

An Origin Story Revisited: A Historiography of Nineteenth-Century Central Park

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Introduction

In 1811, a group of men appointed by the New York State Legislature to devise a street plan for Manhattan Island met to discuss a proposed gridiron layout. They commented that such a design offered the path of “least inconvenience,” and elaborated on their desire for a city “... composed principally of the habitations of men...” arranged in a uniformly rectangular pattern throughout.¹ In accordance with the nineteenth-century “rational” city planning approach, which prioritized the organized physical partitioning of urban space, they acknowledged the need to set aside land for a reservoir to supply residents with water, a public market to centralize the sale of goods, and a “Grand Parade” which would serve as a meeting ground for military purposes.

Certainly, these commissioners did not envision dedicating hundreds of acres to the creation of a public park. But opinions of city planners shifted as industrialization gave rise to a new American landscape dominated by foul smells, murky skies, and diseased bodies, and as miasma theory (the belief that insalubrious airs caused the very illnesses afflicting urbanites) gained widespread traction. Couched under these concerns, landscape architects argued that open, green spaces could function as natural filtration systems.² The incorporation of parks into the cityscape would offer aesthetic relief from urban congestion as in European cities, as well as health benefits through their ability to circulate and purify the air. Inspired by these European precedents, city officials and landscape architects, backed by the local political and economic elite, began the process of transforming a swath of swampy land located in the heart of Manhattan into the nation’s first urban park.

The rational planning theories that envisioned parks fulfilling a utilitarian, public health role also spawned, as scholars have long demonstrated, race- and class-based social exclusion as parks quickly became recreational paradises for the wealthy, further enforcing separation from the poor, working, and immigrant populations.³ This image of the elite park, which emphasized

¹ “Remarks of the Commissioners, 1811,” March 22, 1811, New York State, Office of General Services, Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York. Museum of the City of New York.

² On odors and the ways in which they shaped life in the nineteenth-century city, see Melanie A. Kiechle, *Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

³ Activist and writer Jane Jacobs was an early and vocal critic of the impact and legacy of rational planning, see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961); For a more recent discussion, see Ari Kelman, *A River and Its City: The Nature of Landscape in New Orleans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), esp. 14–15, chap. 4; Samuel Kelton Roberts Jr., *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), esp. chap. 3; see also Dorceta E. Taylor, “Central Park as a model for social control: Urban parks, social class and leisure behavior in nineteenth-century America,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 31, no. 4 (1999): 420–477.

freedom from congestion and recreational space, revealed nothing of its complex and contested origins, however. Scholars have prioritized grand narratives and upheld the park as a space of democratic escapism, discounting the stories of displaced communities who suffered when the park failed to live up to the utopian goals imagined at its creation. The historiography of nineteenth-century Central Park revolves around this fundamental tension between these two outlooks. Since the early 1970s biographers, social and environmental historians, literary scholars, and architectural landscape designers have wrestled with Central Park's role as a public institution, shedding light on what exactly it may have meant to various social classes in mid-to-late nineteenth-century New York City, where rapid industrial development ascribed vastly different qualities of life for its inhabitants.

The resulting literature focuses, rather dichotomously, on either park creation or park use. Master plans and ambitions characterize the vein of scholarship concerned with the process of park construction, with a particular focus on the team of gentlemen who led the effort. On the other hand, attempts to explain the multiple lived experiences of the park, including the ways in which the park functioned as an arm of social control, are salient themes in works interested in the park's quotidian late-nineteenth-century usage. The scholarship has developed along these main lines with little crossover or integration of the two, leading to imbalanced portrayals of the park's origins and formative years. Although scholars have continued to reevaluate what role the park played in nineteenth century society, oscillating from democratic to exclusionary, few works take a holistic approach to the study of Central Park during the late 1800s by incorporating park creation and use into one.

Nascent forays into Central Park's history focused not on the park itself but on the park's designers and their purported democratic aims. Consequently, scholars paid much attention to the cadre of men who refashioned and tamed an unyielding nature into a public park. Among them, no figure looms larger than that of then-journalist Frederick Law Olmsted. In partnership with prominent English architect and landscape designer Calvert Vaux, the duo won an 1857 park planning contest with their Greensward Plan, which eventually became the basis for the park's layout. The two worked closely to bring to fruition one of the most unprecedented feats of landscape engineering in the United States—a colossal park replete with Edenic rolling hills, rustic woodlands, and romantic architecture. Olmsted, a figure long memorialized as the father of American landscape architecture, received much of the praise for this project in the early literature. Biographers such as Laura Wood Roper set into motion a veritable “Olmsted Boom” by the early 1970s, and Vaux's life has also generated scholarly intrigue. Early portrayals of Central Park's history, then, characterize the emergence of the park as a series of accomplishments of great men, something that subsequent scholarship, motivated by the developments of social history, sought to upend.

