



# THE SENECA VILLAGE PROJECT

## STUDYING A 19TH-CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY IN CONTEMPORARY NEW YORK CITY

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Over the last few years, the authors have been working with educator Cynthia Copeland of the New-York Historical Society on the study of Seneca Village, a nineteenth-century African American and Irish immigrant community located on land which today is part of Central Park in New York City. The project is in some ways conventional, but in others, unusual. On the conventional side, we have been using methods typical of recent research in historical archaeology: the study of documents and the use of geophysics and other non-ground-disturbing techniques prior to a hoped-for excavation. The unusual aspects of the project relate to two factors: one, that the project area is located within today's Central Park, and two, that it was the home of African Americans and Irish immigrants. Together, these factors have meant that the prospect of excavating in Seneca Village is highly complex and politicized. Because of its complexity, we have tried to achieve community involvement at every stage. The project provides a good case study for the fact that we are now living in an era when the past is not simply the private preserve of scholars like archaeologists and historians but is also important to and used explicitly by many different contemporary groups, including descendant communities and government agencies, in a variety of ways. It is this aspect of the project that we want to discuss here.

### The Village

Seneca Village was an African American community founded in the 1820s about 3.5 miles outside the city. It constitutes the first known community of Black property owners in New York City and may even have been the first Black middle-class community there. In the 1840s, some of the landowners began to rent their property to Irish immigrants, and the village thus became an ethnically mixed community. By the 1850s, the village was a substantial settlement, with a population of over 260 (two-thirds of whom were African American and the other third, Irish) and several institutions, including three churches and a school. At that point, the growing city was beginning to encroach on the village and the government began plans to

build a large park. After a lot of political wrangling (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992), the city chose the site of today's Central Park, and in 1856, it evicted the 1,700 people who lived in the area, including the residents of Seneca Village, by right of eminent domain. After the eviction, Seneca Village appears to have been forgotten for almost a century and a half.

### The Project

Historians Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar sparked modern interest in the village with the publication of their book *The Park and the People* (1992), a history of the park that devoted most of a chapter to Seneca Village. The material on the village led Grady Turner and Cynthia Copeland of the New-York Historical Society to curate an exhibition, "Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village." The exhibit was both a popular and critical success, and its run was extended to over a year. Following the exhibit, the authors joined forces with Copeland and formed the Seneca Village Project. The project has several goals. One is to determine whether or not archaeological remains of the community are still intact in the park. At this point, based on geophysical study and walkovers of the area, our answer is a tentative "yes." We currently plan to conduct soil borings in the Village area this fall to answer this question more decisively. Ultimately, if it seems that some remains of the village are intact in the modern park, we would like to conduct limited archaeological excavations. But we have other goals for the project as well, which include public outreach and education. We have also formed an Advisory Committee to help the project implement its plan; this committee has been particularly helpful in advising us in how to deal with the administrators of Central Park.

### Public Outreach

Educator Copeland, working with Herbert Seignoret of the City College of New York, has done a lot of community outreach. Together, they have designed and presented numerous programs on the Village to elementary and middle school chil-

dren and their teachers and to the general public as well at libraries, churches, and hospitals. The primary rationale behind these programs is educational—to inform the public about the existence of Seneca Village and the project—but they also use them to identify additional interested members of the public for the Advisory Committee and to solicit ideas for additional research questions. And we have our own political agenda for these programs as well: to build grass-roots support for the project. If we hope to be able to conduct excavations in Central Park, one of New York City's sacred places, favorable public opinion will be an important asset. As part of the outreach programs, we ask audience members to sign petitions supporting the project.

### Education: Undergraduate Interns

Copeland and Seignoret's emphasis on education has educated the authors as well. We now use the study of Seneca Village as a way to engage undergraduates and we have incorporated students into the research process every step of the way. In fact, students have done most of the documentary and archaeological research that has been done on the Village to date. The early work was done by individual students working in the context of independent studies, but then we were able to institutionalize undergraduate involvement in the project. During the summers of 2000 and 2001, the project ran summer undergraduate internships funded by the National Science Foundation through its Research Experience for Undergraduates program; additional funding was supplied by the Columbia Institute for Social and Economic Theory and Research and the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York. So far, the interns have totaled 17 undergraduate students from colleges and universities in New York City. And undergraduates taking independent studies and working under the supervision of the project archaeologists as well as a consultant who is a soils archaeologist will perform the soil borings planned for the fall.

