



Seneca Village

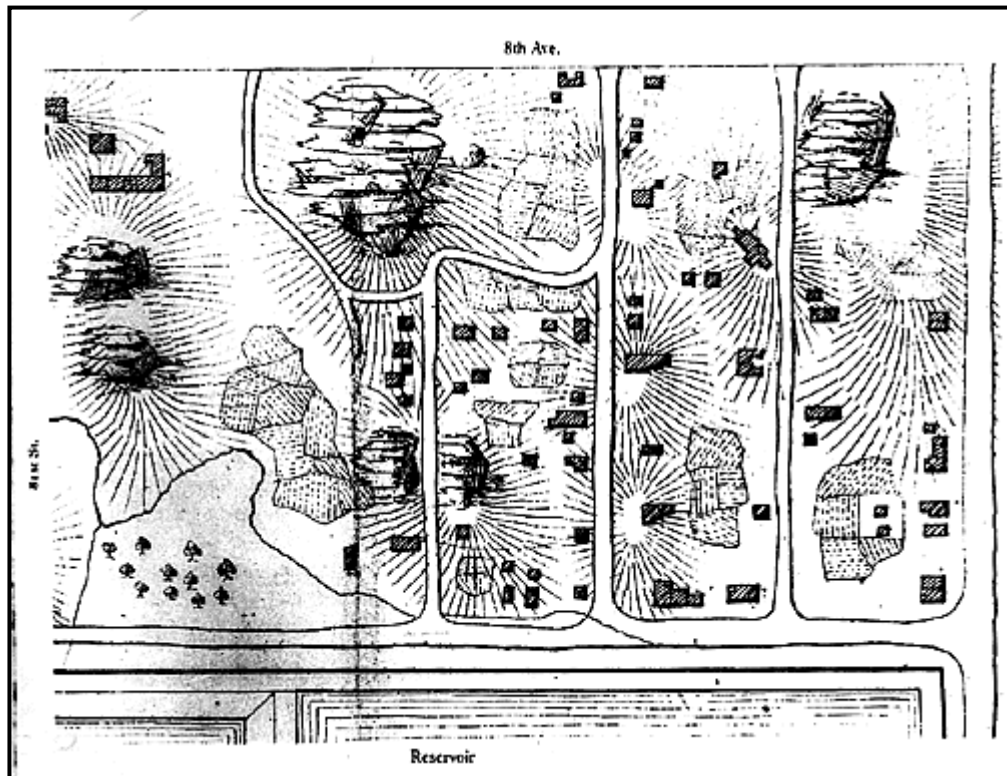
By *Marjorie Charlot

One of the major achievements of Blacks during and after slavery was their formation of their own communities. Some, like Seneca Village, were very successful. Unfortunately, many of these towns were deliberately destroyed. Seneca Village is just one example of such a community.

Seneca was located between what are now 82nd and 89th Streets and 7th and 8th Avenues.¹ No one is sure where the name “Seneca” came from, but some believe that it could have come from the name of the Seneca tribe of Native Americans or from a modification of the word Senegal, the country from which many of the village’s residents may have come. Another theory is that it may have been a code used by fugitives from the Underground Railroad or the name of Roman philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, whose book, *Morals*, was popular among African activists.² The village was often referred to as Yorkville, both on maps and in records; it may also be that the name “Seneca Village” was used as derogatory name for the area.³ According to census records and New York City directories, many of the founders of Seneca were free blacks. These records also show that Seneca’s black inhabitants were from various parts of the country, such as Virginia, Maryland, Connecticut, New Jersey, and various parts of Manhattan.⁴

* *Sankofa Griotte Journal* (Vol. 1, No. 1): 41–51.
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The village, which was located near Central Park in the West Eighties, was founded by Andrew Williams, a 25-year-old “bootblack” (shoe shiner). It began when Williams purchased three lots of farmland on September 27, 1825, between what are today 83rd and 88th Streets and 7th Avenue, for \$125, from a cartman, John Whitehead, and his wife, Elizabeth.⁵ Williams was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (A.M.E. Zion Church) and was also a trustee. His duties were to buy and maintain property. Williams was an active member in A.M.E. community organizations to “uplift the race.” He was also part of the Black suffrage movement, which was the fight for the right of African American males to vote.⁶



A map by Egbert Viele of Seneca Village in 1856, formerly located in today’s Central Park in Manhattan.[†]

[†] Map is from Wikipedia; the original source is *Seneca Village Projects* at <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/seneca/frame.html>.