A significant pattern in this first wave of scholarship is the use of Olmsted's personal life, professional achievements, and landscape design theories as a window into a specific vision for the park's wider, democratic purpose. Biographers set out foremost to resuscitate Olmsted from the “shadow of neglect,” a phrase that alludes to the popular tendency of viewing the picturesque Central Park as naturally occurring and as divorced from the humans who painstakingly constructed the space.⁴ This false notion still retains currency. In 2009 landscape architect Heath Massey Schenker wrote *Melodramatic Landscapes: Urban Parks in the Nineteenth*

⁴ Laura Wood Roper, *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xiii, xv.

Century, dispelling the understanding of parks as “somehow natural, rather than as extremely clever and manipulative fabrications” and upholding this accepted façade as a guiding motivation for the continued study of urban parks.⁵ Sara Cedar Miller’s 2003 popular history, *Central Park, American Masterpiece: A Comprehensive History of the Nation’s First Park*, utilized photography to visually disaggregate the park into its various components, referring to Central Park as a “glorious paradox,” a “marriage of aesthetics and engineering,” that, above ground, appears as a “designed landscape that copies nature so closely that it disguises its own fabrication,” and below ground, “is an efficient technological system.”⁶

Earlier works such as Wood Roper’s foundational 1973 *FLO: A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* maintained that Olmsted had not received enough recognition for creating Central Park and therefore took great pains to remind the reader that the park resulted from the interventions of man. Central Park, Wood Roper reassured, was “a heroic undertaking...a work of landscape art on an intractable piece of ground, no natural feature of the site as it stood was beautiful; anything beautiful on it would have to be created, literally, from the ground up.”⁷ Olmsted’s biographers meticulously poured over the schematics of the park, investigating its artificial configurations—the bridges, gateways, and concrete structures—and the ostensibly natural—the rock formations, lacustrine features, and diverse flora—to further articulate the lengths to which the park was a human mediation on the environment, with Olmsted at the helm of this effort.

The ensuing effect is, somewhat ironically, the sensationalism of one man as progenitor of the entire park. Subsequent biographies such as Elizabeth Stevenson’s 1977 *Park Maker: A Life of Frederick Law Olmsted* also support this conclusion. This narrow focus on Olmsted, however, not only overlooks the large numbers of laborers who constructed the park, but also isolates the park from the context, conflicts, and functions of the city, leaving the overarching social climate in the background. Furthermore, this narrative problematically shifts focus to the ups and downs of Olmsted’s personal choices, which frequently take the story beyond New York and away from Central Park.⁸ Notwithstanding such limitations, scholars ventured so deeply into his personal history because it was likely the most accessible avenue to making sense of the park’s history, as evidenced by the plentiful documentary trail that Central Park’s first superintendent left behind. Both *FLO* and *Park Maker* draw from Olmsted’s city planning manuscripts and personal writings; a trove of correspondence between relatives; family memoirs; visual evidence such as lithographs, photographs, and drawings and blueprints; and *FLO* incorporates interviews with Olmsted’s son, Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. Caught in these sources, the history of the Park was overtaken by the history of Olmsted alone.

⁵ Heath Massey Schenker, *Melodramatic Landscapes: Urban Parks in the Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 6.

⁶ Sara Cedar Miller, *Central Park, American Masterpiece*, 11–13. A notable example of this visual disaggregation can be found in her discussion of the park’s water bodies: “water is fed into the pond through the storm-water system and is augmented with city water supply. This seemingly natural outflow is, in reality, a concrete spillway that controls the elevation of the water.”

⁷ Wood Roper, *FLO*, xiv.

⁸ Olmsted was not known to remain in one place. As a child he traveled across the world and, in his prime, he left his position as Central Park superintendent to establish parks elsewhere. Logically, his biographers followed Olmsted’s meandering story, producing an oftentimes-disjointed portrait of the social atmosphere surrounding nineteenth-century Central Park. For an elaboration of Olmsted’s travels throughout his life, see Wood Roper, *FLO*, chap. 6–8, 10–11.