### The Advisory Committee

When we first began the project, we all felt that we needed to be able to consult with contemporary New Yorkers who had an interest in the Village. Part of our impetus for forming this committee was the experience of the African Burial Ground project, which involved the excavation and study of over 400 people, mostly enslaved Africans, who had died in New York City in the 18th century. This project, which has been ongoing since 1991, provides an example of a worst-case political scenario in which a descendant community learns about an excavation and archaeological study late in the process and its wishes at first are largely ignored (see LaRoche and Blakey 1997). The descendant community has fought long and hard

and it has been partially successful; its demands have been met in regard to the direction of the study and analysis of the human remains. But the fight goes on in regard to the design for the memorial of the burial ground and its interpretation. There is still bad feeling and a lack of trust between many members of the city's African American communities, representatives of government agencies including the General Services Administration and the National Park Service, and some of the anthropologists originally involved in the study.

Our Advisory Committee includes scholars who study African American and Irish history in New York, members of descendant communities that have roots in the Village, and anyone who has a serious interest in the village. Two of our committee members, for example, belong to churches affiliated with those present in the nineteenth-century village, namely the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church—known as Mother Zion Church—and St. Michael's Episcopal Church, which in 1846 established All Angels' Church in Seneca Village as a mission to serve the poor (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:72). Other committee members had been active in the African Burial Ground controversy. The Committee holds meetings once or twice a year. When we formed the committee, we envisioned that it would work in partnership with us in planning the direction of the Project. There are several positive examples of archaeological projects in different parts of this country where archaeologists have worked in partnership with African American descendant communities (e.g., Derry 1997; Leone 1995; McDavid 1997), and research has been enriched by input from people with different perspectives, especially when this input is sought early in the process, when research questions are being formulated. Our Advisory Committee helped design our research questions, but, ironically, the most important help that the Committee has provided to date is in the realm of tactical and political advice (which we discuss below). In fact, if it were not for the advice of our Advisory Committee (many of whom have the experience in political action that the archaeologists lack), the Seneca Village project would probably have ground to a halt a year ago.

### Central Park

Today, Central Park is administered by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and its day-to-day operations are handled by the Central Parks Conservancy, a private, nonprofit organization. The official attitude toward the Village has been characterized by what appears to be a reluctance to acknowledge that it ever existed. For example, the Village was ignored throughout the recent sesquicentennial celebration of the park until the very last moment—in December 2003, at the very end of the sesquicentennial year and only after the exertion of political pressure by African American New Yorkers, a



Figure 1: Detail of the Central Park Condemnation Map, Blocks 783 to 785, by Gardner A. Sage, 1856. This map provides enormous detail about the village (Collection of the New York City Municipal Archives, Bureau of Old Records).

small, almost perfunctory exhibit entitled “Remembering Seneca Village” opened at the Dana Discovery Center at the northern end of the park, just adjacent to Harlem.

This pattern on the part of the Parks Department and Conservancy of acknowledging the existence of Seneca Village only after receiving pressure from the city’s Black community has been mirrored in our own experience gaining permission for archaeological work at the site. A few years ago (during the last mayoral administration), these entities granted us permission to do geophysical research and map the existing surface terrain. But now we want to do limited subsurface work (soil borings). We first requested permission to do this a year and a

half ago, and our request was denied; the new Parks Commissioner said that members of the public could not do anything in the park that would penetrate the park’s surface so that a precedent would not be set. (We should point out that this argument was weak, because a few years earlier archaeologists from Columbia University had received permission to do archaeological testing in the northern part of the park.) Then, last summer, we met with our Advisory Committee and told them that we were having trouble getting permission to move forward. They suggested that we be much more aggressive in requesting permission and advised us how to do this. Following their advice, we wrote again, but this time sent copies of our request to many prominent African and European American politicians and community leaders. Finally, in the winter of 2003, the Parks Department, again apparently bowing to political pressure, granted us permission to do the borings.

### Conclusion

The Seneca Village project has been a learning experience for a number of people, including the authors. The documentary research has provided important and fascinating information about life in this mixed community. However, we believe that there are specific kinds of information that can only come from archaeological excavation, and we hope we will be able to complete this phase of the project. In addition to yielding insights about the village’s past, we think that excavation would help modern-day New Yorkers recognize and acknowledge the significant role that African Americans have played in the city’s past, a role that is usually denied. □

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