The trustees of A.M.E. Zion Church (today known as Mother A.M.E. Zion Church) bought six lots near 86th Street to use as a cemetery. More lots were purchased by Epiphany Davis, a laborer and trustee member of the A.M.E. Zion Church, who bought 12 lots for \$578 on the same day that Williams purchased his lots. A.M.E. Zion bought six more lots a week later from the Whiteheads. The members of this community became the largest land-owning group of blacks in Manhattan. Between the years 1825 and 1832, Whitehead sold nearly all of his 50 remaining land parcels, 24 of which were sold to black families.⁷ By 1850, Seneca was called home by 20 percent of the city's 71 black landowners and 10 percent of its eligible voters. Residents apparently took great care of and pride in their community, for its black families did not leave; Seneca was described as "a neat little village" by the *New York Times*.⁸ African Americans who lived in this village would most likely have been allowed to vote since, at that time, in New York one was eligible to vote if he was a resident, landowner, and taxpayer. African American males in New York had to own \$250 in property in order to vote, according to the New York State Constitution of 1821.⁹ Thus, members of Seneca Village during the antebellum period were eligible to vote. Other landholders included:¹⁰

- **Diana and Elizabeth Harding** (may have been mother and daughter), who bought land between 1825 and 1827.
- **Obadiah McCollin** (a cook), the husband of Elizabeth Harding, who maintained ownership of her own land under her own name.
- **Nancy Morris**, who bought land in 1827. Thirty years later, the land was still owned by her daughter, Angelina, who would retain ownership of the family's property even when she and her husband, Peter Riddles, moved away. Their young son, Frederick, would remain in the care of the McCollin family.
- **Joseph Marshall**, an A.M.E. Zion Church member, who owned five lots and a house on Centre Street in lower Manhattan.

- Another family by the name **Treadwell**, who also bought land from the Whiteheads. In fact, in 1855, more than half of the Seneca residents owned property.¹¹
- **A.M.E. Zion Church**, which bought lots in 1825 and 1827. It started using some of its Seneca lots as a cemetery after the city transformed a potter's field into Washington Square in 1827.¹²

By 1829, Seneca Village had at least nine houses. Included in this number was the home of Andrew Williams.¹³

In addition to Seneca Village, another black settlement was located on York Hill during the second decade of the nineteenth century. It was also established by free blacks. When members of this community were forced to move by government-enforced evictions, they relocated to Seneca Village, increasing its size in the 1830s. York Hill was used to build the Croton Reservoir, which supplied New York City with water from 1842 to 1950s. By the end of the 1830s, the Seneca Village African American population had reached 100.¹⁴ The residents of Seneca earned their livings through service trades, such as working as domestics, waiters, and unskilled laborers. This description also matched that of the residents' Irish neighbors. Those who came close to middle class included William Pease, a black grocer; German Henry Meyers, also a grocer; and John Haff, an innkeeper who was born in New York. Many black women also worked as domestics or laundresses. Wives contributed to their family economies through housework, sewing, economizing on meal preparation, and scavenging for food, clothing, fuel, and implements that could be used by their own households or as trade goods in New York City's secondhand market.¹⁵

Although whites lived in Seneca during the 1840s, the majority did not arrive until after 1850. These new settlers were from Ireland, and they not only made Seneca multicultural but also increased its population size. They bought their land from the black landowners. Of the 250

people who lived there, two-thirds were black and one-third were Irish. In the 1850s, besides the Irish, German settlers also made up Seneca's cultural mix.¹⁶ Two Irish residents of Seneca, George Washington Plunkitt and Richard Croker, would later become infamous political leaders in New York City's Tammany Hall.¹⁷ Authors Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, in their text, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, wrote that:

Among black Seneca Village residents, landownership rates were extraordinarily high. With more than half the black households in Seneca Village in 1855 owning property, African-American residents there had a rate of property ownership five times as great as New Yorkers as a whole. In 1850, black Seneca Villagers were thirty-nine times as likely to own property as other black New Yorkers. Seneca Village's Irish households were not equally fortunate: only three of twenty-nine owned property and none of the recent Irish arrivals did. Irish immigrant settlers of Seneca Village in the 1850s faced some of the same problems as did black migrants to the north a century later: a narrowing of opportunities, in this case, less available land and higher prices.¹⁸

The integration of these two races was a harmonious one. The Seneca Village community included:¹⁹

- Two schools
- Three cemeteries
- Three churches

The all-black A.M.E. Zion Church was founded in New York in 1796 and described as the "largest and wealthiest church of colored people in this city, perhaps in this country."