While biographers were highly attentive to the events of Olmsted's personal and professional life, they also argued that careful examination of his approaches to landscape architecture, most notably his obsession with aesthetics, revealed much about his broader "social plan" for Central Park.⁹ Some, like Charles Beveridge, historian and series editor of the *Olmsted Papers*, combined biography with analysis of landscape design theory to highlight the impact that formative life episodes had on Olmsted's approaches to design. In his 1977 "Frederick Law Olmsted's Theory of Landscape Design," Beveridge shows that Olmsted's early travels to England and China helped forge his commitment to verisimilar expression. More specifically, according to Beveridge, Olmsted thought that parks should "remain true to the character of their natural surroundings," thereby restoring (aesthetic) balance to the chaos of city life.¹⁰ Earlier works supported such a contention, especially *FLO*, which argued that Olmsted's hope for Central Park was that it would "conserve the beautiful and healthy and remedy the ugly and harmful."¹¹ In other words, the harmoniousness of Central Park, a shared urban space, should act as a filter for the rambunctiousness of the city, and encourage accepted forms of leisure, order, and tranquility instead, although "great tact and firmness would be required to enforce [this] desirable standard of behavior."¹² This attention to Olmsted's landscape design theories and methods added nuance to the standard biographical approach while still reinforcing Olmsted's centrality to the scholarship.

That the aesthetic symbolized or spoke for nineteenth-century social concerns was a prevalent argument and valuable contribution to the biographies of the 1970s. Such conclusions were partly informed by nineteenth-century historiography's turn during this time toward explorations of social and class tensions in urban societies. Central Park's scholars maintained that Olmsted's approaches to landscape architecture, particularly his fixation with "communicativeness," or the idea that "one had an essential community interest with other human beings, regardless of regional, class, economic, color, religious, or whatever differences," aimed to placate nineteenth-century social divisions.¹³ According to Wood Roper, "under the impact of Olmsted's thought and practice, landscape design shifted its sights from decorative to social aims; land was to be arranged not only for scenic effect but also to serve the health, comfort, convenience, and good cheer of everyone who used it."¹⁴ Rampant urbanization in New York City resulted in societal fragmentation based on class and racial lines; Central Park, as conceived by Olmsted and as understood by his biographers, "humanized the physical environment of cities and secured precious scenic regions for the use and enjoyment of all the people."¹⁵ Indeed, Olmsted hoped that the park to become a *public* sanctuary. The inclusiveness of this vision, however, became a point of contention in later historiography.

Beginning in the 1980s, scholars interested in park use, rather than park creation, increasingly highlighted the inconsistencies between Olmsted's rhetoric of democratic idealism and the class-based exclusion that ensued across the 1860s and 1870s, the park's early years. The explosion of New Social History approaches to the study of U.S. history more broadly

⁹ Wood Roper, xv.

¹⁰ Charles Beveridge, "Frederick Law Olmsted's Theory of Landscape Design," *Nineteenth Century* 3 (Summer 1977): 42.

¹¹ Wood Roper, *FLO*, 83.

¹² Wood Roper, *FLO*, 136.

¹³ Wood Roper, *FLO*, xiv.

¹⁴ Wood Roper, *FLO*, xiii.

¹⁵ Wood Roper, *FLO*, xiv, 136.

challenged scholars to place the park into a wider context, that of the hierarchical society of nineteenth-century New York City. This led to the rise and proliferation of a competing wave of Central Park historiography, one that actively rejected Olmstedian hagiography, preferring instead to attempt analyses of the daily social experience of the park, a notable thread in the current historiography as evidenced by studies on park policing and carriage drives, explored below. This strand of scholarship constituted a direct response to the more narrowly conceived biographical studies of the 1970s and levied heavy critiques against past historians' overreliance on archival sources centered on Olmsted. While this historiographical wave introduced a host of new considerations and characters to the fore, it never fully escaped the tale of the great gentlemen.

