

Chapter 3: History and Land Use of City Hall Park

A. Background History **Alyssa Loorya**

Introduction

This section is edited from the forthcoming doctoral dissertation from Loorya on City Hall Park. Loorya's work references several graduate student projects associated with the overall City Hall Park project, most notably the Master's theses of Mark Cline Lucey (included as the next section) and Julie Anidjar Pai as well as reports by Elizabeth M. Martin, Diane George, Kirsten (Davis) Smyth, and Jennifer Borishansky. These reports are presented in Chapter 6.

This section outlines the history of the City Hall Park area. To provide for proper context, a general history of the development of the lower Manhattan area is presented first to provide a more complete picture of overall project area.

City Hall Park is a relatively small triangular parcel of land (8.8 acres) within New York City's Manhattan Island. It is bounded to the north by Chambers Street, to the east by Park Row, to the west by Broadway. It began as a cow pasture and today houses the seat of government for the nation's largest city. The general history of City Hall Park is fairly well documented though only in a single comprehensive source.¹ The changing uses of City Hall Park from the beginning of the colonial

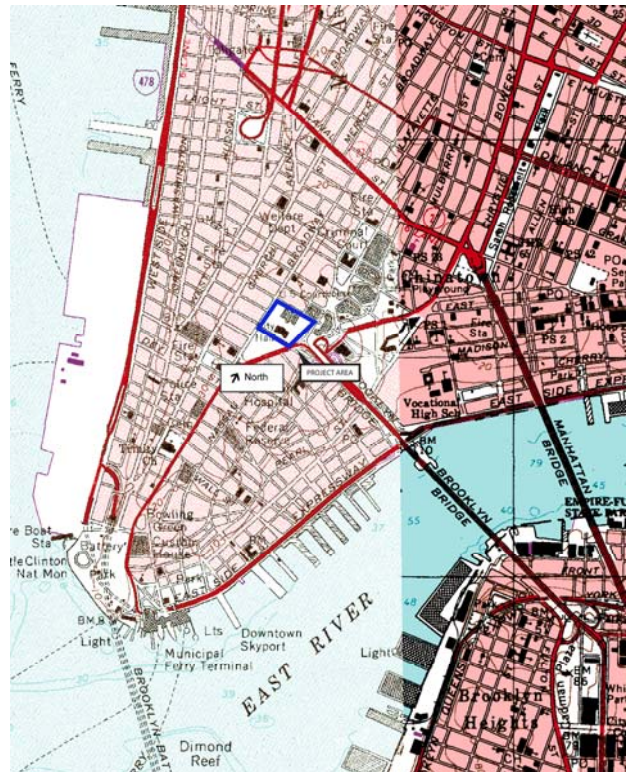


Fig. 3-1: City Hall Park Location

¹ The Master's Thesis *City Hall Park: An Historical Analysis* by Mark Cline Lucey, 2003, (below) chronicles the physical development of City Hall Park from the Dutch Colonial period to the mid-nineteenth century.

the municipal issues that New York City, like most other cities, had to confront. In less than two hundred years, City Hall Park, established in the Dutch tradition of common lands as an institutional enclave, set the stage for the first conflict of the American Revolutionary War and developed into the seat of modern day municipal authority for New York City. The history of this property has occurred in various phases, each blending into the next.

The earliest phase was as a 'common' land for local residents. The open nature of the Common and its location near, yet outside the city, led to a shift to institutional use. Institutional use of the Common was maintained throughout the eighteenth century. The area housed the City's undesirables, providing an attempted solution to the social ills of New York's urban society. The next, and last, phase saw an end of formal use of the property to house city run institutions switching to municipal use for local government/governing. In this phase the property was established as a public park blending historical traditions with modern use. By 1838 City Hall Park had settled into its still current role as the seat of municipal government for a city poised to become a leading metropolitan area in the world. Today City Hall Park, a local landmark site, remains one of the City's, and the nations, oldest public spaces.

Geography

The City of New York is located along the northeastern coastline of the United States, in the state of New York. The landscape of the city was formed during the last ice age, approximately 14,000 to 12,000bp (Bolton 1920). The end of this last ice age was instrumental in forming the rich, lush, fertile soil of the area (Schubert 1968). The terminal moraine of the Wisconsin period glacial stopped at present day Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, creating a flat and marshy landscape that was well-suited for agriculture. The land south of the terminal moraine, where the major farming villages of Kings County and southern Queens County would eventually be located, were covered with water, rock and silt run-off as the glacier retreated and melted. Fertile marshy soils were also deposited in southern Manhattan. In northern Manhattan the glacial period created a rocky and hilly environment

that reflected the deposition of large materials during the receding phase (Schubert 1968, Isachsen et al. 2000).

The Dutch word for the area, “Vlackte”, suggests that “the land which currently comprises City Hall Park was originally a flat plateau². Lucey (below, pp.133) provides a good description of the original topography and the etiology of its present shape.

Native American Occupation

Based upon historical and archaeological evidence it is theorized that Native American populations began to inhabit the New York City area by the turn of the last millennium (Bolton 1920, 1922 and 1934; Lenik 1992; Cantwell and Wall 2001). Artifacts recovered by “historians” and “collectors”, during the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, as well as a variety of documentary sources, attest to a significant Native American presence in the area of lower Manhattan and the larger New York City region (Cantwell and Wall 2001).

The lower Hudson Valley has been occupied since the Early Archaic Period (Lenik 1992), and possibly since the Paleo-Indian period (Ritchie 1965). Native American groups chose to locate their semi-permanent and permanent settlements along the many rivers and estuaries in what is today The Bronx (Ritchie 1958, 1965). An ample food supply and transportation were two key factors in locating along these waterways. The Native American groups in the area practiced a combination of hunting and gathering along with small scale agriculture. The nature of Native American settlements had begun to change just prior to the contact period. Evidence from the pre-contact period suggests permanent settlement among the Native American settlements. Large trash and storage pits as well as ritual burials in the vicinity of the settlements imply a notion of community and territory among these groups (Cantwell and Wall 2001).

² An excellent collection of maps of New York City can be found in Paul E. Cohen and Robert T. Augustyn. *Manhattan in maps, 1527-1995*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1997) and also in Eric Homberger with Alice Hudson as cartographic consultant, *The Historical Atlas of New York City: a Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1994).

On Manhattan Island the local Native American groups are referred to as the Munsees, and were part of the Delaware Nation and the Algonkian language group (Burrows and Wallace 1999; Cantwell and Wall 2001). The Munsees were organized as a series of autonomous groups. Other members of the Delaware nation were present in Kings County, among them the Lenape, the Rockaways, the Nyack's and the Canarsee. The Mohegans occupied northern parts of the city, specifically the Bronx.

Overall there has been little modern archaeological and historical research concerning Native American occupation within New York City. Most information is based on secondary sources and speculation. When Europeans first arrived they encountered a widely inhabited landscape. From the contact period onward local Native American groups faced hostilities with the Europeans, warfare with other Native American groups (notably the Mohawk) and disease and epidemics, brought to the area by the Europeans. Many Native Americans left the area to travel westward looking for a new homeland (Van Wyck 1924; Stiles 1884; Cantwell and Wall 2001). City Hall Park has not produced any trace of pre-Contact occupation.

European Settlement and the Development of the City of New York:

By the turn of the seventeenth century there was a dramatic shift in the social and cultural history within the area that would become the City of New York. Though European explorers had visited the area during the sixteenth century, it wasn't until the arrival of the Dutch West India Company (hereafter "the Company") that true settlement of the area began (Goodwin, Royce and Putnam 1898). The Company had plans to establish trading posts (based largely on the fur trade) along the Noort (North) River (today known as the Hudson River, named after the explorer Henry Hudson who sailed up the river on his boat the *Halve Maen*). The Company's plan called for two key settlements at the northern and southern ends of the river with secondary trading posts in between. Fort Orange was established in the north (at present day Albany) and New Amsterdam (at the lower end of Manhattan Island) was its counterpart at the southern end of the river from 1624 to 1626 (Burrows and Wallace 1999:20-21).

The Common:

What is today known as City Hall Park was located to the north of and just outside the boundaries of Nieuw Amsterdam. This plot of land was part of a large parcel established as common lands by the corporate government of the Dutch West India Company (Lucey 2004:3). Formal settlement by the Dutch began around 1626 when Pieter Minuit *purchased* the southern end of Manhattas Island (Manhattan Island) from the Lenape, for approximately sixty guilders worth of trade goods (Burrows and Wallace 1999:23). The sale of the island led to the founding of a permanent European village in the Lower Hudson Valley region. A fort was built and the settlement, named Nieuw Amsterdam (New Amsterdam), opened the door for larger settlement of the areas surrounding Manhattan Island (Burrows and Wallace 1999:23-24).

Under European law and custom the shareholders of the Company rightfully possessed and controlled all of Manhattan Island. The Company's charter from the Dutch government granted the Company exclusive trading rights and the power to manage the land as they saw fit (Lucey, below, page 132). However, the Dutch West India Company found it difficult to convince people to immigrate to the new colony. Poor living conditions and the unsettled nature of the colony made it an unattractive prospect. For those settlers willing to come to the new world there were many opportunities to obtain land within the region and become vested in profitable commercial ventures. The Company also leased lands for farming on Manhattan Island (Innes 1902:3).

By 1638, the company enacted a policy to promote large-scale settlement by issuing "ground-briefs". This gave "farmers the right "peaceably to possess, inhabit, cultivate, occupy and use, and also therewith and thereof to do, bargain and dispose" of a tract of land" (Lucey below, p. 132.). In return, farmers were required to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Dutch West India Company and make an annual payment to the company (Burrows and Wallace 1999:23, 25).

The small trading post colonies along the Hudson River and the lower Connecticut Valley region are traditionally viewed as having been a purely commercial venture with no definitive plans to create a permanent settlement (Burrows and Wallace 1999:21). Firth Haring Fabend believes however that the Dutch settlement in the area was not based on the fur trade, and profit alone. In her view, although the settlement may have started out based on trade, it was the Dutch, not the English, who set the stage for the laws of the Colonies and they (the Dutch) were in fact, trying to actively settle the area (Fabend 2000).

Economic profit was however an important factor in the settlement of New Amsterdam and it was only a matter of time before residents began to expand to the outlying regions to increase their profits (Kammen 1975, Trelease 1997). Those involved in trade mostly settled to the north of Manhattan, in what would become the northern Bronx and Westchester County. Settlements south of Manhattan Island, in present day Kings, Queens and Richmond Counties and in the southern areas of the present day Bronx, were agricultural. These outlying areas were all independent townships or villages with local governments (Furman 1824; Strong 1842; Stiles 1884).

Following Dutch tradition, all land not granted to private individuals became communal property to be used as a resource for the people (Burrows and Wallace 1999:23, 25).

This included the lands that comprise present day City Hall Park which was used for pasturage as well as a source of wood, lime, clay, sod and thatch. The Dutch West India Company was relatively lenient concerning public access to the unclaimed land of the Common and local residents became accustomed to readily utilizing the land and its resources. Authorities allowed farm animals to graze freely over all unappropriated lands until it proved too destructive to the farmland. When the time came the company began to develop a series of communal pastures. By 1660, the Company “had hired a herdsman to bring the town cattle up the wagon road (Broadway), bear right onto today’s Park Row, and pass the open land known as the Vlackte (Flat) en route to the Collect Pond” (or Freshwater Pond). As early as 1652 the common lands that would become today’s City Hall Park served primarily as communal pasturage (Stokes 1915-1928 4:167) (Lucey below:132).