A racially mixed Episcopalian congregation called All Angels was built in 1849 and affiliated with St. Michael's Church on Broadway at 99th Street. Its racial makeup included Africans, Irish, and Germans. Two-thirds of the names All Angels registered were African American. It was also the largest church in Seneca Village.

At the African Union Church, a school called Colored School #3 was founded in the basement in the 1840. It was one of the few black schools in New York at the time.²⁰ Its schoolteacher was 17-year-old Catherine Thompson, who also lived in the village. As a website entitled *The Seneca Village Project* states: "A description of the school appears in an appeal for better schools for African Americans written by the New York Society for the Promotion of Education Among

Colored Children—an African American organization that made a presentation to a special commission appointed by the governor in 1857 to investigate the city’s schools: “c. School #3 for colored children, in Yorkville, is an old building, is well attended, and deserves, in connection with Schoolhouse No. 4, in Harlem, a new building between the present localities.”²¹

- Shops

Blacks in this community took such great pride in their accomplishments that they would not use the words “colored” or “Negro,” but instead used the word “African” to show pride in their African ancestry. Two churches even adopted this form of address. These included the African Union Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.²² Seneca supported itself for 20 years through ties within the community, such as friendship and marriage.

In 1833, William Cullen Bryant, the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, started a movement to set aside undeveloped land before Manhattan was overtaken by urban growth. He campaigned for this on the editorial page of his newspaper in 1844, stating that Manhattan Island needed a park like those found in European countries. He wanted it to be just as large as its European counterparts.²³ In 1853, Seneca Village was bought out and/or taken away from blacks to make way for Central Park. Those who could not be bought out were driven out by the police.²⁴ The encounter between residents and the police was reported in the *New York Daily Times* on July 9, 1856. The article stated: “The policemen find it difficult to persuade them out of the idea which has possessed their simple minds, that the sole object of the authorities in making the Park is to procure their expulsion from the homes which they occupy.”²⁵ Seneca Village was also described as “Nigger Village” in newspaper articles of the 1850s.²⁶ To gain support and to justify their actions in destroying Seneca, a campaign was started to cast a negative image on the village by describing it as “rundown and seedy” or a “wasteland” that was home to “squatters” living in “shanties.”²⁷ This was far from the truth. It was not a wasteland, since some members

paid taxes—a fact verified by tax records of the time. Nor was it a temporary community overrun by “squatters”; it was founded by blacks in 1840, and these individuals and members of their families were still living there 15 years later. The state was able to take their land because, in 1853, the state legislature had authorized “eminent domain,” which meant properties that were once privately owned could be taken away from their owners and used for public purposes. In total, 1,600 people who had land, jobs, or homes on the 842-acre tract of land were displaced. Andrew Williams and several others were not happy, to say the least, and some took their cases all the way to the Supreme Court.²⁸ It also seemed that the state did not pay the true value of the properties; the land was taken away before the owners could contest the amount of the settlement.²⁹ Thirty years later, Andrew Williams, the founder of Seneca, received \$2,335 from the city for his three lots and his two-story house.³⁰

Once it was taken from them, the residents of Seneca never reestablished their village, and residents were scattered throughout the city.³¹ In 1871, nearly 20 years after the Seneca residents left, laborers creating a new entrance to the park at 85th Street and 8th Avenue found a coffin of a “negro” boy. This would not be an isolated incident, for over 50 years later, a human skull was found—and, later, an entire graveyard. This cemetery was found by park gardener Gilhooley and later became known as Gilhooley’s Burial Plot. An article that appeared in the *New Yorker* described the cemetery as “filled with the bones of tramps and squatters who lived in the Park a hundred or so years ago.”³² Years later, the lies told to defend destroying the village were still being published; however, the residents were far from being tramps and squatters. They created a community for themselves that proved to be stable and which was taken care of by its residents for years. Blacks founded and built Seneca Village, and to its residents, it was a utopia where members of the community were not only allowed to own land but where

landowners had the right to vote, giving them a voice in the world outside their village. Residents would help one another, and they also opened their doors to non–African Americans.