A fundamental methodological shift marks this historiographical departure: the reexamination and comparison of grand plans with emerging realities. Often, this required scholars to reengage with Olmsted's prescriptions for orderly park use, placing them in context with lived experiences and overarching political and economic events. Scholars such as Galen Cranz and Alan Trachtenberg center this approach in their respective 1982 works, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* and "Mysteries of the Great City" from *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*, both of which revisit the fundamental Olmstedian notion that the park's original intent was to restore the "system of order and security" wrested away by the transformative Gilded Age.¹⁶

To be sure, Central Park instilled a sense of order, but only, as Trachtenberg elucidated, in its reproduction of class divisions through the exclusion of the poor and immigrant communities who lived and worked in the city or who depended on the park to earn their livelihood. According to Trachtenberg, "embodied within the concept of the park...lay a motive to eradicate the communal culture of working-class and immigrant streets, to erase the culture's offensive and disturbing foreignness, and replace it with middle-class norms of hearth and tea table."¹⁷ As recently as 2015, David Thacher's "Olmsted's Police" explored one of the most important means of maintaining this predefined social ethic: intra-park policing. As Thacher suggests, the Central Park Police functioned as an "independent social institution...under the direction of Olmsted" to teach, rather than to coerce, a "genuinely ignorant" general public how to properly behave in a shared space so as to preserve the quality of the park and quell "disorderly conduct, breach[es] of peace, public drunkenness, and a variety of nuisances," including the once-legal activity of keeping hog pens.¹⁸ Environmental historian Catherine McNear's 2014 monograph, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City*, reiterates these sentiments its case study of the Piggery War of 1859, wherein police branded the lower-class practice of owning piggeries, typically located on the outskirts of the park, as criminal behavior unfit for the modern urban environment.¹⁹ Keeping and fighting for the right to own pig sties and slaughterhouses, as many did, especially women, was considered repugnant behavior as such establishments were not only odorous, unsightly, and a known threat to public

¹⁶ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 109.

¹⁷ Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America*, 111.

¹⁸ David Thacher, "Olmsted's Police," *Law and History Review* 33, no. 3 (Aug. 2015): 579, 581. How best to use the trail system, drive carriages, and even admire the foliage fell under the jurisdiction of the Central Park Police.

¹⁹ Catherine McNear, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 161.

health, but, perhaps more importantly, damaging the value of rising uptown neighborhoods nearby.

Others like Cranz and literary studies scholar Stephen Germic did away with the belief that the park was somehow separate from and immune to the systemic transformations taking place in the city, insisting that the park was both a microcosm of the stratified society and an agent in the city's trajectory of socio-environmental change. *The Politics of Park Design* pointed out that Central Park itself played an important role in the urbanization process, representing the ways that "social forces shape the physical world," and later studies such as Germic's 2001 *American Green: Class, Crisis, and the Deployment of Nature in Central Park*, grounded in a narrative studies approach, neatly complemented this assertion by arguing that the park represented the "various and especially spatial contradictions that plagued a capitalist social and economic system."²⁰ Central Park, as seen by Germic and Cranz, did not fit into easy classifications: it helped to resolve the "multifaceted crises of spatial contradiction and overaccumulation [caused by capitalistic development] through urban engineering, the expenditure of surplus capital, and the employment and the [moral] refinement of the dangerous population of surplus laborers," perplexingly blurring *and* maintaining class lines.²¹ Ultimately, this historiographical trend saw scholars make the case that the park was neither a neutral oasis, unaffected by outside events, nor was it as benevolent as previous scholarship, which read the park as an Olmstedian artefact, had asserted. Instead Central Park was imbued with multiple meanings, a nuanced conclusion to be teased out more robustly by later scholarship, which endeavored to review the ways in which the people themselves used the park.

Even as these scholars pointed out that Central Park's history was more than Olmsted's vision, and that multiple interpretations of the park's social benefit existed during the nineteenth century, they conceded that its history "has always been a top-down matter."²² Still, they tried to move beyond Olmsted and the particularities of design, intent, and programming in order to glean public sentiment by tapping into park press reports and political cartoons, sources which more successfully offered first-person glimpses of the park user's perspective. Social scientific works such as Cranz's admittedly saw a need for the study of the reported social benefits of these public parks through systematic and empirical evaluation of their visitor logs, but perceived this venture as one of limited reward due to the park system's failure to maintain reliable records of daily use in the early years of operation. Scholars thus continued to narrate Central Park's history through the perspectives of its administrators, ultimately reinforcing the process of *creation* rather than that of the nineteenth-century user *experience*. Works like *The Politics of Park Design* acted as a middling ground for the next wave of social history, because they recognized that it was those "at the top... who have had the *power* to translate [their interest in parks] into park policy."²³

²⁰ Stephen A. Germic, *American Green: Class, Crisis, and the Deployment of Nature in Central Park, Yosemite, and Yellowstone* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001), 17.