In 1664 the Duke of York was granted “all of the territory between the Delaware and Connecticut rivers,” by his brother James II, King of England (Burrows and Wallace 1999:72). Soon after British war ships sailed into the Narrows, the mouth of present day New York Bay, challenging Dutch control of the area. New Amsterdam’s residents did not mount any resistance and the colony was turned over to British control. The British renamed both the city and colony New York (Burrows and Wallace 1999:73).

In 1673, the Dutch briefly regained control of the area but the British returned being given control of the area in the treaty that ended the third Anglo-Dutch War (Rothschild 1990:11 and Cantwell and Wall 2001).

Within the City of New York, at this time still just Manhattan Island, Dutch culture began to diminish as many Dutch assimilated into the now predominant Anglo culture. Though some elements of Dutch culture did remain the Dutch language began to disappear and the percentage of residents of Dutch descent in the population significantly decreased (Burrows and Wallace 1999:135-136; Rink 1986:266). By the turn of the eighteenth century the Common began to shift toward municipal/institutional use.

The Eighteenth Century:

The history of Manhattan Island is closely connected with the rise of commercial venture and capitalism. As the commercial aspects of the City grew, so did its population; development began moving northward and farming all but disappeared in the area today known as lower Manhattan. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the area of the City had begun to “change from a relatively small, open, colonial society to a large, class-structured commercial-capitalist component of a new nation” (Rothschild 1990:3). Immigration continued in increasing numbers and helped to contribute to a steady increase in Manhattan’s population from 1698 to 1771 (Burrows and Wallace 1999:136). Immigrants were coming to New York from a variety of countries, from northern Europe and beyond. The influx of new settlers, along with the rapidly approaching Industrial Revolution, was one of the first signs

of the drastic changes that would occur within the City and its surrounding areas and in America as well.

By the early 1730s the population of the City had grown to almost 9,000 (Burrows and Wallace 1999:144). The northern boundary at Wall Street began to give way to a need for space. The increased population and ensuing crowding began to exert new stresses on the City's infrastructure. In turn, as the City grew northward the Common became increasingly less isolated. Residential development rapidly approached the southern and eastern edges of the Common and there was a significant increase in both crime and poverty (Stokes 1905; Burrows and Wallace 1999:144).

With the demolition of the windmill (built about 1663) in 1723, the Common entered the second phase of its development, the beginning of its use as a location for public institutions³. The Common, which remained just outside of town in the early to mid-eighteenth century, became the location for institutions that housed the undesirable and/or dangerous institutions that the City's residents did not want located near their homes. The windmill site was used for executions.

The First Almshouse

The next structure to occupy the Common was an institutional structure, the Almshouse, more commonly referred to as 'the First Almshouse'. The First Almshouse was constructed to deal with the growing problems of poverty within the City. In 1734 the City decided to construct an almshouse, construction of which was completed in September 1735. The First Almshouse opened in 1736 (NY Minutes of the Common Council – hereafter) MCC 1675-1776 and Lossing 1884). The building's location on the Common ensured the isolation of the diseased, the poor, the petty criminals, and the city's many vagabonds from the general

³ The only structure other than the windmill on the Common at this time was a one-and-a-half story house constructed ca. 1720-1730 by Mr. John Harris, a former builder and alderman. Harris occupied the house until his death in 1770. At that time the city regained control of the land and the house and the house was demolished three years later (Stokes 1915-1928 and Lucey, this volume).

population of the City. It also made it significantly easier for the city to control the institutionalized poor.

The Almshouse is a British institutional form. In *A Dictionary of British Social History* almshouses are described as “institutions, usually for the old and infirm, endowed by charity. The oldest are medieval in origin, being founded by religious communities, corporations, or individuals, often for people living in a particular locality or having been employed in some trade” (Cowie 1999:5). The almshouse was founded by charity for the reception and support of the poor. While this definition differs from the form and function of the almshouse in the City of New York it does form the foundation for the institution established in the City.

One of the oldest almshouses in England is St. John’s Hospital in Canterbury. Built in the 11th Century, St. John’s served as a place for the poor and infirm as well as a hospital. It is still active in the present day, as are over 2000 other almshouses throughout Great Britain (Cowie 1999). Britain’s earliest almshouses focused on aiding those who could not work due to unfortunate circumstances and were in need of assistance. The original social institution of the Almshouse was not as a workhouse. Almshouses were strictly to provide relief for the poor, as dictated by Britain’s Poor Law Act of 1601, which stated: “the justices of the peace were to be responsible for appointing in every parish an Overseer of the Poor, who was to collect a poor rate, relieve the sick, aged and blind...” (Cowie 1999:225).

It wasn’t until 1723 that the Poor Law Act was amended to include the notion of a workhouse. A workhouse may be defined as a building that poor able-bodied individuals enter in order to earn a living and learn a trade enabling them to re-enter society as a productive member of society while serving their community with needed and practical labor. It is this definition that best corresponds to the development of the First Almshouse in New York City (Huey 2001). It is also indicative of the many customs and laws carried over to the Colonies from Britain.

The numbers of poor and their plight had grown steadily throughout the first quarter of the eighteenth century. Between 1690 and 1723, the city’s population had almost doubled from

3,900 to 7,248. As the city grew into an important commercial port of geographic importance so did the number of paupers, helpless dependents, and vagrants. Burrows and Wallace (1999) outline the relationship of the poor and wealthy in the City during this period. “According to the 1730 census, New York’s population stood at 8,622: 7045 whites and 1577 blacks. That same year a comprehensive property assessment revealed that the richest 10 percent of the city’s taxable population, some 140 merchants and landowners, held almost half of its taxable wealth. By contrast, 49 percent of taxable property held by whites worth 10 pounds or less—a pathetically meager sum, indicating that around one-third of all whites were more or less destitute. On the assumption that virtually all blacks were no better off, nearly three fifths of the city’s inhabitants thus lived at or near the subsistence level” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:144).

It was also during this period that the city experienced several health concerns notably severe outbreaks of yellow fever (1702), smallpox (1731-1732), and measles (1727) and experienced the economic depression of 1729 to 1737. This placed overwhelming pressure on the traditional parish-based system of outdoor poor relief (Burrows and Wallace 1999 and Lucey 2004).

Relief for the poor in New Amsterdam began with the Dutch Reformed Church, during Dutch control over the City, as a church based system to help the less fortunate. Traditionally the poor were cared for by family, private charity or the vestry (Wilson 1893). As the population grew, it became increasingly difficult for many people to find suitable work, adding to those members of society who were either not willing or not fit to work. Even as the number of impoverished persons rose, it remained the role of the churches to deal with this social problem. Frequently members of a parish were asked to take in poor or destitute members. This was considered a charitable act that was looked upon kindly by the Church. These people would become the financial and moral responsibility of the individual or family that took them in. However, this form of charity and poor relief could not sustain itself under growing pressures (Burrows and Wallace 1999).

The New York Assembly implemented in 1683 the first act that attempted to control the poor

at a governmental level. The “Maintaining the Poor and Preventing Vagabonds” Act allowed the government of any given town to provide relief for its poor while rejecting new immigrants who did not appear to have sufficient means of supporting themselves. This Act was intended to keep additional poor out of the colony but it was not successful (Burrows and Wallace 1999:145). Two years later, in 1685, a ‘poor rate’ was adopted. The ‘poor rate’ was similar in design to aspects of the British Poor Law Act of 1601. The rate was affirmed in the Ministry Act of 1693 and immediately put into effect (Burrows and Wallace 1999:145). The ‘poor rate’ was allowed to all who were generally thought to be ‘deserving poor’ i.e., those who had fallen upon bad times. All individuals who were deemed able bodied were denied assistance of any kind, and were in fact persecuted for their lack of motivation to work.

The poor rate consisted of two kinds of relief. Out-relief, the more popular form, consisted mainly of grants of fuel, clothing, food and cash. This was most commonly provided to women and children. The second form of relief consisted of housing in a rented house on Broad Street. While this could be considered New York’s first almshouse it was not specifically built for that purpose. The individuals who were housed there were often old men too ill to work. It should be noted however that only a small proportion of New Yorkers actually received municipal relief as a great number of parishes continued with the tradition of providing alms to the poor (Huey 2001; Burrows and Wallace 1999:145-146).

Despite the good efforts of the Church and the “poor rate”, it remained difficult for the City of New York to deal with those deemed to be the “undeserving poor”. Despite an increasingly growing problem, as well as, an increasingly misleading reputation as a town with few vagrants and beggars, the City Council rejected a 1699 proposal by New York Governor Bellomont for the construction of a workhouse. Though one year later, in 1700, the Common Council adopted legislation for removing the “Vagabonds & Idle Persons that are a Nuisance & Common Grievance of the Inhabitants” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:146).

By 1720, the problems of poverty and vagrancy began to take a toll on the city. Increases in poor taxes caused a public outcry and the Common Council, controlled



Fig. 3-2 The Almshouse

by the newly-elected Morrisite “party of the people,” moved to ease public pressure by voting to build an almshouse (Lucey, below:140). By November 15, 1734 it was decided by a committee of the Common Council that inquiries would be made about purchasing land on which to build a “poor house”. As indicated by the Common Council minutes in 1735 the

building would not only be an almshouse, but a workhouse as well. Along with housing the sick, impoverished widows and orphans, this building would put the idle back to work and incarcerate criminals (MCC 1675-1776, 4: 305-311). The Almshouse was furnished with materials to occupy the inmates in productive labor as all paupers were required to work to earn their keep. Children at the almshouse were taught to read, write, and cast accounts. The Churchwarden was appointed as the overseer of the almshouse.

The activities and groups within the Almshouse were initially meant to be kept relatively separate. The *Minutes of the Common Council* dated March 31, 1736 describe the intended usage of the rooms of the Almshouse: “That the lower room to the Eastward be for the Keeper and his Family to Dress



Fig. 3-3: The Almshouse (Computer reconstruction)

Victuals and the poor to eat in, that the upper room to the Eastward be the lodging room for the keeper and his family, that the division of the cellar to the eastward be for hard labor and weaving, the

middle division of the cellar for the provision of the cellar; and the westernmost division of the cellar for the unruly and obstinate to be confined and imprisoned in: and the other three rooms not herein particularly appropriated to be for spinning, carding, and other labor until such time as this Court shall see cause to make other alterations”(MCC 3/31/1736). The Upper West room served as an infirmary. Additionally, the Common Council ordered a garden to be fenced, plowed up, and kept for growing “Roots, Herbs, etc.,” also “That fetters, Gives, Shackles, and a convenient place of whipping post be provided for the said House of Correction for punishing the incorrigible and disor[der]ly persons committed thereunto” (MCC 1675-1776 4:309-310) (Lucey, this volume, p.140).

Those admitted to the Almshouse ranged in age from 4½ months to 65 years. Among the reasons for being admitted to the Almshouse were insanity, pregnancy, blindness, being lame, consumption, vagrancy and being an orphan. Stays at the Almshouse ranged from a day up to the death of an inmate. The inmates of the Almshouse were held to strict daily schedules that consisted of work, prayer and meals. This strict scheduling was very different from the experiences in the private dwellings under the earlier system of poor relief. Such conditions discouraged many from making the Almshouse a permanent home. In its first year of operation the Almshouse only took in nineteen people, twelve adults and seven children. Within one year of the opening of the Almshouse the Common Council drastically slashed the amount of out-relief given to the City’s poor (Burrows and Wallace 1999:157).

