

### 1825-1857. Seneca Village in New York City

Source: <http://www.gothamgazette.com>

Seneca Village was Manhattan's first prominent community of African American property owners. From 1825 to 1857, it was located between 82nd and 89th Streets at Seventh and Eighth Avenues in what is now a section of Central Park. The area had access to a natural spring near 82nd street that provided fresh drinking water. During the 1850s, local newspapers described Seneca Village as "Nigger Village."

In 1825, parcels of land were sold to members of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which was considered the "largest and wealthiest church of coloured people in this city, perhaps in this country." They included a former boot black named Andrew Williams, who purchased six lots of land for \$125 a laborer laborer named Epiphany Davis who bought twelve lots for \$578.

Buying land in Seneca Village was less expensive than in the main downtown areas of the city and , under the New York State Constitution of 1821, it permitted African-American males, who owned \$250 in property, to vote. The New York State Census of 1855 reported that 264 people, largely African-Americans but also Irish and German immigrants, lived in Seneca Village. By the time it was destroyed to make way for contruction of the park, the village included three churches, a school, and several cemeteries. The African Union Methodist and the AME Zion were near 85th Street. Colored School No. 3 was located in the basement of the African Union Methodist Church. All Angels' Church was built in 1849. It had a racially integrated congregation of African Americans and Irish and German parishioners. In 1853, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church laid a special cornerstone that contained a Bible, a hymn book, the rules of the church, copies of the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Sun*, and a letter with the names of the church's five trustees.

In 1853, the New York state legislature set aside an area including Seneca Village for the construction of Central Park and authorized the use of "eminent domain," the taking of private property for public purposes. The confiscation of the land began in 1856 and Seneca Villagers received final eviction notices during the summer. People who owned property were compensated, but many protested in the courts. On July 9, 1856, an article about Seneca villagers in *The New York Daily Times* reported that "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." After the eviction, the community of Seneca Village was never reestablished.