

Understanding the Racial Wealth Gap

Unit by The Racial Justice Organizing Committee,
part of the 2021 cohort of *The 1619 Project* Education Network

“The Death of the Black Utopia by Brent Staples for *The New York Times*



New York City embraced willful amnesia when landscapers working at the western edge of Central Park unearthed two coffins in August of 1871...

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— told what should have been a familiar story. Less than a decade and a half earlier, the city had cleared the way for its hallowed park by evicting 1,600 or so people who lived on the land. Among those displaced were the residents of Seneca Village, Manhattan’s first significant settlement of black property owners and the epicenter of black political power in Manhattan during the mid-19th century. The village occupied land along what is now Central Park’s western edge, between roughly 83rd and 89th Streets.

From its modest beginnings in 1825, the village had grown over three decades to include homes, gardens, a school, cemeteries and perhaps as many as 300 residents. By the time it was razed more than 30 years later, the settlement counted several distinguished citizens among its property owners. Nevertheless, real estate interests and their minions in the press set the stage for what the writer James Baldwin would later describe as “Negro removal” by defaming the flourishing enclave as a “shantytown” and a “nigger village.”

New York City embraced willful amnesia when landscapers working at the western edge of Central Park unearthed two coffins in August of 1871. An engraved plate on a richly appointed rosewood coffin identified the deceased as Margaret McIntay, buried two decades earlier at the age of “sixteen years, three months and fourteen days.” A more modest box found not far away contained the remains of an unidentified black person described in the press as “decomposed beyond recognition.”

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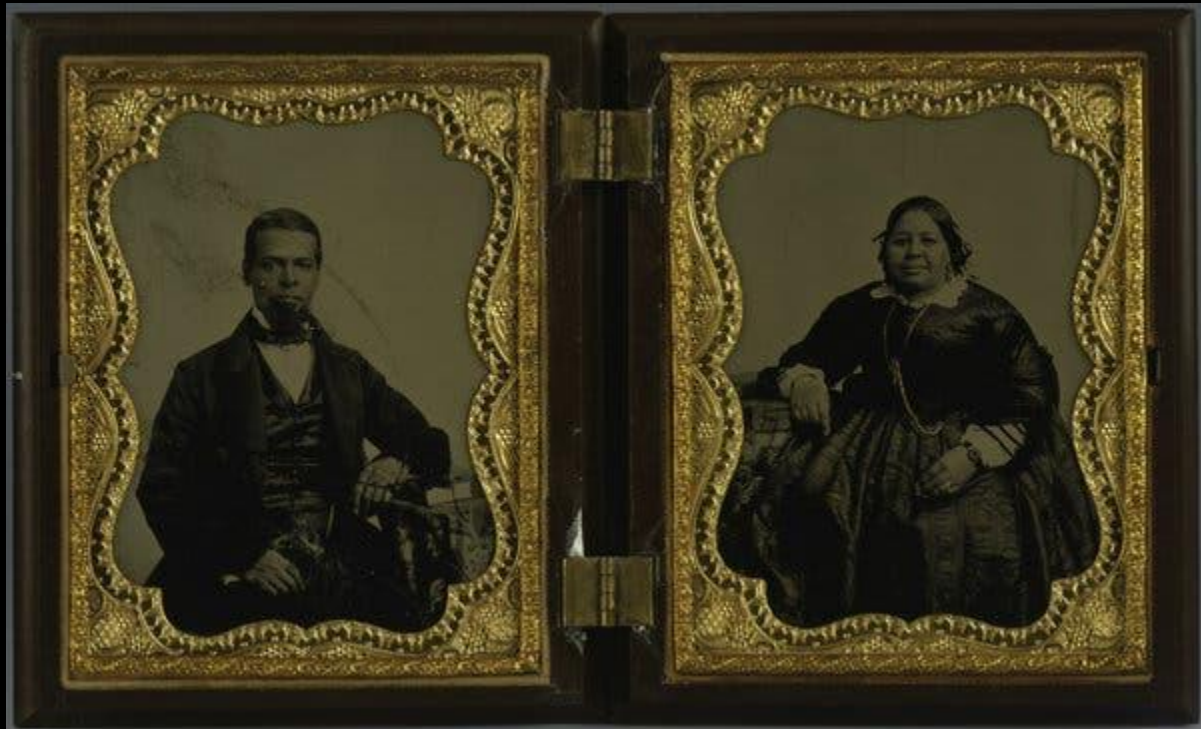


