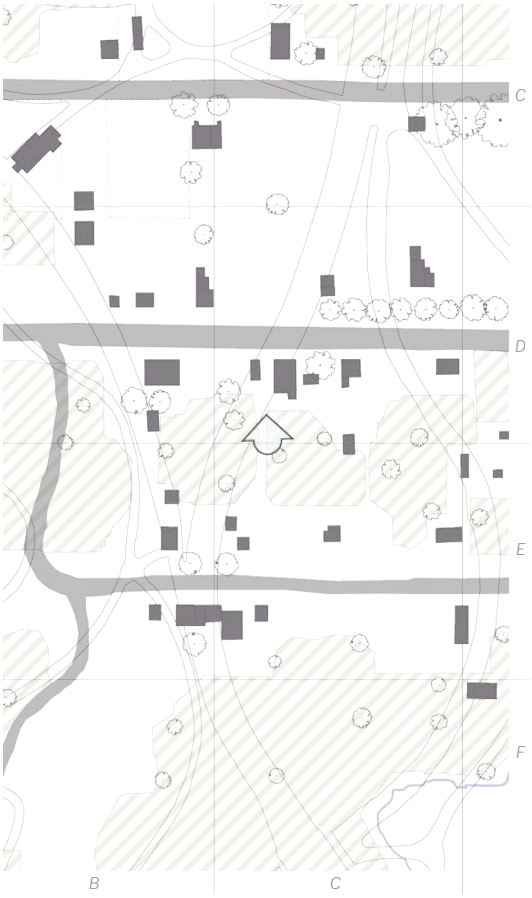
WEBSTER & PHILIPS HOUSE ARTIFACTS

Archaeologists excavated in the yard between the two homes, finding traces of both: chimney bricks, window glass, and iron nails. They also found pollen and plant remains indicating nearby food sources: berries (elderberry, raspberry, mulberry), nuts (chestnuts, walnuts), and edible plants (purslane), as well as medicinal herbs (goosefoot). Sheep, cow, and pig bones, ranging from head to hoof, suggest animals raised for food. Other artifacts hint at fashionable personal tastes and possibly wedding gifts, such as a gilded copper furniture ornament, a gilded brass button, likely from a man's coat sleeve, a gilded Chinese porcelain saucer, and a printed English teapot depicting the countryside near Florence, Italy. The teaware as well as tobacco pipes and an ale bottle evoke hosting friends and relaxing after work.

Photograph of a teapot, printed with the "Florentine" pattern, excavated from the yeard between the Webster and Philips houses.



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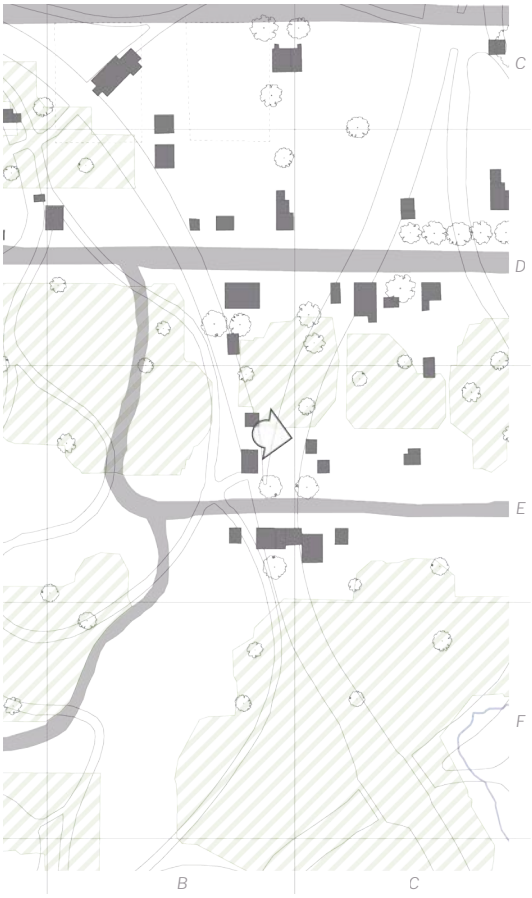
ISHMAEL ALLEN SHANTY & SHOP