Within three years of its opening the Upper West infirmary room of the Almshouse could no longer adequately serve the continuing outbreaks of contagious diseases. Nor could it keep the remaining inhabitants disease free. To address the situation the City ordered the construction of a small hospital in May 1739 as “A Receptacle and Conveniency of Such unhappy Poor as are or shall be Visited with any Malignant or Obnoxious disease” (MCC 1675-1776 4: 457-459) (Lucey, this volume, p. x).

Between 1731 and 1737 the City added another 2000 people to its population. By 1746 the population of the City was 11,717 (Lucey 2004). During the 1740s and 1750s the City put considerable effort into making the Almshouse more functional. In 1746 the city ordered an enlargement of the Almshouse to address the needs of an increased number of poor and/or sick residents who could no longer provide for themselves (MCC 1675-1776 5:171, 176).

Upper Barracks

As the City continued to grow and develop, it was also facing a period of unrest. In the 1740s New Yorkers feared that the French and British battle for possession of the northeastern stretches of the New World would escalate and bring conflict to the City, thus there was an increasing concern of a French and Indian attack. Capturing the City of New York would strategically benefit the French as the Hudson River provided a connection to Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River. In 1744, the City began preparing by strengthening Fort George at the southern end of Broadway.

Fearing an invasion, the City constructed a palisade at the northern edge of town



located just north of present day Chambers Street. The Palisade was constructed of fourteen foot cedar logs that measured nine to ten inches in diameter. The wall was perforated with loopholes for musketry and a gate was installed at the intersection of Chambers and Broadway (Stokes 1915-1928, 1:196). The palisade bisected Manhattan Island following a zigzag pattern, reaching as far north as possible without falling into the swamplands and drainages of the Collect Pond. The Common thus fell within the protected zone.

Fig. 3-4: The Palisade (Maerschalck Plan 1755, detail)

As tensions between the British and the French escalated in the 1750s, the British sent 1000 troops to New York City for winter quartering in 1756. As the barracks at Fort George were inadequate the Earl of Loudon, commander-in-chief of the armed forces in North America, ordered New York residents to house the soldiers. Public outcry led municipal leaders to declare this “too unequal as well as too heavy a burthen for the Inhabitants to bear” (MCC 1675-1776 6:108). In further response, the Common Council ordered “The Immediate providing of materials for the Carrying on and Compleating [of] Barracks to Contain Eight Hundred men” ... “on the Commons south of Fresh Water” along present-day Chambers Street in October 1757 (MCC 1675-1776 6:108 and 111-112). It was wondered “wheather a Suffecient Number of Carpenters Can be had, so as to Compleat the said Barracks in a fortnight” The barracks would “Contain Twenty Rooms on a floor two stories high, to be Twenty one feet square, four hundred and Twenty feet Long and Twenty one feet wide” (MCC 1675-1776 6:108 and 111-112). By legislative act, title to the barracks and the land upon which they stood would remain with the city and gave the Common Council license to rent them during times of peace (Stokes 1915-1928 4:695). The barracks were constructed from October 31 to November 29, 1756 (Lucey, this volume, p. x).

New Gaol⁴

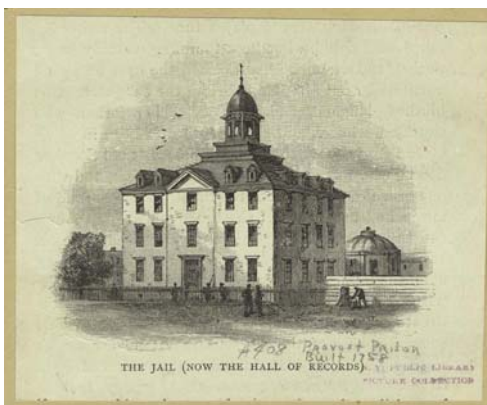


Fig. 3-5: *New Gaol*

Increasing crime in the 1750’s, blamed on the quartered soldiers (Burrows and Wallace 1999:1850, was met by calls for a new prison. The Common Council moved in 1757 to build “proper and convenient Gaols on Some Grounds to the Southward of Fresh Water” (MCC (October 19, 1757) as quoted in Stokes 1915-1928 4:684). Upon completion of the

New Gaol in September 1759, all prisoners housed within City Hall were moved to the new facility. No reference has been uncovered stating why, other than

⁴ Gaol is the British spelling for jail and will be used where appropriate.

overcrowding of the prison system, and that prisoners were being housed in City Hall. Most of the jail housed civilian lawbreakers with a few rooms specifically set aside for debtors and paupers. Part of the building was claimed by the British military to incarcerate French prisoners of war. With the combination of New York City's criminal population, the paupers and the French prisoners of war, the New Gaol quickly filled to capacity.

Following the end of the French and Indian war the city executed a complete transfer of buildings concerned with municipal disciplinary authority to the Common, erecting a public whipping post, stocks, cage, and pillory next to the New Gaol in 1764. The release of the prisoners of war made space available in the gaol and in 1767 part of the structure began to serve as a Bridewell⁵ for vagrants (Stokes 1915-1928) (see Lucey, this volume, p. x).

Throughout the war the economy of New York City continued to grow. A housing boom, spurred by the presence of hundreds of British Military and Naval officers, boosted the economy throughout the 1750s into the 1760s (Burrows and Wallace 1999:183). From 1753 to 1760 the City added over six hundred houses. The military officers also supported a consumer economy of luxury items. They “created a rich new market for the luxury goods produced by local carvers and gilders, watchmakers, furniture makers, painters, pewterers and potters, silversmiths, perfumers, glovers, seamstresses, hoopmakers, and mantua makers.” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:183) Even during the war years, 41 wig-makers and hairdressers were employed in the city and the British officers provisioned themselves with wine, tobacco, ceramic (likely imported) and glassware, stationery and teas from specialty shops around the city (Burrows and Wallace 1999:183).

The Revolutionary War:

⁵ The Bridewell was named after the British institution of the same name, The Bridewell House of Correction. The Bridewell was originally built as the Bridewell Palace (1515-1523) for Henry VIII. In 1553 Edward VI gave the Bridewell Palace to the City of London to house homeless children and to punish disorderly women. When the City took full possession in 1556 they turned the Bridewell into a prison, hospital and workrooms.

Following the French and Indian war a growing rift between the American colonists and England was apparent. The Commons became a rallying ground for Americans opposed to British policies such as the Stamp Act and the Navigation Act (Burrows and Wallace 1999). From the time of the first protest meeting against the Stamp Act in November 1765, the Common was the site of frequent mass meetings and demonstrations where those associated with the new law were often burnt in effigy. The Sons of Liberty, using the Common as their staging ground, incited a revolutionary fervor throughout the City. On March 31, 1766, several Sons of Liberty “fell on an officer of the Royal Americans on the Common about Dusk, behind his back and beat him unmercifully and broke his sword, which he had drawn in his Defence” (*Montresor’s Journal* 1766:356-357)

In May 1766 the British government repealed the Stamp Act. In response the Sons of Liberty erected a pine staff on the Common with a large sign inscribed “George III, Pitt & Liberty.”⁶ This staff became known as the first Liberty Pole (Burrows and Wallace 1999 and Sons of Liberty 2005). Conflict between the British soldiers, quartered in the barracks, and New Yorkers was inevitable and the Common was witness to an early scuffle prior to the American War for Independence. First blood was spilled in August 1766 when a group of British soldiers cut down the Liberty Pole. The next day an estimated two to three thousand American colonists rallied at the Common. The colonists hurled bricks and stones at the troops who responded with bayonets, wounding a number of colonists (*Weekly Post-Boy* 1232, August 14, 1766; *Weekly Post-Boy*, 1233, August 21, 1766.) The conflict with British soldiers over this, and later Liberty Poles, went on for years until the actual outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1776.

In 1774 additional barracks, measuring 20 feet by 200 feet, were constructed on the green between the original barracks and the almshouse for the increasing number of British troops. These became known as the Second Barracks. Sometime between

⁶ Referring to King George III of Britain and William Pitt, head of the British government.

1776 and 1782, during British occupation of New York City, two more barracks buildings were built. Judging by the British Headquarters Map, drawn in 1782, these

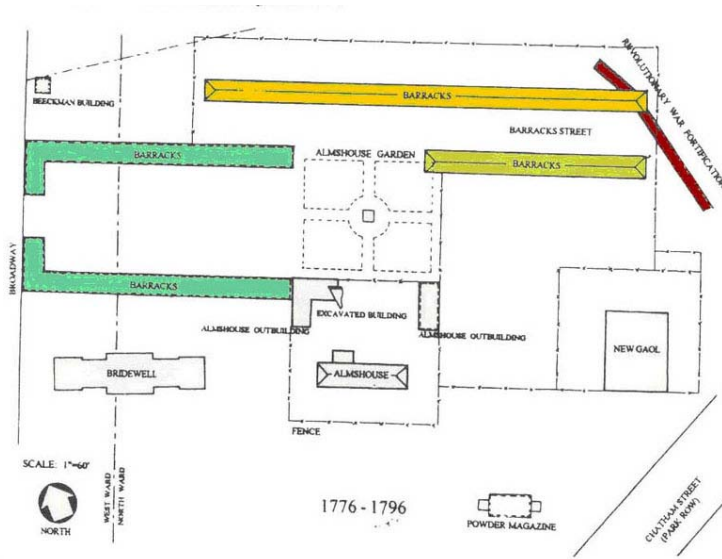


Fig. 3-6: Common in 1776-96 (from Baugher and Lennick 1997—redrawn after Hunter 1994)

barracks appear to have been approximately 300 feet in length. The number of men stationed in New York City rose just before the full onset of the War in 1775 (Lucey this volume, p.x).

Upon receiving news of the battles at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the Sons of Liberty seized control of the

powder magazine by the Collect Pond. By June, the British troops had been evacuated and the American colonists hastily built barricades and batteries. For over a year, the Continental Army maintained control of Manhattan. During this time, the Common served as a military parade ground and as a central gathering place (Burrows and Wallace 1999:220-225 and Lucey 2004). On July 9, 1776 the Declaration of Independence was read to a cheering crowd on the triangular green of the Common.

Two months later, in September 1776, the Continental army suffered a major defeat in the Battle of Long Island and fled northward out of Manhattan. On November 15, 1776 colonial troops were forced out of the City by British General Howe. British troops took control of the City beginning a seven year occupation. The New Gaol, the recently constructed Bridewell and other structures in and around the Common were used to house the Colonial prisoners. Conditions were overcrowded, sanitary facilities overtaxed, and many prisoners died of neglect and disease. William

Cunningham, the Provost-Marshal in charge of the prisoners, claimed that he had starved more than two thousand of them, aside from hanging others “behind the Upper Barracks”, where they were supposedly hastily buried (Stokes 1915-1928: v. 5:1016).

In November 1777 the British soldiers in the city numbered 5000. Less than a year later, in July 1778, there were over 15,000 troops stationed in New York City. During the last year of the war (1782), 17,000 soldiers were living in New York (Burrows and Wallace 1999:246). Many civilians fled the city during this period. Through sheer numbers alone the British Army was an occupying force in New York City throughout the Revolutionary War period. As the occupying force the British were responsible for the large civilian population. They were responsible for the clean up and reconstruction following the Great Fire of September 21, 1776 that burnt down almost all of the buildings on Manhattan’s lower west side. This fire created the beginnings of a housing shortage as the army was not able to rebuild fast enough. The return of the Tories who fled the city between 1774 and 1776 increased the City’s population as well. By 1777 the population rose to 12,000 people increasing to 33,000 by 1779 (Burrows and Wallace 1999:245). As the housing crisis grew a “Canvas Town” was set up west of the Common at Broad Street (Burrows and Wallace 1999:251). Three hundred people sought housing in the Almshouse; rents increased by 400 % and the cost of food rose by 800%. Another fire in August 1778 exacerbated the housing crisis. By 1778, one quarter to one third of the City’s total housing had been lost (Burrows and Wallace 1999:150).