²¹ Germic, *American Green*, 16.

²² Galen Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 157.

²³ Cranz, *The Politics of Park Design*, 157–159. Cranz elaborates that those situated at the top "can be distinguished from park users and from the indirect beneficiaries of park policies, such as speculators on land adjacent to park sites."

Historians Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar further developed Cranz's insights on the park's entrenched power politics and their impact on its historicization their 1992 social history of Central Park, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*. In consultation with the extant but fragmentary visitor logs; media constructions of the park as presented in newspapers and cartoons; paintings; and guidebooks, this work at last incorporated everyday people—the laborers, former “park dwellers,” and non-elite park users—into the park's origin story and directed a spotlight on their importance to the history of both park creation and park use.²⁴ Arguing that “Historians have shared the tendency to study this public space apart from the city's people...concentrat[ing] instead on the career of Frederick Law Olmsted,” Rosenzweig and Blackmar focused on the “people who made, maintained, and, above all, enjoyed the park that was their own.” In this, they confronted older studies that saw the park much as Olmsted himself desired it to be seen—a “landscape of vistas, birds, bridges, buildings, rocks, and trees”—disconnected from city life and its conflicts.²⁵ *The Park and the People* located the rise of a more “eclectic and popular space” in the waning decades of the nineteenth century as a result of the “reconfiguration of the political public,” or the municipal government, which had the power to define who constituted the public and how accommodating the park would become to different forms of daily use beyond that of popular leisure activities such as carriage drives.²⁶

The Park and the People also democratized the history of the park's creation by paying less attention to the well-rehearsed narrative of great men and instead foregrounding the merchants who helped secure funding for the project, the politicians and artists who weighed in on the park's design aspects, the laborers who toiled away for the park, and the engineers who turned plans into realities.²⁷ Recognizing, much like *The Politics of Park Design*, the issue of the difficulty of measuring public sentiment and, by extension, user experience due to a dearth of primary sources, *The Parks and the People* added texture to this conversation. This methodological predicament, the authors convincingly argued, was not solely the consequence of an insufficient record-keeping system; everyday park-goers' invisibility in the late-nineteenth-century historical record was also linked to “a variety of structural constraints [that] determine[d] whether people [possessed] the means to make use of the public space [including]...long work hours, the cost of public transportation, and the distance from downtown neighborhoods that restricted working-class New Yorkers' use of Central Park.”²⁸ *The Park and the People* noteworthy reoriented the historiography of Central Park by producing a more equitable park narrative based on the conception of Central Park as a space intimately connected to the public.

A key figure in *The Park and the People* is Calvert Vaux, co-designer of Central Park. Although extant scholarship on Vaux is limited, those who have explored Vaux's life use the familiar technique of biography, but they differ on how much weight to assign to the complex power dynamics between Vaux and Olmsted. Too much emphasis on personal dramas between the two would take away from Vaux as an individual contributor; too little, on the other hand, could risk inflating his role. Rosenzweig and Blackmar heavily featured disagreements between the two, insisting throughout that Olmsted in fact “did little designing,” and instead preferred to

²⁴ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 73.

²⁵ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 3, 5.

²⁶ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 9.

²⁷ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 7, 204.

²⁸ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 5.

work on administrative duties. Furthermore, it was Olmsted's insistence on the "subordination of his partner" that contributed greatly to the dissolution of a powerful partnership in the 1870s.²⁹ Working off of the foundations set by Rosenzweig and Blackmar, Francis Kowsky's 1998 *Country, Park, and City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux*, a study that rivals the earlier Olmsted tomes of the 1970s, called for a more nuanced approach. According to Kowsky, scholars should seek to understand Vaux on his own terms. Kowsky's stated aim, for example, is not to "lift Vaux at the expense of Olmsted. Rather, [he] wish[es] to show that Vaux, a tireless idealist...who laid out parks and grounds that celebrated nature's ways, was one of American art's most intelligent and sympathetic partisans."³⁰ These works set off yet another reinterpretation of the park's public role. By looking deeper into Vaux's motivations and approaches, they excavated a competing conception for park function: a less policed, more democratic park than that imagined by Olmsted.