Across planted fields to the southwest of the Websters and Philipses was a 9x10-foot “shanty” rented by church sexton Ishmael Allen, 40; wife Amy, 42; their four children aged 3 to 15, all NY-born; and boarder Lydia Jackson, 45, from Westchester County. The Allens were one of three families, along with the Wilsons and the Hinsons, the 1850 census taker recorded as “mulatto” or mixed-race in 1850, but the 1855 census taker recorded as “black.” These shifting categorizations reflect how race is and always was a powerful social construction rather than a biological reality. A small building labeled “shop” on the 1856 Sage map was likely Allen’s workshop, suggesting he had a skilled trade. We have interpreted his trade as blacksmithing, because of the importance of blacksmiths in free Black communities in the 19th century; many were leaders in their communities and churches.



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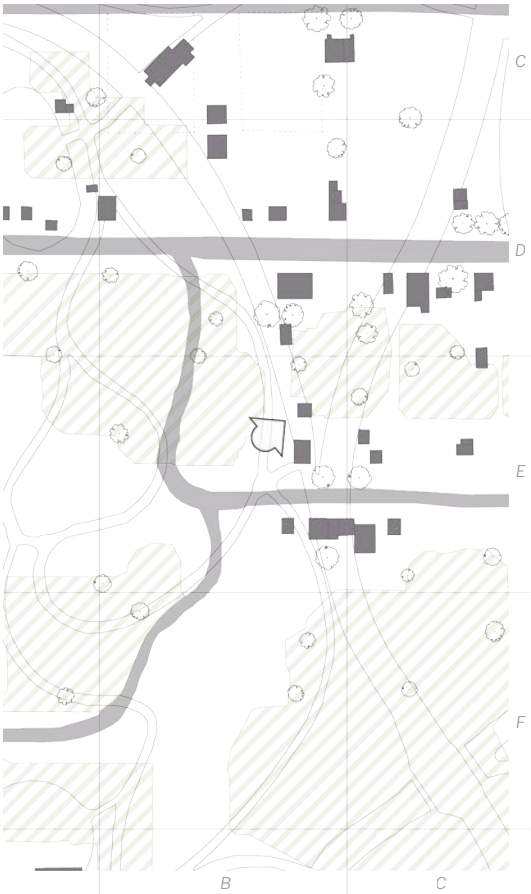
JOHN WHITE SHANTY

Nearby, John White, a 62-year-old widower and Delaware-born sailor, lived in this 13x13-foot “shanty” with six children aged 2 to 15 in 1855. White was one of many Black men in the city’s maritime industries. Work on a ship was dangerous and difficult, but offered opportunities for better pay and broader horizons. White’s neighbor, Maryland-born James Davis, 40, was also a sailor. Both lived in the village’s lowest-valued homes, $500 and $300. White rented from Lucy Celia Wallace, one of the village’s Black female landowners, who inherited property from her deceased father.



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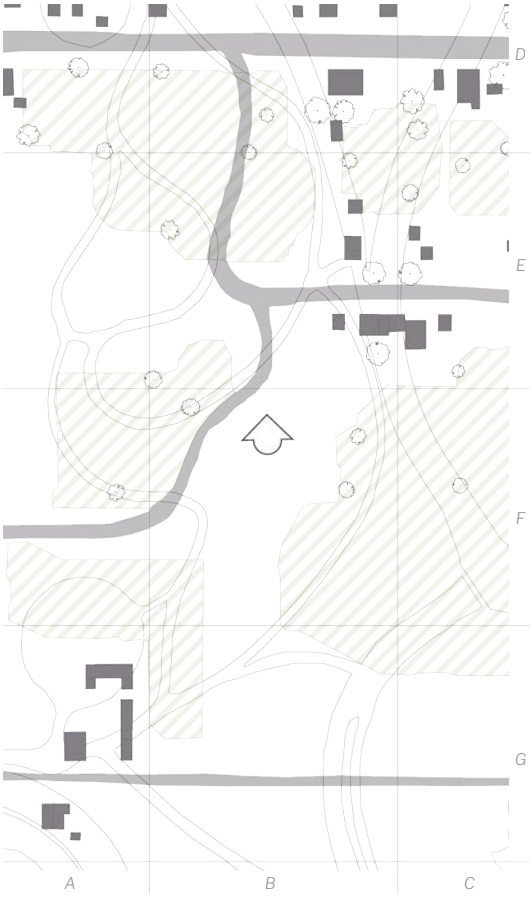
TANNER'S SPRING