To contain the price of food farmers from outside the city were forced to provide food for the soldiers. The American Revolution created food supply problems for the entirety of the British colonies (Williams 1944:112). Shipping food to the British troops in the City was a logistical nightmare for the British army. The Patriots frequently disrupted the City’s supply lines that provided provisions from the farmlands outside of New York. Army Quartermasters were forced to import food from “elsewhere in the Empire” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:151). Rebel pirates

routinely attacked supply ships. The few supplies that did manage to get through were often spoiled and livestock seldom survived the harsh trip across the Atlantic. Apart from the occasional successful raid on rebel livestock the only meat that the troops received was salted meat. As the war progressed several of the small islands off Manhattan, such as Governors Island and Randalls Island, were used for gardens and the pasturing of sheep, cows, and pigs. Although the troops never completely ran out of food, there were many times throughout the war that they received only starvation rations (Williams 1944).

In addition to the scarcity of food soldiers had deal with fuel shortages. Winters in New York were typically harsh, but the coldest winter on record occurred during the occupation in the late 1770s. The entire harbor was frozen solid, and no supply shipments could reach the soldiers. The winter of 1779-1780 was so harsh that it created a firewood shortage. “The heaviest cutting occurred during the terrible winter of 1779-80, when snow fell almost every day from early November to March and the East River, Hudson River, Long Island Sound, and the Upper Bay became a solid mass of ice. Military authorities couldn’t, or wouldn’t, distribute firewood to civilians, and it became so expensive that some of the city’s poorest inhabitants quietly froze to death. A year or so later, while studying the enemy’s positions on Manhattan from the New Jersey palisades, Washington was astonished to see that ‘the island is totally stripped of trees’” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:155).

In addition to the food, fuel and housing crises, there were small pox, cholera, and yellow fever epidemics in the city throughout the war (Burrows and Wallace 1999:151). Throughout this difficult period the British military leadership was in charge of the City as the civilian government had been disbanded by Governor Howe. Martial law was imposed with a commandant in control of the city, aided by a small group of military leaders and a police department who “enforced military regulations” (Burrows and Wallace 1999:249).

After the War:

Military occupation of New York City ended on November 25, 1783, Evacuation Day. Following the British evacuation the barracks no longer served a defined purpose. In 1787 four rooms of the barracks were converted into a hospital for the Almshouse (Stokes 1915-1928 28:1220). The post-war rise in population (from 12,000 in 1783 to 23,610 in 1785 [Burrows and Wallace 1999:270]) continued in the decade that followed (from 23,610 in 1786 to 33,131 by 1790, and to 60,515 by the turn of the century ([Burrows and Wallace 1999:265-273])). The area around the Common became densely populated, improvements were made to the New Gaol and Bridewell, and in 1785 a second Burial Ground was established to relieve the crowding of the first Almshouse Burial Ground, which had been established behind that structure in 1757 (Lucey, this volume, p. x).

“Following the war New York was named the new nation’s capital. As befitting the nation’s capital, the late 1780s saw continued efforts to improve the existing institutions on the Common. A stable and storehouse were erected at the almshouse; renovations were made in the Bridewell; a fence was built around the Goal yard and vagrants in the Bridewell were put to work filling the gaol yard with dirt (MCC 1784-1831 1:214, 381, 388 and 449)” (Lucey, this volume, p. x). Heeding concerns about the presence of gunpowder in the new residential areas surrounding the Common, the Common Council ordered, in October 1789, that the powder magazine “in the hollow near the almshouse” be taken down and the materials used for the almshouse store (MCC 1784-1831 1:494.). The removal of the Powder House was the first act in the upcoming transformation of the Common. Though still an area for institutional entities the first steps toward transformation to a public park were underway by the 1790s. Formal paving of the area delineated the boundaries of the future park.

City Hall Park:

The framing of the Common south of Murray Street with a sidewalk is not without present-day significance. Except for the Post Office that stood at the southern tip of the Park (1870-1939), the southern portion of the area was always a public park, complete with pedestrian walks, benches, landscaped trees, and fountains. In 1796 the City formally laid out Chambers Street, setting the northern boundary of the Park. Following this the common lands north of Chambers Street quickly developed into a gridwork of streets as developers leveled hills, filled wetlands, and even filled the Collect Pond. Only the characteristic triangular Park remained undeveloped (Lucey, this volume, p. 163).

The 1790s brought an ongoing struggle between those who wanted to view the Park as an ornament of the City and those who wanted it to remain as a center of municipal institutions. Ultimately, City Hall would bridge both visions, standing as an ornamental monument and also serving as the seat of government.

During the 1790s the City experienced several yellow fever outbreaks. It is estimated that during a single outbreak, 2500 residents died from the fever within a four month period (Barber 1841). This placed a strain on the relatively small almshouse and the relatively new Dispensary that had been established for the out-relief of the ailing poor.

In July 1796, authorities ordered improvements to “the Ground commonly called the Fields in front of the Alms House & Bridewell” (MCC 1784-1831 1:733). Part of the improvements was to plant trees along the street line, adding to the park atmosphere. The city’s first guidebook, *The Picture of New-York* (1807), noted that the Park was a “beautiful grove” planted with elms, planes, willows, and catalpas, and that rows of poplars lined the sidewalk (A.T. Goodrich & Co 1818).

It was also in 1796 that the Common Council decided to demolish the old Almshouse. In May 1796 the council moved that a new almshouse would “be erected on the Rear of the Ground of the present Alms House” on the site of the former Upper Barracks (present day Tweed Courthouse), thus maintaining the institutional use of the former

Common (MCC 1784-1831 2:239, 243-44). In May 1797, almshouse residents moved to the new Second Almshouse. Less than two months later the first almshouse was razed.

In 1813 several accounts from the diary of Reverend Ezra Stiles Ely were published that provided a first hand account of the Almshouse and Bridewell. Reverend Ely provided religious services and support to both institutions as well as to the gaol. Ely provides several accounts of inmates and their circumstances such as William, a blind man whose job it was to create button molds. Ely also mentions several boys who were orphaned or abandoned that occupied themselves by singing (Ely 1813).

Another change that would affect the former Common was the construction of a state prison in Greenwich Village in 1797. Prior to the construction of this new state prison, state prisoners were incarcerated in the western half of the Bridewell. In 1799 the state prisoners moved to the Greenwich Village prison. Criminals incarcerated in the New Gaol moved to the Bridewell, leaving only debtors in the Gaol. This earned the Gaol its new monicker of the Debtors' Prison (MCC 1784-1831 2:338). In the course of the next two decades, leading into the second quarter of the nineteenth century, other small structures appeared in the Park and several of the older structures came to serve new purposes. For example, in August of 1787 the barracks began to serve as a hospital for the almshouse (MCC I:314). When Bellevue opened in 1812 it superseded the second almshouse, which then was converted to private use as the New York Institution, which housed the Academy of Arts, American Institute; the New York Historical Society and the City Library.

The Nineteenth Century:

As the nineteenth century approached the City was experiencing another spurt of population growth and between 1790 and 1800 the population doubled from 33,131 to 60,515. By 1810 the population rose to 96,373. By 1820 the population increased again by another 30,000 (Lucey, this volume, p.x). The growing city expanded

northward, and the Common (or the Fields, as it was now known) was in the heart of the new city. The construction of a new City Hall at this location between 1803 and 1811 suited the genteel, wealthy neighborhood that developed here in the post-war boom. Other smaller municipal structures were also added, while by 1812 the Second Almshouse was emptied and gentrified (Lucey, this volume, p. x).

A small building, of unknown function, appears in the 1804 Mangin Plan, this one on the east side of the almshouse. The Almshouse Commissioners also erected a thirty by thirty-five foot building to serve as a soup kitchen (Hardie 1827:263). The soup kitchen building appears on the 1804 Mangin Plan. The Park also contained New York's first dispensary at this time⁷.

As completion of City Hall neared, municipal authorities sought to further clean up the Park's image. In 1808, just one year after it opened, the Free School moved across the park to a former state arsenal on the corner of Chatham Street and Tryon Row. In 1809 the council ordered the whipping post removed from in front of the Bridewell. A visitor named Timothy Dwight noted that, "the infliction of punishment was found to be so revolting to the feelings of the Community" it demanded the removal of the whipping post. In 1809 gas lamps were installed in the Park and, in 1810, turnstiles were added to the Park's gates to help regulate pedestrian flow (MCC 1784-1831 4:716-717; 5:572 and 6:372 and Dwight 1821-1822:448-484).

City Hall was completed in 1811. The building stood two and a half stories and measured 215 feet by 105 feet. The south, west, and east sides of the building consisted of expensive Massachusetts marble from the Johnson & Stevens Quarry in

⁷ However, some discrepancy exists as to whether the soup kitchen and the City Dispensary occupied the same building. One source suggests that they were separate, with the soup kitchen at the corner of Tryon Row and Cross Street and the dispensary at the corner of Chambers Street and Cross Street. The source also suggests that the dispensary actually shared its building with Engine Company No. 25 and Hose Company No. 1 during the 1830s (Hall 1910:410 and Sheldon 1882:353 and 357). Alternatively, Hooker's Plan between 1804 and 1817 shows a building on Tryon Row labeled "City Dispensary & Soup House."

West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. The north side of the building was constructed using brownstone from New Jersey. By 1812 the city's government offices had moved to their new French Renaissance-inspired home in the Park. The move initiated the last round of improvements and transformations. All residents of the almshouse were moved to the new hospital complex at Bellevue. The Common Council renamed the emptied almshouse the New York Institution and designated the building as "an Institution for the promotion of arts and sciences in this City." Among the public and semi-public institutions that found a home in the New York Institution were the Academy of Arts, the Academy of Painting, the American Institute, the New-York Historical Society, the City Library, the American Museum, the Lyceum of Natural History, the Chambers Street Savings Bank, and the Deaf and Dumb Institute. For eighteen years the building housed institutions "of arts and sciences" (MCC 1784-1831 7:270).

In 1814 the grounds to the south and north of the City Hall received a facelift as the Common Council ordered "a Plan for the laying out of the grounds adjoining the new City Hall . . . in the manner which . . . would be most proper and advantageous for the Public Interest and the beauty of the City." In August 1816 a committee of the Common Council recommended a botanic garden be planted between the New York Institution and City Hall. And in 1817 the council ordered that "the Ground between the City Hall and the old Alms House and that between this time and the first of May next, the whole space to be laid down in Grass, bordered with trees and thrown open for the benefit of the City in the same manner as the spaces in front of the Hall, reserving however so much as may be necessary in the discretion of the Committee to be enclosed for the use of the Hall and Bridewell"(MCC 1784-1831 7:715 and 8:600, 790-791).

An 1809 print by George Hayward shows a five to six foot high wooden picket fence running north along Broadway to the engine house which stood across from Warren Street. In March 1817 the Common Council decided to build an iron fence imported from foundries in England. The iron fence was erected "commencing at the Engine

House opposite Warren Street and running northerly to Chamber Street; thence along Chamber Street to a point in line with the west end of the New York Institution”(MCC 1784-1831 9:84, 125 and 206 and *N.Y. Gazette* June 19, 1817). Four years later the Council opted to replace the wooden fence surrounding the southern portion of the Park with an iron fence as well. Starting from the southern tip of City Hall Park, the new fence was to “be so extended as to connect it with that already erected, and that the Engine House on Broadway be removed” (MCC 1784-1831 11:686). Another fence with a diamond slat top runs from the engine house in front of the Bridewell, and a plank fence runs north from the engine house to the workshop/school. The southern entrance of the park was ornamented with four marble columns to support the new iron gates.