Country, Park, and City is situated as a response to a bout of Olmstedian revivalism stimulated by the 1985 move to establish a national park on Olmsted's property. Using the dearth of primary source material on Vaux, Kowsky pieced together Vaux's life and career and reevaluated his relationship with Olmsted using personal published recollections of close friends, family members, and assistants. The resulting work strategically avoids overemphasizing Vaux's connection to Central Park, despite Kowsky's argument that Vaux was more committed to Central Park than Olmsted and that he "did some of his best work" on the park.³¹ Instead, Kowsky analyzes his other architectural contributions, including houses, cemeteries, mental asylums, libraries, cottages, and other parks such as Prospect and Brooklyn Parks to illustrate Vaux's multifaceted artistic talent, one that contrasted starkly with the skills of "Frederick the Great," who Kowsky charged, "had no professional training of any sort, nor did he possess any artistic abilities."³² Through Kowsky, Vaux emerges a "man who always stood ready to do battle in defense of his high ideals."³³

Echoing Kowsky, in 2001 and 2002, American literature scholar Stephen Germic and historian David Scobey, respectively, challenged the enduring "Cult of Olmsted" by calling for critical review of Olmsted's centralization in the historiography and, relatedly, of Olmstedian conceptions of the park whose hagiographic treatments.³⁴ While the authors acknowledged that "it is no longer possible to narrate the development of environmental reform, landscape design, and city planning without giving Central Park and Olmsted (and increasingly Vaux) pride of place," they also charged that "the very brightness of [Olmsted's] image tends to bleach out much of the complexity, contingency, and significance [of the] democratic development."³⁵ Olmsted's detractors, they lambasted, had quietly been suppressed by "the legion of scholars devoted to the veneration of his accomplishments."³⁶ Scobey's 2002 *Empire City: The Making of the New York City Landscape* works around this dilemma and is an example

²⁹ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 122.

³⁰ For an elaboration of Kowsky's objectives, see Francis R. Kowsky, *Country, Park, and City: The Architecture and Life of Calvert Vaux* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9. Much as Wood Roper initiated the "Olmsted Boom," Kowsky's work resulted in the "Olmsted Backlash."

³¹ Kowsky, *Country, Park, and City*, 3.

³² Kowsky, *Country, Park, and City*, 9.

³³ Kowsky, *Country, Park, and City*, 97.

³⁴ See David Scobey, *Empire City: The Making of the New York City Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 279.

³⁵ Scobey, *Empire City*, 193.

³⁶ Scobey, *Empire City*, 18.

of how to temper Olmsted's ubiquitous presence in Central Park scholarship by inculcating the construction of Central Park within the larger politics of urbanism. Not a wholly new development, *Empire City's* coverage of Central Park instead represents an important piece of synthesis: it engaged Trachtenberg, who, in the 1980s, innovatively analyzed Central Park in the context of the overall development of nineteenth-century New York City; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, who first questioned whether the park was indeed "his [Olmsted's] park" in the 1990s; and, finally, Kowsky, who in 1998 definitively proved that it was indeed not.³⁷ While this is still an active debate and *Empire City* is a much-needed development, the Olmsted-centric discourse that continues to define the historiography has contributed to an under-scrutinization of Central Park as an arena for the interworking of race and class politics during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Scholarship influenced by the New Social History made important inroads in developing the history of park use, but ultimately remained mired in the methodological challenge of accessing a historically-contingent user experience through a limited primary source base. Moreover, its emphasis on Vaux and questioning of Olmsted, while filling a lacuna, refocused Central Park's story on great men once again. Although a lack of consensus on the park's quotidian effect on nineteenth-century residents still prevails, the more recent historiography of Central Park, influenced by cultural history and its concern with discourse presents a new framework—performance—through which to confront the slippery nineteenth-century lived experience.