The site of the African Union Methodist Church in what was Seneca Village, now part of Central Park. Credit...Joshua Bright for The New York Times

As the historian Leslie M. Alexander shows in her book on black activism in early New York City, defamation had done its work by the time the landscapers uncovered the forgotten dead in 1871. Less than 15 years after an eviction process that had been documented in the press and in the courts, few New Yorkers remembered that park construction had swept away a community. The story had been eclipsed by the cultural forgetting that often cuts black

achievements out of history, Ms. Alexander writes, and “was effectively erased from the memory of New York City...”

...Mayor Bill de Blasio has wisely seized on the Seneca Village revival to underscore the need for remaking the lily-white landscape of historical monuments in New York. The mayor’s [planned Central Park monument](#) will celebrate the heroic Lyons family, charter members of the New York City [free black elite](#) who owned land in Seneca Village and ran a stop on the Underground Railroad in Manhattan that sheltered hundreds of escapees from slavery.

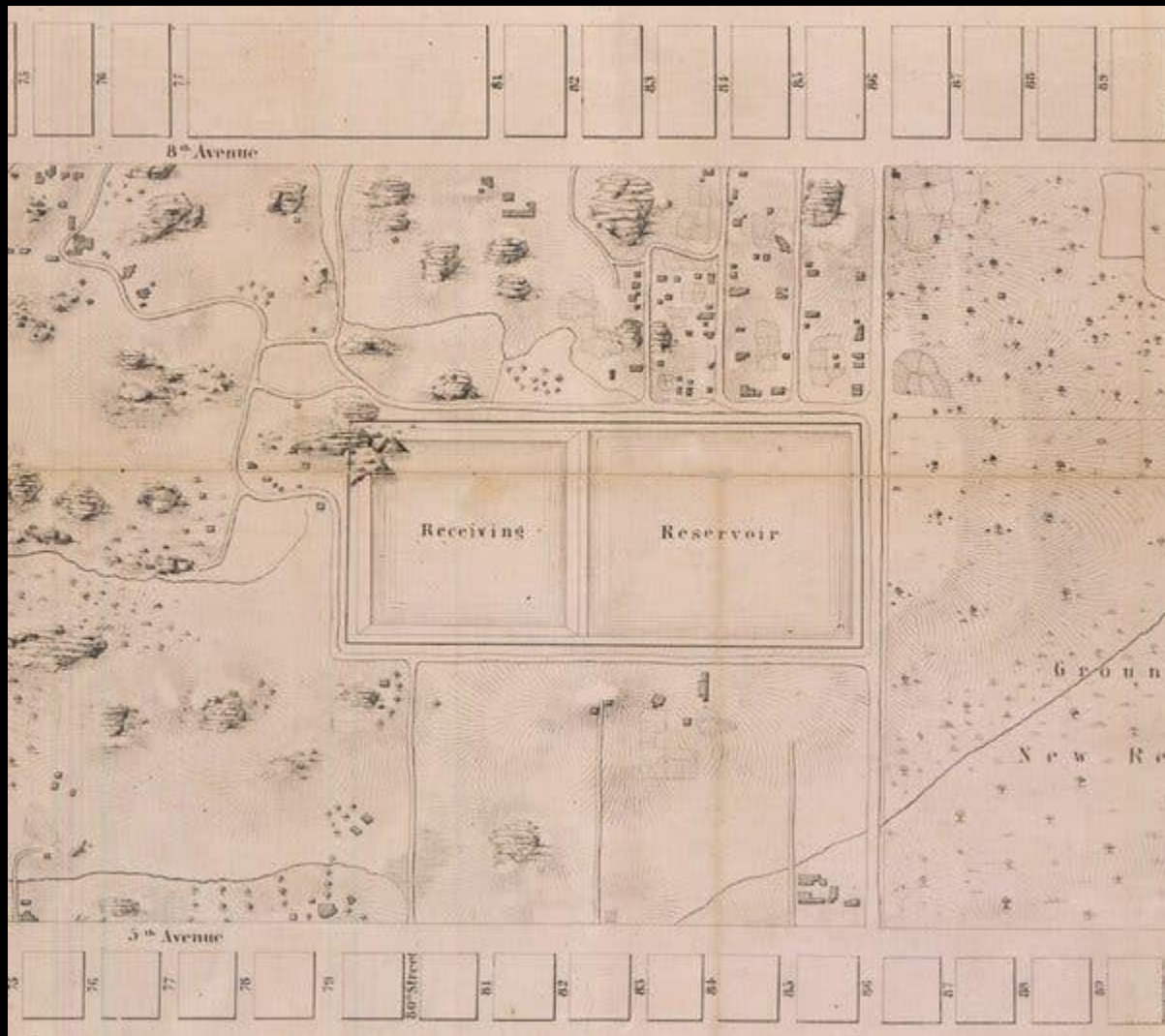


Albro Lyons Sr. and his wife, Mary Joseph Lyons, Seneca Village landowners and conductors on the Underground Railroad. Credit...Smith Collection/Gado, via Getty Images

The successful businessman and racial justice advocate Albro Lyons had deep roots in the churches and voluntary associations that championed racial justice in 19th-century Manhattan. He graduated from the first African Free School founded by the New York Manumission Society, a wealthy group of white men that included people like Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. The school produced other members of the African-American elite, including the internationally renowned Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, the abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet and James McCune Smith, the first African-American to receive a medical degree.

Albro Lyons and his wife, Mary Joseph Lyons — also from a free family — ran a boardinghouse for African-American sailors that served as the perfect cover for an Underground Railroad operation. Their daughter, Maritcha Remond Lyons, was a teacher, feminist and popular public speaker who chronicled the family’s story in a memoir that provides a rare window into that era of black activism in the city.