New York’s elegant City Hall Park was joined by the construction of a new building in 1818 at the northeast corner of the Park. The Rotunda was built by John Vanderlyn to exhibit his panorama *The Palace and Garden of Versailles*. As New York’s first art museum, the Rotunda added to the cultural prestige of the booming city. In 1835 the Rotunda’s spaces were converted into public offices. After the great fire of 1835 the post office occupied the building for a decade and then the city converted the Rotunda into public offices (Avery 1988).

In 1824 the Common Council called for the removal of the Gaol and all the other small buildings between the Free School on Tryon Row and the Park. The council planned to sell the land on which the Gaol stood and use that money to build a larger prison north of the city and much farther from the now-fashionable City Hall Park area. The order was not acted upon however and a new recommendation converted the Gaol into a city hall of records. In 1830 the prisoners in the Gaol were transferred to a building at Bellevue and the renovation work began (MCC 1784-1831 19:193-195).

In May 1830 the New York Institution met the same fate as the Gaol. The Minutes of the Common Council stated that the former almshouse would be renamed the “New

City Hall” and would serve only public purposes (MCC 1784-1831 19:76-80) (Lucey, this volume, p. x).

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As the 1830s progressed only City Hall and its converted annexes remained within City Hall Park. This re-designation of old buildings into governmental offices set the Park’s transition into its final stage of development. The Common Council declared in March 1831 that the second almshouse, the Gaol, and the Rotunda were legally designated as part of the ‘City Hall of the City of New York’ (MCC 1784-1831 19:583). In 1838 the demolition of the Bridewell removed the last vestige of the Park’s former role.

B. A Documentary History of City Hall Park, 1652-1838⁸

Mark Cline Lucey

Introduction

The following chapter presents a chronology and narrative history spanning the period from Dutch settlement to about 1830. Although inventories of structures in the land known today as City Hall Park existed (Hunter Research 1990), no comprehensive documentary history of the park has ever been written. Historians have written prolifically about urban development during the colonial period, but, with the exception of Rosenzweig and Blackmar’s *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (1992), none have told the story via the changing uses of a particular piece of land. The history of urban spaces in early America is not well developed, even though such histories would provide an illuminating lens through which to view a growing and changing country.

This is the history of a plot of earth that began as a cow pasture and stands today as a treasured public space and the seat of government in the nation’s largest city. Apart

⁸ This is a slightly edited version of a Master’s Essay for an M.A. in History, Brooklyn College.

from this work, no comprehensive, written history exists for this crucial plot of land.⁹ Moreover, the changing uses of City Hall Park between 1652 and 1838 tell the story of greater changes happening within New York City during a period of rapid, turbulent development. The first section, titled “waste vacant land” looks at the early shaping of the city’s corporate government via its relationship to property, especially the property that became known as the Common. The section titled “Not In My Backyard” describes early rapid urban growth as the city first matured to the point of requiring penal and poor relief institutions. “Not So Distant” explores the development of public life in New York City via the proliferation of public gatherings on the Common, both for celebration and for protest. The following section, titled “Homeland Security,” chronicles a city at war and in fear. For the years leading to the American War for Independence, “The Most Publick Place” looks at New Yorkers who had developed a powerful sense of possession of their homeland, and of the Common in particular. “The Park” describes a city that was growing rapidly and developing a strong sense of itself as a great metropolis. Traditional notions of the Park as the site for undesirable institutions competed with rising notions of the Park as a potential ornament to the city. In the final section, City Hall is built and symbolizes the happy compromise between the proponents of beautification and the traditionalists who believed that the Park should continue to house penal institutions.

⁹The most thorough study to date is a designation report by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission entitled “African Burial Ground and the Commons Historic District,” released in February of 1993. The report contains approximately sixteen pages of generalized history of City Hall Park, but attempts no analysis of the land’s uses. The report’s purpose is merely to provide a summary history in order to justify the land’s value as an historic landmark.

The earliest history of City Hall Park was written by Henry Barton Dawson to be included in D.T. Valentine’s *Manual for New York*. Dawson’s pamphlet, entitled “Reminiscences of the Park and its Vicinity” consists almost exclusively of the history of the American revolutionary period with detailed accounts of colonial acts of rebellion and “outrages committed” by the British troops. The account served, evidently, as a booster for America.

Two more accounts were written in 1910 as appeals to the city to preserve and restore the park. A number of citizens’ groups wrote “Save the City and the City Hall Park” to protest the proposed new court house. “An Appeal for the Preservation of City Hall Park” by E.H. Hall served a similar purpose. The former contains almost no history whatsoever, while the latter contains only a brief “Historical Sketch of City Hall Park”.

In 1919, Henry Collins Brown published “A Plea for the Restoration of City Hall Park to its Colonial Aspect” as a tirade against the federal post office located on the southern end of City Hall Park and a plea for its removal. The pamphlet contains little historical content.

Finally, the October 1999 reopening of the newly restored City Hall Park included a pamphlet by John P. Avalon called “City Hall Park: New York’s Historic Commons”. The account contains very brief period histories, plus a list of historic structures, but no analysis.

As an architecturally magnificent monument, City Hall also maintained the municipal use of the Park without the undesired jails and poorhouse. By 1838, with the destruction of the Bridewell, City Hall Park had settled into its mature role as the seat of municipal government, and the city as a whole stood ready to become a leading metropolis of the world.

Writing the history of City Hall Park required a great deal of primary source research. Of foremost importance were the *Minutes of the Common Council* (cited as MCC) contained in the New-York Historical Society research library. These minutes provided what is essentially the only official record of buildings constructed and destroyed, proposals for uses of the space, and uses of the existing buildings. Additional research was done in the *Minutes of the Commissioners of the Almshouse & Bridewell*, the *Churchwardens Minutes* and a variety of reports presented to the Corporation of the City of New York. Maps, city plans, and drawings played a significant role in locating the actual position of various buildings and determining whether the resolutions of the Common Council were, in fact, carried out. In the realm of secondary sources, I.N. Phelps Stokes' *Iconography of Manhattan Island* provided the most comprehensive information. Stokes also relied heavily on the *Minutes of the Common Council*, but his research helped to identify other sources including newspapers, images, and maps.

“waste vacant land”

The triangular piece of land known today as City Hall Park is part of the original New Amsterdam common lands as established by the corporate government of the Dutch West India Company. This space has served as a center of public, communal, and civic services and activities since the middle of the seventeenth century, undergoing innumerable changes as the needs of New York City changed. Today City Hall Park, considered by one mid-nineteenth-century observer (Dawson 1867:95) as among “the most spacious and delightful squares with which any City Hall in America was surrounded,” survives as one of the city’s earliest open, public spaces.

When the Dutch West India Company obtained Manhattan from the Lenape people in 1626, its shareholders perceived themselves as rightfully possessing and controlling the whole of the island, for indeed the company's charter granted them exclusive trading rights and the power to manage the land as they saw fit. By 1638, the company began a new policy of promoting large-scale settlement by issuing "ground-briefs", thereby giving farmers the right "peaceably to possess, inhabit, cultivate, occupy and use, and also therewith and thereof to do, bargain and dispose" of a tract of land. In return, the company required these farmers to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Dutch West India Company by making a yearly payment that released them from further obligation to the company. Following Dutch custom, all land not granted to private individuals remained for public use as pasturage and a source of wood, lime, clay, sods, and thatch (Burrows and Wallace 1999:23, 35; Reps 1965:121).¹⁰

Until about 1653, the Dutch West India Company remained relatively lenient about public access to unclaimed land. Residents of New Amsterdam became accustomed to cutting and digging as they pleased. Dutch authorities allowed animals to graze freely over all unappropriated lands until the arrangement proved too destructive to farmland. In response, the company began to develop communal pastures in 1653. By 1660, the firm had hired a herdsman to bring the town cattle up the wagon road (Broadway), bear right onto today's Park Row, and pass the open land known as the *Vlackte* (Flat) en route to the Collect Pond (or Freshwater). According to Stokes, as early as 1652 the portion of New Amsterdam's, and later New York's, common lands (today's City Hall Park) served primarily as communal pasturage (Stokes 1915-28, 4:167; hereafter cited as Stokes).¹¹ The Dongan Charter of 1686, and later the Montgomerie Charter of 1730, confirmed the communal use of this "waste, vacant,

¹⁰ Woodlands and pastures also served as common land in Spanish colonial pueblos and in seventeenth-century New England towns. Reps (1965:121) suggests that "the village-farm unit used in both English and Spanish settlements had its origin in European land tenure systems as they evolved from feudalism."

¹¹ Colonial documents made mention of the Common Pasture, or Sheep Pasture as early as July 1, 1652.

and unappropriated” land by officially ceding the area to the Corporation of the City of New York.¹²



Figure 3-7:

Detail from *A Plan of the City of New York from an actual survey Made by James Lyne (The Bradford Map or the Lyne Survey)*.

Cartographer unknown, 1731, depicting 1730.

As the Dutch word *Vlackte* suggests, the land which currently comprises City Hall Park was originally a flat plateau. Covered by scrub and sod,¹³ the triangular plateau descended just north of present-day Chambers Street into the ravine containing the Collect Pond. (See *fig. 3-7*) Several hills neighbored the pond, including Potbakers Hill, which stood between present-day Duane and Reade Streets west of Centre Street, and Catiemuts Hill at present-day Park Row and Duane Streets. Two basins comprised the Collect itself: the Little Collect existed near today’s Centre and Duane Streets, and the big pond spanned several present-day blocks between Lafayette,

¹² According to Hendrik Hartog (1984), the rules of municipal corporation law were formulated as ways of regulating the conduct of entities like New York City that judges already knew to be public. New York City was thus never truly a “private” government. Hartog argues that the Dongan and Montgomerie Charters were written to solidify the ability of corporation officers to assert their possession of the city’s properties.

¹³ An excellent collection of maps of New York City can be found in Paul E. Cohen and Robert T. Augustyn. *Manhattan in maps, 1527-1995*, (New York : Rizzoli International Publications, 1997) and also in Eric Homburger with Alice Hudson as cartographic consultant, *The historical atlas of New York City : a visual celebration of nearly 400 years of New York City's history* (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1994).

Baxter, Pearl, and White Streets. A small island or spit of land separated the two parts of the Collect. The pond drained in two directions. From the southeast, it flowed toward the East River. From the northwest corner of the Collect, water flowed northwestward through lowland swamp until it reached the Hudson River at present-day Canal Street. This freshwater connection from the Hudson to the East River provided a natural border between the city and the countryside to the north. In 1653 the newly-formed Dutch city government fixed the limits of New York as an independent municipality at the Hudson and East Rivers “as far as the Fresh Water”, although the palisade constructed along present-day Wall Street in that same year marked the true northern boundary of settlement (Stokes 1:39).



Figure 3-8:

Plan of the City of New York in the Year 1735 (Mrs. Buchnerd's Map) Cartographer unknown, 1735, depicting 1732-35. Note how the road past the Collect Pond loops to the southeast to pass around Cateimuts Hill.

Various factors determined the eventual shape of the Common. The western border existed as a straight extension of lower Broadway, marking the border of the Dutch West India Company farm to the west. This land, later claimed by the British crown as the “King’s Farm” (See *fig. 3-7*), was undoubtedly some of the best farmland south of the Collect Pond. Broadway itself followed a ridge which started at the Bowling Green near Fort George and rose gradually to the plateau upon which the King’s Farm and the Common stood. Thus Broadway followed a natural high road that some historians believe existed as a Native American route before Dutch settlement.

