As photographer and historian for the Central Park Conservancy since 1989, I have given hundreds of tours to visitors. The question I hear most often is, “So, what was here before it became a park?” When I started, we knew some basics—the road, the taverns, the fortifications—but I did not know how to see the prepark. In the summer of 1990, I began to fill in the blanks.

That August I had the good fortune to document the work of consulting archeologists Richard Hunter and Lynn Rakos as they conducted a preliminary study of the northern end of Central Park. Trained as an art historian, I appreciated the park as Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s masterpiece of American art, but I had no exposure to prepark fieldwork until Richard and Lynn slowly revealed it to me over those sweltering summer days. Unremarkable soil mounds were, I soon learned, eroded breastworks from the War of 1812, four-foot-high protective walls of earth and sod. An average-looking heap of boulders had actually been the foundation of a long-forgotten military outpost.

The most defining moment for me came when we were gathered near the North Meadow handball courts looking at a contemporary map overlaid with a map of prepark dwellings. Richard noted that we were a few steps away from where the kitchen of German immigrant Christian Gent would have stood, and he explained that nineteenth-century residents, with no concept of trash collection, customarily tossed their broken dishes into their adjacent yard. Without taking a single step, he stooped down and picked up a two-inch piece of blue and white crockery embedded in the grass literally at our feet. Holding that shard in my hand, I marveled at the tangible connection between past and the present. It beckoned to me, inviting me to unravel the mysteries of a place I thought I knew so well. Gradually, with the help of archival material, phantom farms, gardens, orchards, houses, shanties, stables, and barns appeared throughout the park, and
the lives of strangers from the distant past unfolded with them. Before Central Park is the result of that journey.

My research process for this book has been both magical and maddening. The resources and archives in New York for the prepark from the earliest settlers in the seventeenth century until the mid-1800s are a historian’s dream come true. From well-known repositories like the New York City Municipal Archives, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York State Archives in Albany to the more obscure, like New York County Court’s Division of Old Records and the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, untold riches are there for the asking, and the buildings they are housed in are some of the most palatial or the most unusual sites in New York City. In the stately library of the New-York Historical Society—my home away from home—my heart almost stopped when I unfolded the puckered and scallop-edged parchment with official red wax seals and black ribbons, the 1802 deed from landowner Samuel Stilwell to Gulian Ludlow for a parcel of land that would later become a section of Seneca Village, the Black community on the west side of today’s Central Park.

The land conveyed in 1802 from Samuel Stilwell to Gulian Ludlow would become in 1855 a part of Seneca Village, the former Black community on the west side of Central Park.

31 Chambers Street, the home of the Municipal Archives of the City of New York, is the former Surrogates Court House, a massive block-long building and one of the most elaborate Beaux Arts jewels of New York City. Its exterior features massive allegorical sculptures and figures of New York history. Its three-story-high variegated marble lobby was designed to resemble the villa entrance halls of titans like Morgan, Vanderbilt, and Rockefeller. The Division of Old Records on the seventh floor is equally jaw-dropping, but in a different way. Bound volumes—some bigger than coffee tables—and folders bursting with documents fill every inch of the bookshelves that extend for miles and reach from the floor to the towering ceiling. So many are covered in dust and made of paper so old that tiny fragments of confetti fall in your lap no matter how gingerly you turn the brittle pages. There’s a small sink in the corner to rinse off the years of history that coat your hands. It was there that I experienced many a thrilling moment, like when I untied the faded red ribbon enclosing a rolled-up and yellowing transcript of the 1868 court case of Sylvester Cahill et al agst. Courtlandt Palmer and others, untouched for a century and a half until I unfurled it in 2018.

With the exception of George Washington, most of the people you will meet in these pages are not familiar names to us today, though many were quite well known in their own time. Much of this story is of the founding Dutch families of Harlem, the leaders of New York society, and leaders of the Black community who resided downtown. We know about them because they were mentioned in the press or contemporary literature, kept personal records and diaries, wrote letters, had deeds, and appeared in church or government records. I was thrilled to discover several portraits of elite landowners and civic or religious leaders. At last, there were faces, bodies, and possessions to put to the names.

But such a trove does not exist for those who moved onto prepark land from roughly 1825 to 1857. The very poorest squatters remained nameless and uncounted. The immigrant farmers, artisans, and Black or white working class were rarely mentioned in newspapers, and they left us with few letters, diaries, and documents. They often show up in the state or federal censuses, and on immigration lists. If they owned land, we have the deeds, but their wills, when available, are often the best or only source for information about who and what they held dear.

The madness of my research came in the contradictions and inconsistencies in the source material. I felt uncertain when, for example, the testimony from that court case mentioned above did not match the information on an actual
map, and the map did not agree with the handwritten tax records. I constantly debated when and whether to trust the written or visual record.

And this study is just a beginning. Many valuable documents were discovered in storage while I was doing my research. As more is found, digitized, and made available to scholars, many of the questions raised by this book will be answered, and help us to clarify, interpret, and add to the Central Park story. My ongoing research will continue on www.beforecentralpark.com. Research on all aspects of Central Park history can be found on the Central Park Conservancy website, www.centralparknyc.org.
BEFORE CENTRAL PARK
Map of Central Park in 2021, with the landscapes and structures referenced in the book labeled.

Source: Central Park Conservancy, 2021