Unfortunately, this utopia faced a brutal awakening when racism and class came into play. Racism occurs when one group aspires to have a social hierarchy and privileges that override the needs of another group of a lesser social standing. Although Central Park is among New York’s many jewels and is loved by New Yorkers, the truth of the matter is that it was built mainly to benefit real estate tycoons at the expense of others who could not fight racism and the overwhelming wealth of a select few.

Today, the only proof of the existence of Seneca Village is a plaque placed in 2001 by the Central Park Conservancy as a commemoration.³³ In addition to the two communities mentioned, Seneca Village and York Hill, other black communities in Manhattan were San Juan, Little Africa (now Greenwich Village), the Tenderloin, Black Bohemia, and the Five Points.

Notes

¹ Linda Tarrant-Reid, *Discovering Black New York: A Guide to the City’s Most Important African American Landmarks, Restaurants, Museums, Historical Sites, and More* (New York: Citadel Press Kensington Publishing Corp, 2001), 35; Antoinette Mullins, *A Village Vanished: Seneca Village* (Web), February 9, 2007, <http://www.harlemlive.org/community/parks/senecavillage/seneca.html>; William Loren Katz, *Black Legacy: A History of New York’s African Americans* (New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 1997), 79–80.

² Erica Pearson, “Death of Seneca Village,” *Gotham Gazette*. July 7, 2003. Web. February 18, 2004. <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/20030721/200/465>.

³ ILT Institute for Learning Technologies at Teacher College, Columbia University, *Seneca Village Project*, the Education Department of the [New-York Historical Society](#) and [the New York Public Library, Office of Young Adult Services](#) (Web), February 9, 2007, <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/seneca/village2a.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Tarrant-Reid, 35; Katz, 80.

⁶ Seneca Village Project.

⁷ Tarrant-Reid, 35; Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 65; Pearson.

⁸ Howard Dodson, Christopher Moore, and Roberta Yancy, *The Black New Yorker: The Schomburg Illustrated Chronology* (New York: John Wiley & Son, Inc., 2000), 74; Katz, 80.

⁹ Tarrant-Reid, 35; Pearson.

¹⁰ Rosenzweig, 67–68.

¹¹ Ibid., 67–68.

¹² Ibid., 70–71.

¹³ Ibid., 68–69.

¹⁴ Mullins; Seneca Village Project.

¹⁵ Rosenzweig, 68–69.

¹⁶ Ric Burns, James Sanders, and Lisa Ades, *New York: An Illustrated History* (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1999), 114; Central Park Virtual Park, “Full Text of the Plaque Commemorating Seneca Village” (Web) (2006), February 9, 2007, <http://www.centralparknyc.org/virtualpark/thegreatlawn/senecavillage/>; Dodson, 81; Rosenzweig, 72; Mullins.

¹⁷ Seneca Village Project.

¹⁸ Rosenzweig, 70–71.

¹⁹ Ric Burns, James Sanders, and Lisa Ades, *New York: An Illustrated History*, New York: Knopf, 1999), 114; Central Park Virtual Park; Dodson, 81; Rosenzweig, 72; Mullins.

²⁰ Rosenzweig, 70; Mullins; Central Park Virtual Park.

²¹ Seneca Village Project.

²² Mullins.

²³ Columbia University, “History of the Community,” *Seneca Village Project, The History and Archaeology of a Community of African American & Irish Immigrants in Nineteenth Century New York City*, accessed February 9, 2007, http://www.mcah.columbia.edu/seneca_village/htm/history.htm.

²⁴ Katz, 80.

²⁵ Pearson.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dodson, 81.

²⁸ Central Park Virtual Park.

²⁹ Central Park Virtual Park.

³⁰ Rosenzweig, 88.

³¹ Central Park Virtual Park.

³² Rosenzweig, 89.

³³ Pearson.