The diagonal southeastern border of City Hall Park is more perplexing. This road, known today as Park Row, gives the park its characteristic triangular shape. Why did travelers heading north on Broadway diverge from Broadway on their way out of town? Again topography provides the answer. As Broadway passed the Common on the west side, the high ground soon dipped into the marshy drainage of the Collect. The only way to bypass the swamps was via a narrow strip of high ground to the east of the Collect and onto Bowery Lane. Therefore a traveler going north would turn northeast at present-day St. Paul's Chapel, staying on the eastern edge of the plateau, skirting around the east side of Cateimuts Hill, (See *fig. 3-8*) and heading straight for the pass through the fresh water barrier. This road is tellingly labeled on more than one map as the "High Road to Boston" (See *figs. 3-6 and 3-8*), a name which underscores the importance of traveling on high land to minimize the problems with mud. Cateimuts Hill, Potbakers Hill, and the Collect formed the unofficial northern border of the Common, though legally the "commons" extended amorphously northward to encompass the pond, its swamplands, and all other unappropriated land.



Figure 3-9 Detail showing the first Almshouse (no. 28), Powder Magazine on the Common (no. 29), Palisade and Blockhouses (no. 30), from *A Plan of the City of New York from an Actual Survey Anno Domini M,DDC,LV* (The Maerschallck or Duyckinck Plan). 1755, depicting 1754. Visible are the Almshouse (#28), the Powder magazine (#29), and the Palisade (#30).

This land served as the city Common to a late seventeenth-century population of about 5,000¹⁴ that packed in south of Wall Street. Governor Peter Stuyvesant and the Council of New Netherland legitimized the communal nature of the land in 1658 and the British extended the grant in 1686 via the Dongan Charter which stated:

all the waste, vacant, unpatented, and unappropriated land lying and being within the said city of New York, and on Manhattan's Island aforesaid, extending and reaching to the low water mark in, by, and through all parts of the said city (Dawson 1867; Hoffman 1862 1:121).

The Montgomerie Charter of January 5, 1730 again ceded this land in order to avoid ambiguities in the Dongan Charter. Together these charters vested not only the historic town Common of New Amsterdam but all the unappropriated lands north of the town limits in the municipal government as the Commons of New York.¹⁵

¹⁴ All population statistics in this paper include the African residents and are from Rosenwaike 1972:8, 18, 36.

¹⁵ This fact creates a problem for historians since all vacant and unpatented lands were vested in the New Amsterdam government and town records generally refer to the "Commons" without distinguishing whether they mean the historic town Common of New Amsterdam or the undeveloped municipally-owned lands to the north of the city.

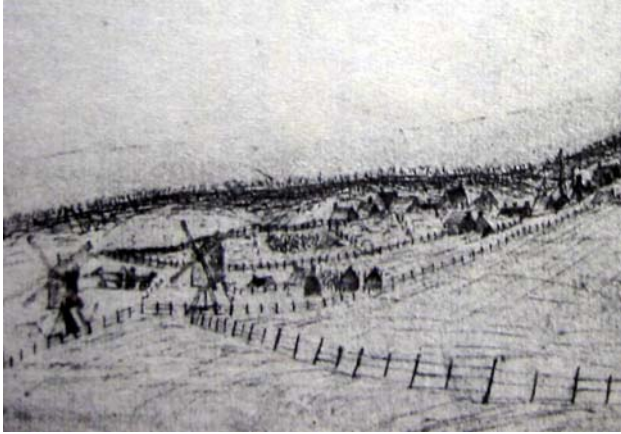


Figure 3-10 Detail showing the windmill on the Commons of 1663-64 (center) and the De Meyer windmill of 1677 (left) from *N York Van Acteren of Van De Noort Kant* (View of New York from the North Side). Drawing by Jasper Danckaerts, accompanying the *Labadist Journal*, 1679-80.

In the late seventeenth-century, uses of the Common foreshadowed its future role as a site dedicated to publicly-oriented uses. Troops used the land as a parade ground during the 1673-1674 Dutch recapture of New Amsterdam. In 1663-1664 two carpenters, Jan de Wit and Denys Hartogvelt received from the Dutch West India Company a plot of land measuring twenty rods by twenty rods¹⁶ and constructed a windmill, the first known structure on the Common.(See *fig. 3-10*) Maps suggest that the windmill stood just east of present-day Broadway and Murray Streets. Between 1663 and 1723, except for a brief period from 1689 to 1692 when lightning destroyed it, the mill provided the colony with a much needed export and food source (Stokes 3:335).

Apparently, the “20 rod by 20 rod” piece of land upon which the windmill had stood did not return to “common land” status but passed into the stewardship of a Mr. John Harris, a former builder and alderman who constructed a one-and-a-half story house at the southeast corner of the lot. (See *figs. 3-7 and 3-8*) Harris and his descendants would live there until 1770 when he passed away and the city regained control of the land and the house. At that time the Common Council ordered that the house be “Let to such Gentlemen, professors of Physick & Surgery as have management and care of the hospital” (MCC 7:200). Five years later the house would be torn town to make room for the Bridewell prison for vagrants.

¹⁶ A rod measures 16.5 feet, putting the size of the property at approximately 100 yards by 100 yards.

During the 1673 Dutch recapture of New Amsterdam Governor Colve granted a piece of land from present-day Chambers Street to Duane Street between Broadway and Centre Street, to Cornelius Van Borsum. English Governor Benjamin Fletcher generously reaffirmed the grant in 1696, but a dispute soon arose as to whether the grant had allowed inheritance of the land. On several occasions the Common Council determined that the property remained part of the common lands, a position that may have been justified by an act annulling “certain extravagant grants of land made by Governor Fletcher” (Hoffman 1862 1:121-126). In the eyes of New Yorkers, Van Borsum’s land remained common land, exemplified by the African-American community’s establishment of a burial ground there. (See *fig. 3-7*) Captain Kip, a descendant of Van Borsum took payment for use of the ground until his death in 1775, and his family maintained possession until the British Army seized the house and lot. The house and fences belonging to Captain Kip were destroyed while New York City remained under British control. (Stokes 4:394).

Not In My Backyard!

By the early 1730s the population of New York had swelled to almost 9,000 and spilled north of the boundary created by the wall at Wall Street. Residential development lapped at the southern edge of the Common. (See *fig. 3-11*) Reflected in the penal institutions constructed on the Common during this period is the story of a city dealing with the growing pains of crime and poverty.

The first sign of change exists with the famous execution of Lieutenant Governor Jacob Leisler and his son-in-law Jacob Milborne on May 6, 1691 for alleged treason. Though no specific reference to a gallows having been constructed on the Common exists, the inference is there (Stokes 4: 368-369). Later resolutions for gallows erection in the Common exist in the Common Council minutes for December 1725, June 1727, and many others. On May 5, 1756, for example, the Common Council ordered the gallows removed “to the place where the negroes were burnt some five

years ago at the foot of the hill called Catiemuts Hill near the Fresh Water. Catiemuts Hill, it will be recalled, stood approximately at present-day Chambers Street (*MCC, 1675-1776, 3: 381, 412; MCC, 1675-1776, 6: 51*).



Figure 3-11 A Plan of the City of New York. (The Carwitham Plan) C. 1735, depicting c. 1730.

With the demolition of the windmill in 1723 and a new role as a site for executions, the Common achieved a new character – it would become the location for institutions the townspeople did not want near their residences. Anything considered dangerous or simply undesirable would be located on the Common just outside of town.

A powder house, first proposed in 1721 but not constructed until 1728, was built on a narrow spit of land dividing the Collect from the Little Collect Pond. (See *fig. 3-11*) A July 30, 1728 report by a committee of the Common Council recommended “that a piece of Ground of one hundred or one hundred and twenty foot Square belonging to this Corporation, upon the Common near the place where the Gallows now Stands, in their opinion is A proper place to build the said Powder House” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 3: 445*). But a final order a little over a month later resolved “that a little Island in the fresh water be and is hereby Appointed and Appropriated a proper piece of Ground and the most Convenient place for the building thereon A Magazine or Powder House for the Convenient and safe keeping of Gunpowder” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 3: 449*). This indecision on the part of the Common Council suggests that the authorities considered the Common’s location easily accessible to the city, but the island location eventually

won out. Most importantly, citizens of New York considered both locations distant enough from the city in the unfortunate event of a powder magazine explosion. With the threat of French and Native American attack, the city would build a second powder magazine in a hollow on the Common. (See *fig. 3-9*)

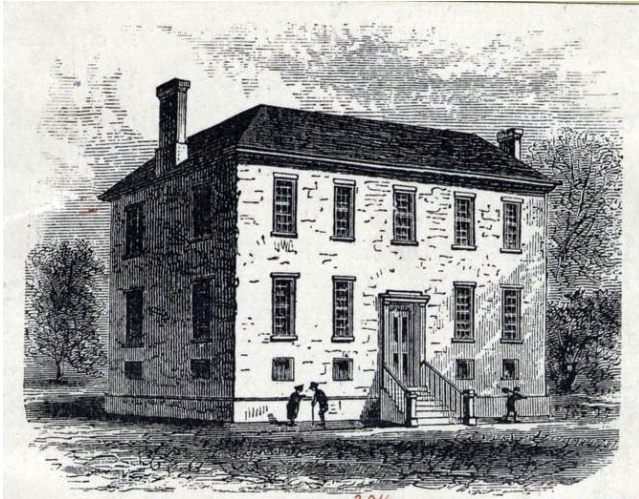


Figure 3-12 The first almshouse, constructed in 1736.

Not quite as dangerous, but certainly undesired, a “poorhouse, workhouse, and house of correction,” otherwise known as the first almshouse, was the next structure built on the Common. (See *fig. 6*) Completed

in September 1735, the building’s location on the Common made it possible to isolate the diseased, the poor, the petty criminals, and the city’s many vagabonds from the general population. The almshouse also made it significantly easier for the city to control the institutionalized poor.

Between 1690 and 1723, the city’s population had almost doubled from 3,900 to 7,248. By 1720, the problems of poverty and vagrancy began to take a toll on the city. Additionally, the city experienced numerous severe outbreaks of yellow fever, smallpox, and measles, putting an overwhelming strain on the traditional parish-based system of outdoor poor relief. As poor taxes increased, anger flared and the Common Council, controlled by the newly-elected Morrisite “party of the people,” made a move to ease public pressure by voting to build an almshouse in 1734.¹⁷ Along with housing the sick, the impoverished widows, and the orphans, this building would also put the idle back to work and incarcerate the criminals (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 4: 305-311).

¹⁷ For information on the Morris-Cosby political power-struggle which led, in part, to the construction of the almshouse see Burrows & Wallace 1999:150-153.

