

Eminent Domain and Landmark Property Stolen Part 1: How Seneca Village Became Central Park

Links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdsWYOZ8iqM> (Jan 20, 2020 [8:15]) Vox

This is the story of freed Black people in the mid-19th C who left lower Manhattan (NY) in search of a safe home and community. As was the pattern across the country, the people created one-- at least for a while--"Seneca Village" in the wooded and hilly middle of the island. There, skilled tradesmen bought land and built homes, as did many Irish fleeing the famine, and some Germans. As the Manhattan population ballooned, white politicians, elites and urban planners began to fear that the entire island would become overbuilt, and desire spread for a signature green space. The idea evolved into a "central park." As was the pattern across the country, the decision was to overtake Seneca Village, the thriving Black community. In order to confiscate the land, a media endorsed smear campaign described Seneca Village as a place where squatters were living off the land. In the last years there has been an archeological dig proving that the great community of Seneca Village existed in ways that have not previously been documented.

Black Excellist: Lost History of Seneca Village (Home of New York City CENTRAL PARK)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atzk8peFb14> (2021 8 mins)

Central Park is a New York City crown jewel. But for 32 years in the mid-19 C, a section between 83rd and 89th Streets was home to Black (70%) and Irish (30%) residents in a thriving community they developed and named Seneca Village. Seneca Village grew to 300 people, seventy buildings, three churches, two schools and three cemeteries and was "the epicenter of Black political power and excellence." Andrew Williams bought three of the initial lots. Half of all residents owned their homes; and home ownership allowed the men to vote. The community was the epicenter of Black political power and excellence. Decades later, as was the pattern that persists until the present, Black homes were labeled as unfit (then called "Shanty Town," run down and filled with "insects," today's equivalent of "slums") and they were forced out to provide green space for the park. Many believed that extreme and violent racism was limited to the south, but in its history, NYC before the early 19th C had enslaved people at rates that rivaled Charleston--but Seneca Village was safe, until it was not. In the last few years, Columbia University and the City University of NY have begun an archeological dig unearthing items such as an iron tea kettle. These and city records are helping piece together the once Seneca Village story that included families such as the Lyons and the Williams.

<https://youtu.be/MOIfEoGBqZ0> Seneca Village: The Williams Family Legacy
Central Park Conservancy (Oct 2020 [7 mins])

Those searching to find descendants of Seneca Village became interested in following the line of Andrew Williams, a free Black man who purchased land in 1825 for \$120. He was an early settler in Seneca Village, and he was there in the end when the land was taken through Eminent Domain. Williams was a boot-back (shining shoes) and a cart-man. "Andrew Williams was not a formally educated man, but he was sharp man," and he understood the value of his land and argued for fair compensation. The researchers found four generations of family including Williams' 4th generation great granddaughter, Ariel Williams. She explains the family pride, "the name Andrew Williams gets carried over and over throughout the entire family...my brother also being named Andrew." The women carried a variation of the name, hence "Ariel." Andrew Williams protested--unsuccessfully--to



the sum of money the city offered for his land. While given less, he moved and then began a practice of saving and educating his children; this practice as well is a thread through subsequent generations. Ariel Williams: "I understand where I came from and the traits that I took from those people and why my father was the way he is and why I am the way I am today."

Additional Resources:

Seneca Village: African Americans in early New York | Smarthistory
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct9iepgScxk> (Jan 12, 2018 [6 mins])

Before Central Park there was Seneca Village | Secrets of the Dead | PBS
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Pcg4osnEvQ> (Nov 23, 2019 [5 mins])

Within a few decades in the mid-19th C, Seneca Village in what is now Central Park is formed by freed Blacks, thrives, and is destroyed as homes are stolen through "eminent domain." This was a community of seventy buildings, three churches and schools. Using maps and census data, we can look at the people who lived in the community. They were landowners—who, if men, importantly, could then vote. They were mostly Black but also Irish. One left a journal.

New Yorkers Honor a Thriving Black Village Displaced by Central Park <https://nyti.ms/3N67Tzi>