By elevating this family, New York City is drawing an explicit connection between the aspirations that Seneca Village represented for the black families who invested in property there and the racial terrorism that African-Americans, including the Lyons family, often faced in crowded upstart Lower Manhattan.



Topographical Survey for the Improvement of Central Park in 1856. Seneca Village ran from roughly 83rd Street to 89th Street on the western perimeter. Credit... Egbert Viele/Topographical Survey for the Improvement of Central Park.

SUPREME COURT.

In the matter of the Application of the Mayor,
Aldermen and Commonalty of the City of
New-York, relative to the

OPENING AND LAYING OUT

A

PUBLIC PLACE

Between 59th and 106th Streets, and the Fifth
and Eighth Avenues,

IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK.

The Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty of the City of New-York, pursuant to statute in such case made and provided, hereby give notice, that they will apply to the Supreme Court of the State of New-York, at a Special Term of the said Court, to be held at the City Hall of the City of New-York, on Saturday, the 17th day of September, 1853, at the opening of the Court on that day, or as soon thereafter as counsel can be heard, for the appointment of five Commissioners of Estimate and Assessment in the above entitled matter; that the nature and extent of the improvement hereby intended, is the opening and laying out of a Public Place, bounded southerly by 59th Street, northerly by 106th Street, easterly by 5th Avenue, and westerly by 8th Avenue, in the 12th 19th, and 22d Wards of the City of New-York, as laid out on the map or plan of said city, under and by virtue of an Act entitled "An Act relative to Improvements in the City of New-York, and for other purposes," passed April 3d, 1807; and, also, an Act entitled "An Act to alter the map or plan of the City of New-York, by laying out thereon a Public Place, and to authorize the taking of the same," passed July 21st, 1853, three-fifths being present.

ROBERT J. DILLON,

Dated New-York, August, 19, 1853.

Counsel to the Corporation.

COLLINS, BOWNE & CO. Printers and Stationers, 174 and 176 Pearl Street, New-York.

The announcement of the creation of the park dated Aug. 19, 1853.