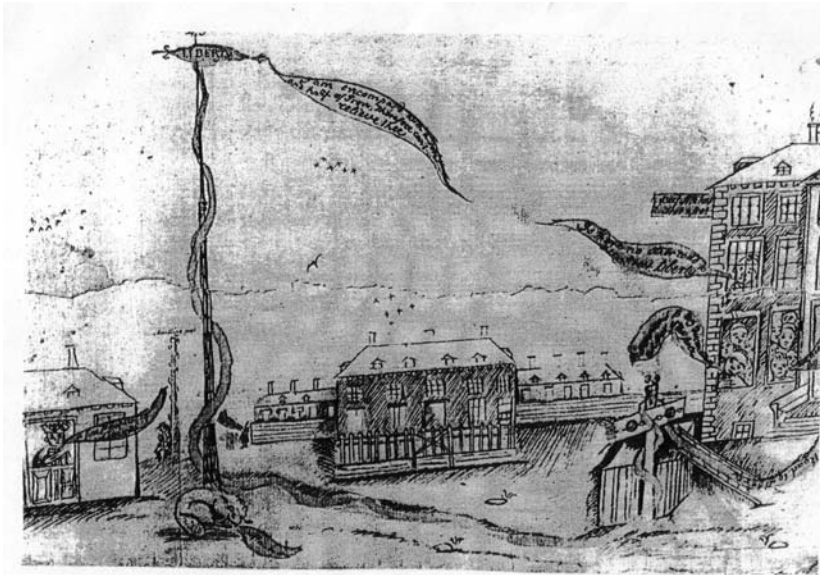


Figure 3-13

Caricature of the Commons showing the first Almshouse (center), Upper Barracks (behind), New Gaol (right), Liberty Pole and John Harris House (left). Political

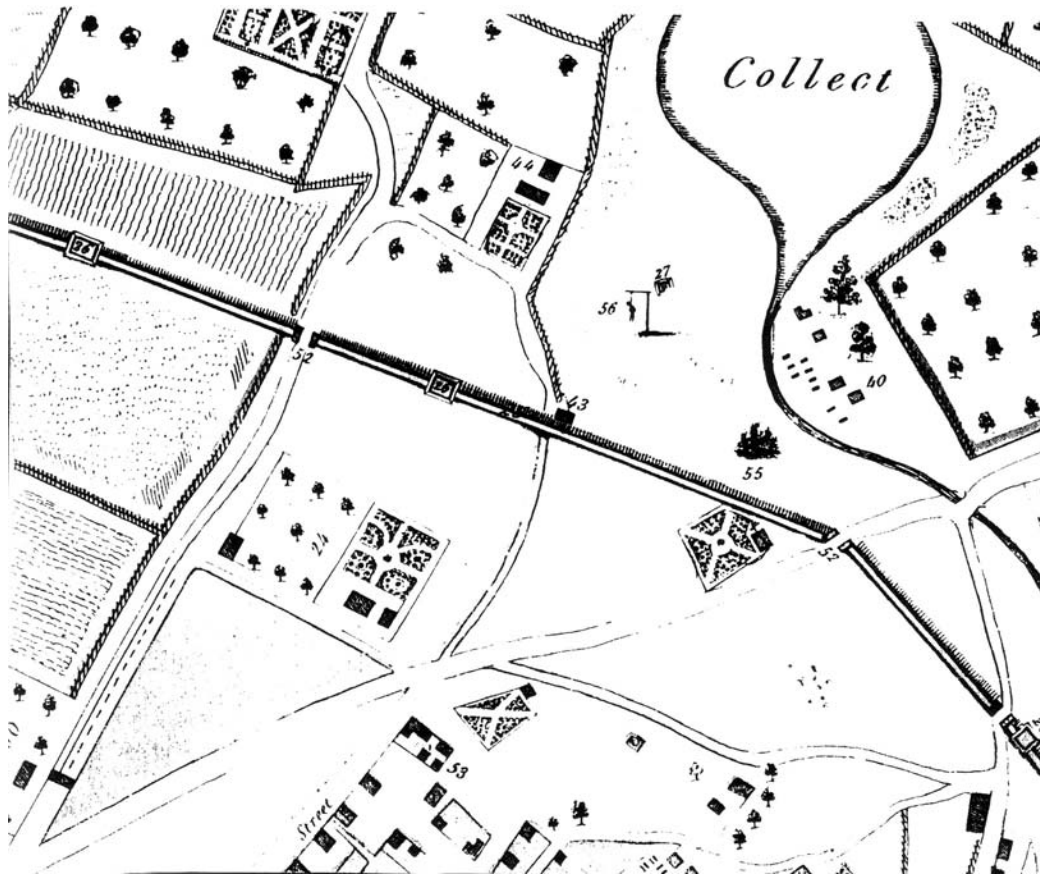
cartoon by Eugene du Simitiere, 1770.

A two-story stone and brick building measuring eighty-six feet in width standing where City Hall stands today, the almshouse housed “Poor Needy Persons and Idle Wandering Vagabonds,” “Sturdy Beggars,” and “parents of Bastard Children”. (See *figs. 3-12 and 3-13*) All inhabitants of the city had “free Liberty and Lycense to send to the said House all unruly and ungovernable Servants and Slaves there to be kept at hard labour.” The keeper of the almshouse supplied inmates with clothing “marked with the first letters of their names” and kept them working at carding wool, shredding old rope for reuse, knitting, spinning, dressing hemp or flax, picking oakum, making shoes, and raising garden crops “that such Poor as are able to work may not Eat the Bread of Sloth and Idleness, and be a Burthen to the Publick” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 4: 305*).

Vestrymen soon expressed their concern at the mixing of elderly women and innocent children with vagabonds, criminals and assorted drunks. Though the “West Cellar” was for the “unruly and obstinate to be confined in,” the “East Cellar” was for hard labor and weaving, and other rooms for spinning, carding and other labor, the attempts at separating the workhouse from the poorhouse from the house of correction were rudimentary. The Upper West room served as an infirmary, the

Upper East as lodging for the keeper, and the Lower East as a dining hall. Additionally, the Common Council ordered a Garden to be fenced, plowed up, and kept for growing “Roots, Herbs, etc.,” and “That fetters, Gives, Shackles, and a convenient place of whipping post be provided for the said House of Correction for punishing the incorrigible and disor[der]ly persons committed thereunto” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 4: 309-310*).

One month after the almshouse opened, the Common Council ordered an “Oven and Wash-house” to be built. On the Grim Plan of 1742 a small building appears to the east of the almshouse. (See *fig. 3-14*)¹⁸ This building is most likely the oven and wash-house (*MCC, 1675-1776, 4: 319*).



¹⁸ It should be noted that David Grim drew the map of 1742 New York City in 1813. While invaluable as an historical document and highly depended-upon by historians, the Grim Plan must be viewed in this light. The map reads, “A Plan of the City and Environs of New York as they were in the Years 1742, 1743 and 1744. Drawn by D. G. in the 76th year of his age who had at this time a perfect & correct recollection of every part of the same”.

Figure 3-14 Detail showing the Almshouse, the Harris House (#24), and the Palisade with two gates (#52).Grim, David. *A Plan of the City and Environs of New York*. Drawn in 1813, depicting 1744. (Lithograph by G. Gayward for Valentine’s Manual, 1854).

Two years later, in May 1739, the city again ordered a new building constructed on the almshouse grounds. Apparently the Upper West infirmary room in the almshouse could not sufficiently service the continuing outbreaks of contagious diseases nor keep the rest of the inhabitants safe, so the city built a small hospital as “A Receptacle and Conveniency of Such unhappy Poor as are or shall be Visited with any Malignant or Obnoxious disease” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 4: 457-459*). The city had built the almshouse none too soon. Between 1731 and 1737 the population had swelled by another 2,000 people, and by 1746 it stood at 11,717. As the number of poor continued to increase along with the number of sick, the city ordered an enlargement of the almshouse in 1746 (*MCC, 1675-1776, 5:171, 176*).

Not So Distant

Though by the middle of the eighteenth century the Common stood substantially distant from the town center to serve as the location for an almshouse and a powder house, it apparently was proximate enough to be the favored site for public gatherings. The growth of civic life in New York City is evident in the celebrations and protests on the Common. Small protests developed eventually into the American War for Independence and the Common played a central role in that development.

It was in these decades that New Yorkers began referring to the Common as “the Fields”, a more genteel name for an increasingly important public space in a city intent on mimicking the British.¹⁹ With the population soaring past 13,000 in 1749, development boomed and, according to Stokes, “The city had grown northward, so

¹⁹ More on the mid-eighteenth century “refinement” of New York can be found in Burrows & Wallace 1999:172-179.

that the Commons, perhaps more popularly known as ‘the Fields,’ were conveniently near, and served as a meeting place for the citizens when some public crisis or other brought them together ” (Stokes, 1: 333). Celebrations of such events as the King’s Birthday, Guy Fawkes Day, military victory, or the visit of a foreign dignitary all happened on the Common (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 4: 163, 5: 421). It is not difficult to understand why. The Grim Plan of 1742 shows that the city had developed in such a way that few open green areas remained. (See *fig. 8*) Bowling Green, laid out in 1732 beside Fort George at the base of Broadway, was small in comparison to the Common and contained the Governor’s Garden (Burrows & Wallace 1999:175). The Common, perched on a high plateau and just a short walk up Broad Way, provided an open, presumably dry area in which to gather.

Of special note were the Pinkster Day celebrations which attracted African slaves from as far as forty miles away. Pinkster is a holiday that was celebrated over several days by African and Dutch New Yorkers throughout the 1700s. “Pinkster” is the Dutch name for Pentecost, an important festival in the Christian calendar celebrated seven weeks after Easter, in May or early June. For enslaved people, the year offered few holidays or breaks from tedious and often grueling work. For rural captives in particular, who were often isolated from larger African communities, Pinkster became the most important break in the year. Despite Pinkster’s Dutch origins, Africans in New York and New Jersey were so successful at incorporating their own cultures into the celebration that by the early 1800s Pinkster was actually considered an African-American holiday.²⁰

Slave-owning families often granted time off to captive men and women. The Pinkster holiday gave enslaved Africans the opportunity to reunite with loved ones and family members who often lived some distance away. Many journeyed from rural areas to the Common in New York City, with its significantly larger population of both free and enslaved Africans. Enslaved men and women sold such items as berries, herbs, sassafras bark, beverages, and oysters at these markets, and in turn used the

²⁰ For more information on the Pinkster celebrations and slavery in New York City see White 1991.

money earned to participate in the Pinkster celebration (Gutman 1976:333-334; White 1991:123).

The digging of a road through Cateimuts Hill made the Common and the Collect more accessible and thus less remote from the city. A road appears already on the Lyne map published in 1731 (See *fig. 3-7*), but as the Common Council reported in 1740, a “Number of Gentlemen Have Undertaken to finish the Street Already begun thro the Hill by the Windmill at their own Expense.”²¹ (*MCC, 1675-1776, 4: 532*). Present-day Park Row was apparently well enough traveled, and the previously described loop around Cateimuts Hill sufficiently inconvenient, to warrant the money and effort to have the hill lowered and cut through. Known as “The High Road to Boston,” the city’s primary land route for merchants now split diagonally northeast from Broadway and cut a straight line through Cateimuts Hill, connecting to the Collect Pond and the Bowery Lane on the other side, and traveling northward through Manhattan Island. (Compare *figs. 3-8 and 3-14*)

In 1733 the city had granted Anthony Rutgers a sizable piece of land – seventy acres just north of present-day Chambers Street. This tract, known as Calk Hook Farm, included the Collect Pond and the African Burial Ground to the southwest of the pond. Rutgers received the land with the understanding that he would drain the area known as Swamp Meadow (See *figs. 3-7 and 3-11*) between the pond and the East River. By the 1740s, Rutgers was draining not only the swamp but the pond itself – the city’s primary source of fresh water. Public outrage eventually forced Rutgers to stop, but he and his heirs continued to drain the numerous wetlands surrounding the pond, leading to the shrinking of the Collect and the drying up of the Little Collect by century’s end.