Previous scholarship, focused tightly on Olmsted's writings and design theories, has detailed the ways in which the park transmitted a moralizing, reformist agenda to the masses. Whether through its pristine landscape or the Central Park Police, during its early years the park dictated and enforced a certain code of conduct for intended park usage, one which emphasized organized, respectful leisure and maintained a strict socioeconomic hierarchy. More recent works, such as Schenker's *Melodramatic Landscapes* and Kevin Coffee's 2012 "The Material Significance of Carriage Drives to the Design of Central Park," contended that the public performed these messages as if "mirror[ing] a theatrical melodrama."³⁸ In these studies, the park arises as a theater or "public stage on which complex processes of social differentiation played out in the nineteenth century, both figuratively and literally."³⁹ Coffee isolates carriage drives, in particular, as a "theatre for genteel leisure, acculturation, and ostentatious display...a performance space for social prestige," suggesting that the upper middle and elite classes performed a type of cultural script.⁴⁰ Schenker, too, describes how people acted out a "pervasive" cultural discourse in ways that both maintained and broke the bounds of class. Drawing on an enlarged evidentiary base, which includes novels and the writings of civic leaders among the standard repertoire of newspaper articles, memoirs of park planners, and drawings and designs, these works mix visual, cultural, and spatial analysis to reveal the nineteenth-century cultural discourses operating in the everyday performance of park use. The analytical category of performance, as seen through Schenker and Coffee's studies, freshly and engagingly explores user experience.

³⁷ Scobey, *Empire City*, 239.

³⁸ Schenker, *Melodramatic Landscape*, 149.

³⁹ Schenker, *Melodramatic Landscape*, 18.

⁴⁰ Kevin Coffee, "The Material Significance of Carriage Drives to the Design of Central Park," *The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archaeology* 38, no. 1 (2012): 75, 89.

Revolving around the idea of performance, this historiographical trend uniquely aligns with contemporary park initiatives. For example, the fall 2019 outdoor exhibit, “Discover Seneca Village,” curated the park’s grounds as a site for the performance of the less widely understood pre-park social history of Seneca Village, founded by a community of property-owning African Americans escaping the city’s discrimination. Their land was ultimately expropriated for the construction of the park, although, as the project’s website claims, its natural features “still exist today.”⁴¹ Contemporary visitors are invited to a performance of the park’s history by interpretive signposts, which highlight the history of the village’s residents and identify historic sites of homes, churches, and gardens, promising that “people can experience many of the distinct aspects of the area that the Village’s residents did over 150 years ago.”⁴² Spearheaded by landscape architects seeking to go beyond landscape history-as-approach and public historians who aim to resurrect the forgotten elements of the park’s history through public-facing projects, this strand of scholarship is still relatively young and the developments it has introduced to the wider historiography of Central Park merit further consideration if it is to reach its full potential.

The historiography of nineteenth-century Central Park is comprised of diverse disciplines, with roots in social history, art history, and urban history. The study of Central Park is also profoundly interdisciplinary, combining American literature scholarship and studies of landscape design with scholars whose lenses range from legal history, to ethnohistory, to American studies. Scholarly inquiry into Central Park emerged humbly from a community of biographers interested in celebrating the contributions of Central Park’s superintendent, Frederick Law Olmsted, but has since evolved to include lesser known figures such as Calvert Vaux. The process of park creation has received considerably more analysis than that of the nineteenth-century park experience, which understandably remains elusive due to the dearth of primary sources. This does not mean, however, that scholars have not been able to address the ways in which the park reflected nineteenth-century urban society, only that they have had to rely on creative ways of accessing these complex and unequal social relations.

Despite the broad ground covered by these scholars, future scholarship must find innovative ways to address user experience. Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar remarked in 1992 that Central Park has appeared in films since 1889 as a place of “sophisticated urbanity.”⁴³ Scholars can expand their primary source base by using these films to tap into the cultural representations of Central Park as presented by the era’s film creators. In the absence of archival sources, such an undertaking would complement attempts to gain insight into the performed lived experience. Other scholars have also pointed to the use of everyday correspondence as a method of accessing the mundane experiences of life in nineteenth-century New York City. Interested scholars should attempt to comb through these recollections for instances of interaction with the park. Until then, our understanding of the quotidian, late-nineteenth-century usage of the park, and the social tensions and power relations embedded therein, remains grounded more in suggestion than evidence.

⁴¹ Central Park Conservancy, “Discover Seneca Village,” available from: <https://www.centralparknyc.org/programs/discover-seneca-village>, accessed December 17, 2019.

⁴² Central Park Conservancy, “The Rediscovery and Research of Seneca Village,” November 25, 2019, available from: <https://www.centralparknyc.org/blog/rediscovery-and-research-of-seneca-village>, accessed December 17, 2019.

⁴³ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 1.