

In Search of the Black Utopia

Jan. 8, 2022





Artwork by The New York Times; photographs by Mashuk, via Getty Images, and Fabiola Jean-Louis

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City has a long history of “period rooms” that use art, architecture and furnishings to convey a sense of bygone eras. The museum renovated this tradition in ways it could not have foreseen when it enlisted the production designer Hannah Beachler — who took home an Oscar for “Black Panther” — as lead curator of an installation celebrating the [Black utopian community](#) that was destroyed in 1857 to make way for Central Park.

The enclave known as Seneca Village was established in 1825 and

eventually grew to about 200 people. It was a shining example of African American self-reliance and community building when the press slandered it as a “nigger village” and a “shantytown” to justify sweeping it away. At a time when deepening segregation was the order of the day, the settlement had embraced [racially integrated church worship](#) and the forward-looking belief that white people and African Americans could abide together in mutual respect.

The community’s fate was sealed when the gods of real estate coalesced around a blueprint that would whiten the city and take it upscale. Perhaps as many as [1,600](#) people were displaced to build the park, but the racialized argument that was brought to bear against African Americans stands out as a precursor of 20th-century “urban renewal” campaigns.

The Met installation, entitled [“Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room,”](#) embraces a cosmology of the African diaspora that sees past, present and future as coexisting in the same instance. The intricately decorated [dwelling](#) it depicts opens the door to an alternative universe where Seneca Village still flourishes and its people still lovingly tend their homes, gardens and churches.

The hypothetical homestead on display in “Before Yesterday We Could Fly” is richly fitted out with [art, furnishings, ceramics and household objects](#) that reinforce the Afrofuturist theme. Kitchen crockery reflects the likenesses of people across time — from Harriet Tubman, to Beyoncé, to Stacey Abrams. In the living room, a five-sided television shows a brief black-and-white film directed by Jenn Nkiru. The film carries the viewer into the 19th century, [contesting the idea](#) that past, present and future can be divided into nonoverlapping periods.

The most striking piece on display is an [adaptation of a 19th-century corset dress](#), by the Haitian-born artist Fabiola Jean-Louis. Decorated in gold, Swarovski crystals, lapis lazuli, labradorite and brass, this stunning garment is posed in a seated position, as though to depict the woman of the house

receiving visitors. This illusion of delicacy shatters when the museumgoer notices that the sleeves of the dress are reminiscent of chain mail armor and that the dress is dedicated to the vengeful deity who is said to have inspired the Haitian Revolution.

That body armor metaphor is appropriate to the crucible in which Black New Yorkers lived when Seneca Village was founded in 1825. In preparation for the end of slavery, New York had done its best to incapacitate African Americans [politically](#) and economically.

Black men had been largely driven from the skill trades and forced into subsistence jobs as laborers. The state then tried to obliterate Black voting rights by making ballot access for Black men contingent upon ownership of property valued at \$250 "over and above all debts and encumbrances."

Black citizens were also under assault in the streets of Lower Manhattan, where proslavery mobs burned African American churches and threatened the lives of abolitionists. Not long after the state ended slavery in 1827, a syndicate of judges, lawyers and policemen convened a "[kidnapping club](#)" that placed both free African Americans and fugitives at risk of being snatched off the streets and trafficked into the slave states.

Seneca Village had the virtue of being located several miles outside the hostile city center, on the western edge of what is now Central Park, between 83rd and 89th Streets. In addition to allowing Black property owners to vote, the settlement placed citizens of color at a welcome distance from Lower Manhattan.

The new settlement also provided an [ideal](#) setting for fugitives from slavery to pause and refresh themselves while moving north on the Underground Railroad. Among the escapees who passed through the city during the Seneca Village period was the strikingly handsome [Frederick Douglass](#), a fugitive from Baltimore who was soon to become one of the greatest orators of his day.

One of the first buyers, the biblically named Epiphany Davis, underscored the settlement's relationship to the antislavery struggle when he bequeathed his daughter a framed print of a slave ship as "[a reminder](#) that no matter how comfortable life could be for hardworking Black Americans, the evils of slavery were never to be forgotten."