Southwest of Davis and White's "shanties" was a natural spring, an important source of drinking water at a time when clean water was not accessible to all people in the city. Despite the success of the Croton water system and the proximity of its imposing reservoir, Seneca Villagers, like many other New Yorkers, did not have Croton water piped to their homes. William Matthew had a well that he paid someone the then substantial sum of $50 to dig on his property. It is possible that other villagers did so too, while others collected rainwater in barrels or cisterns, or hauled it from this spring or possibly from the reservoir along 86th Street. Dubbed "Tanner's Spring" in 1880, this was a place where groundwater continuously flowed up through the bedrock. Villagers would have kept the pool of water clean by containing and covering it with stones or wooden boards. The spring is still visible in the park today, but its appearance has been altered over time.

Photograph of Tanner's Spring in 1901.



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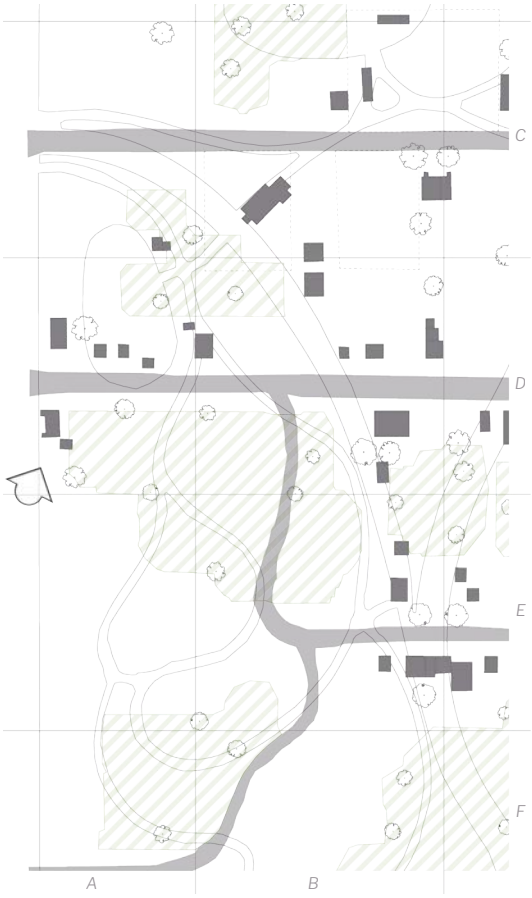
GALLAGHER HOUSE & STABLE

In this home in 1855 lived John Gallagher, 52, a shoemaker; his wife Anne, 42; their two children, aged 6 and 10; and Anne's father, Pat Donahue. The adults were born in Ireland and immigrated around 1840, a few years before the wave of Irish Famine refugees arrived in the city. The 1840 census suggests the Gallaghers immediately settled in Seneca Village, making them the village's earliest known Irish residents. Their small stable likely housed a horse or two, animals highly valued in Ireland. There were four other stables in the village: the reservoir keeper's (Gearys'), the Dunns' larger stables, and the one attached to the Landin's house. The presence of many horses in the village underscores their importance then for transportation and work moving goods, in which several residents were engaged—including three porters, two cartmen, and a driver according to the 1855 census. This work and appreciation for horses was a common link among some villagers of diverse backgrounds.



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CONCLUSION

The village's destruction in 1857 abruptly ended over 30 years of effort to nurture families, sustain livelihoods, and create community. The destruction was ruthless and unexpected, with many new buildings—a church, school, and homes—recently constructed. Some residents petitioned for more compensation. Others hastily packed and salvaged their belongings. All lost their community as families scattered. The Wilsons followed All Angels' Church to Bloomingdale; the Websters moved downtown; the McCollins and Gearys relocated to Yorkville; and the Dunns to Harlem, the Williamses to Queens, the Haffs to Brooklyn, the Peases to Oyster Bay, Long Island, and the Landens to Monmouth County, NJ. Research is ongoing, and we have only scratched the surface. We hope this visualization helps visitors imagine and remember this community sacrificed for a famous park.

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