The Seneca Village story is often recounted through the lens of tragedy and woe, but the historian Sara Cedar Miller relates a more nuanced tale in her forthcoming book, "[Before Central Park.](#)" In this telling, land ownership in the village is cast as an engine of empowerment, and even enrichment for African Americans who exploited the real estate wave and cashed out at the right moment.

Early buyers typically purchased between one and three lots for an average of \$40 each. This would have required prudence and diligent saving by manual laborers, gardeners and porters who earned only about \$69 a year. Those who sold out during the real estate boom of the mid-1830s probably earned more money than they had in all of their working lives. While these sellers turned a tidy profit, a new cohort of African Americans arrived on the scene looking for safety, financial assets and, of course, the right to vote.

A number of families that owned property in Seneca Village were members of an African American elite that lived, attended church and ran businesses downtown. These families purchased lots in the village partly in support of Black self-determination — but they also viewed real estate as an investment that would appreciate over time. Ms. Miller writes that the "Black elites held on to their land or passed it to their heirs until it was bought by the city for Central Park."

The African American businesswoman and abolitionist [Elizabeth Gloucester](#) stands out in this story. It has long been clear that she had amassed considerable wealth by the end of her life. "Before Central Park" makes a strong case that Ms. Gloucester's renowned real estate empire began with the Seneca Village lot that she purchased in 1849 for \$100 — and for which

the city awarded her \$460 in 1856 when it purchased the plot to build the park.

“Without missing a beat,” Ms. Miller writes, “she used her award to buy a lot *near* Central Park between Madison and Fifth Avenues, 98th to 99th Streets, knowing full well that the property would only increase in value because of its proximity to the park.” She built her family wealth by acquiring [more than 15 boarding homes](#) and was thought to be one of the wealthiest Black women in the country.

Like others in the Black elite, the philanthropically inclined Gloucesters used their money to influence causes, including abolition. The fire-breathing abolitionist John Brown stayed at the Gloucester home in Brooklyn Heights on his way to the failed attack on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Va., that would set him on the path to the gallows.

The fearsome and beautiful war dress displayed in “Before Yesterday Could We Fly” would have been perfectly appropriate for Ms. Gloucester, with whom Brown was most impressed. [He told her](#), “I wish you were a man, for I’d like to have you invade the South with my little band.”

Not long before the raid, Brown met with Douglass, who passed a letter from Ms. Gloucester and a contribution of \$25. [The salutation read](#): “With best wishes for your Welfare and prosperity & the good of your cause. I subscribe myself your sincere friend.”

Seneca Village property owners who lived elsewhere were differently situated on an emotional level than residents who had spent most or all of their lives worshiping, raising children and burying their dead in their beloved village.

Assets and voting rights were of course important, but for families that had experienced the nightmare of slavery, the gift of a home where the family could be together was perhaps the most beloved possession of all.

As Ms. Miller writes, "First generation Seneca Villagers were old enough to have grown up in a white household, and for some of them, it was the first time their family enjoyed the most basic experience that white Americans took for granted."

These men and women must have felt an incalculable sense of loss when they packed their belongings and departed their homes for the final time. The sense of dislocation was made all the more traumatic by the challenge of finding a new safe haven in a hostile city where an enclave like the one they had left behind was no longer possible.

The Seneca Village story was largely lost to civic memory until 1992, when Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar resurrected it in their [book](#), "The Park and the People: A History of Central Park." The task of reconstructing the story of the village and its residents is just beginning. Nevertheless, historians have already moved this once-forgotten episode to center stage in the 19th-century drama that was New York City.

Correction: Jan. 9, 2022

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of a book by the historian Sara Cedar Miller. It is "Before Central Park," not "Before the Park."

Brent Staples joined the [editorial board](#) in 1990 after working as an editor of the Book Review and an assistant editor for metropolitan news. In 2019, Mr. Staples won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing, The New York Times's first winner for editorial writing in 23 years. Mr. Staples holds a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Chicago. [@BrentNYT](#)