The Panic of 1741, also known as the Great Negro Plot, shows the Common once again as the preferred site for punitive measures; isolated from town yet not so distant

²¹. This is the only mention of a second windmill existing on the Commons. It appears on the Lyne survey of 1730, the Carwitham Plan of 1730, and the Buchnerd Plan of 1735 near present-day Chambers and Centre Streets. The windmill does not appear on the Grim Plan of 1742.

as to be inconvenient. In early 1741, the white inhabitants of New York City began to suspect the enslaved African population of conspiracy to burn down the city (Lepore 2005) . Panicking, the white residents began a citywide search of the possessions of the slaves and used torture to question numerous “suspicious” slaves. In the end, the authorities arrested over 200 blacks and hanged or burned thirty of them. Several whites suspected of conspiring with the African population were put to death as well. Grim’s map of 1742 shows clearly where the city gibbeted seventeen blacks in the valley beside the powder house on the Collect Pond island and burned thirteen in the valley between Cateimuts Hill and Potbakers Hill. (See *fig. 3-14, # 56 and #55*) The frequent orders to construct gallows suggest that they were erected and deconstructed by the city for individual occasions, but it is hard to determine whether the location north of the Common served only for African convicts or for whites as well. In 1756 an order came from the Common Council to “Remove the Gallows from where it now Stands, to the place where the Negroes were Burnt Some five years ago, at the foot of the Hill Called Cateimuts Hill Near the fresh water” (*MCC, 1675-1776, 6: 51*). To add to the confusion, this Common Council directive would put the date of the burnings in 1751, ten years after the Great Negro Plot. No records of burning Africans have been found. In any case, there appear to have been separate sites for black and white capital punishment, at least as late as 1756. The moving of the gallows also suggests that by 1756, New Yorkers no longer considered the Common isolated enough for something as gruesome as a hanging. The hollow on the north side of Cateimuts Hill was preferable.

Homeland Security

Fear of French and Indian attack in the 1740s initiated the next phase of evolution for the Common. As the French and the British battled for possession of the northeastern stretches of the New World, New Yorkers lived in perpetual fear of invasion. Control of New York City could be crucial to French strategy since the Hudson River provided an important connection to Lake Champlain and the mighty St. Lawrence River. In response to potential attack and following a New York tradition that began

in 1653 with the construction of the Wall Street wall, the city began construction of a palisade at the northern edge of town. (See *figs. 3-9 and 3-14*)

Though no fighting took place in North America until 1745, New York City began strengthening Fort George at the southern end of Broadway as early as 1744. By July 1745 construction began on a palisade which bisected the island extending from present-day Chambers Street on the Hudson River to what was then known as Latham's Shipyard, near present-day Peck's Slip and Cherry Street, on the East River. Built of fourteen-foot cedar logs and perforated with loopholes for musketry, the palisade contained a gate at present-day Broadway and one further to the east, where Police Plaza stands today. David Grim wrote in 1813:

I remember the building and erecting the Palisade and Block-Houses, in the year 1745, for the security and protection of the inhabitants of the city, who were at that time much alarmed and afraid that the French and Indians were coming to invade this city.

Those Palisades were made of cedar logs, about fourteen feet long and nine or ten inches in diameter, were placed in a trench, dug in the ground for that purpose, three feet deep, with loopholes in the same, for musketry, and a breastwork four feet high and four feet in width. In this line of Palisades were three Block-Houses, about thirty feet square and ten feet high, with six port holes for cannon. Those block-houses were made with logs, of eighteen inches diameter (David Grim quoted in Stokes 1:270-271).

The location of the palisade is of particular interest. The wall was built following a zigzag pattern as far north as possible without plummeting into the swamplands and drainages of the Collect Pond. Starting at the Hudson River just south of extensive swamplands, the palisade ran east along present-day Chambers Street passing to the

north of the Common and the almshouse along the top ridge of Cateimuts Hill and then headed down toward the East River staying on higher ground just above the drainage from the Collect. Thus the Common fell within the protected zone of the city. But it would be hard to conclude that this indicates a status of growing importance. Staying on elevated ground and protecting the residential areas that had developed to the southeast of the Common around Beekman Swamp seems to have been the determining factors. Still, a protected Common served the city well as a parade ground for the militias who camped and drilled there (Burrows and Wallace 1999:168).

One problem with the location of the palisade was the location of the 1728 powder house on the Collect Pond island. While the island location had seemed well-protected almost twenty years earlier, it now stood vulnerable to the French. Thus the Common Council in March 1747 ordered a new powder house built “in the hollow near the almshouse” (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 5: 190). This hollow was a short distance to the southeast of the almshouse near present-day Park Row across from Frankfort Street. (See *fig. 3-9, #29*) A committee charged with enlarging the overpopulated almshouse also gave direction to the building of a watch house near the powder magazine to give it extra protection. An increased almshouse population also led, in March 1757, to the Common Council approving a first burial ground “of the length of two boards” to be built just to the east and north of the almshouse.

Tension between the British and the French heated up anew in the early 1750s. Battling for control of the upper Ohio valley, Britain sent 1000 troops to New York City for winter quartering in 1756. The meager barracks in Fort George proved inadequate so the Earl of Loudon, commander-in-chief of the armed forces in North America, ordered the inhabitants of New York to billet the soldiers. Public outcry led the municipal leaders to declare the free quartering of soldiers “too unequal as well as too heavy a burthen for the Inhabitants to bear.” Thus in October 1757 the Common Council ordered “The Immediate providing of materials for the Carrying on and Compleating [of] Barracks to Contain Eight Hundred men,” and wondered “wheather

a Suffeient Number of Carpenters Can be had, so as to Compleat the said Barracks in a fortnight.” Ordered to be built “on the Commons south of Fresh Water” along present-day Chambers Street, the barracks would “Contain Twenty Rooms on a floor two stories high, to be Twenty one feet square, four hundred and Twenty feet Long and Twenty one feet wide.” (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 6: 108, 111-112. For New York’s involvement in the French and Indian Wars see Stokes 1:199; 4 (1756, April14): 680, (1756, December 1): 685, (1757, October 19): 694, (1757, October 31): 694, (1757, December 24): 695); (See *figs. 3-13, 3-15, and 3-16*). By legislative act, title to the barracks and the soil upon which they stood remained with the city and gave the Common Council license to rent them out during times of peace (*Colonial Laws of New York* quoted in Stokes 4 (1757, December 24): 695).

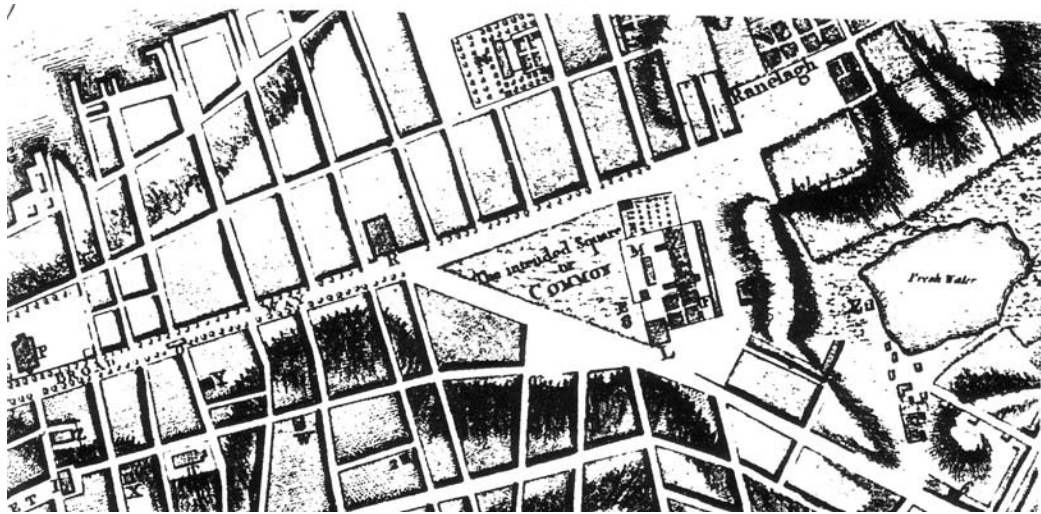


Figure 3-15 Detail showing the almshouse (M), the Upper Barracks (F), The New Gaol (L), the two powder magazines (E), and St. Paul’s chapel appears as R from John Montresor. *A plan of the city of New-York & its environs : to Greenwich, on the North or Hudsons River, and to Crown Point, on the East or Sound River, shewing the severall streets, publick buildings, docks, fort & battery, with the true form & course of the commanding grounds, with and without the town : survey'd in the winter, 1766. 1775, depicting 1766.*

Arrests for crimes increased within New York City as the population grew in the 1750s. Additionally, French prisoners of war arrived in the city, burdening the

municipality's capacity to incarcerate. At the same time that the Common Council was loaning funds to build the barracks, they had to scrape together enough money to erect "proper and convenient Gaols on Some Grounds to the Southward of Fresh Water" (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 6:71). Built between 1757 and 1759 on ground just to the east of the almshouse, the New Gaol was a sturdy stone and brick structure measuring sixty feet by seventy-five feet. (See *figs. 3-15, 3-16, and 3-17*) Built in the style of domestic architecture that typified most public buildings before the 1790s, the prison was a three and a half story structure topped by a cupola and surrounded by a fence, with a central entry and barred windows.

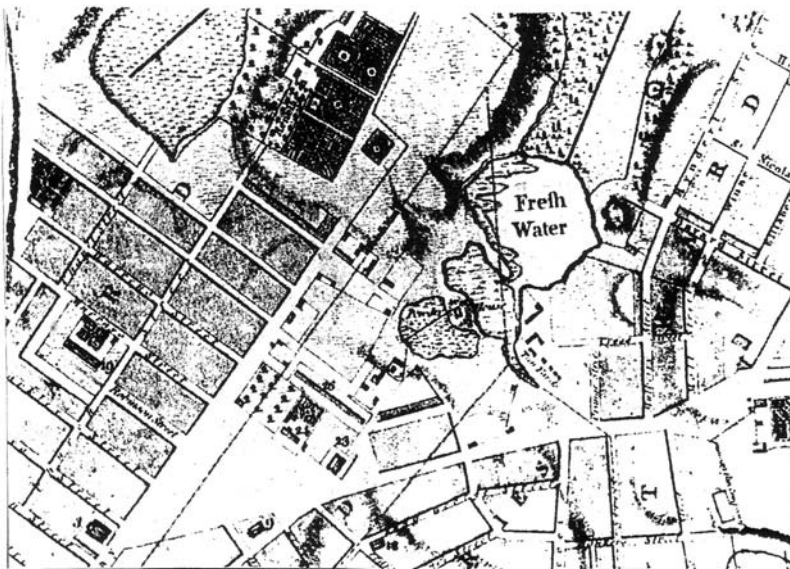


Figure 3-16 Detail showing the first Almshouse (24), New Gaol (23), and Barracks (26) from Bernard Ratzer, *Plan of the city of New York in North America : surveyed in the years 1766 & 1767* (The Ratzer Plan). 1776, depicting 1766-67.

In September 1759 the Common Council ordered the removal of all prisoners from the City Hall on Wall and Broad Streets to the New Gaol and put the sheriff in charge. While the British military claimed part of the building for the incarceration of French prisoners of war, the city and county of New York claimed "the Two Cellar Rooms under the West Side and Towards the Rear" of the Gaol and "the Three Rooms or apartments in the West Side of the Same house in the Middle Story and the Six Rooms in The Third Story" for paupers, debtors, and civilian lawbreakers. With

the end of the war in 1763, the city signaled the complete transfer of municipal disciplinary power to the Common area with the erection of a public whipping post, stocks, cage, and pillory next to the New Gaol. As the release of the French prisoners of war made space available, part of the Gaol served as a Bridewell for vagrants until the completion of an actual Bridewell to the west of the almshouse in 1775.

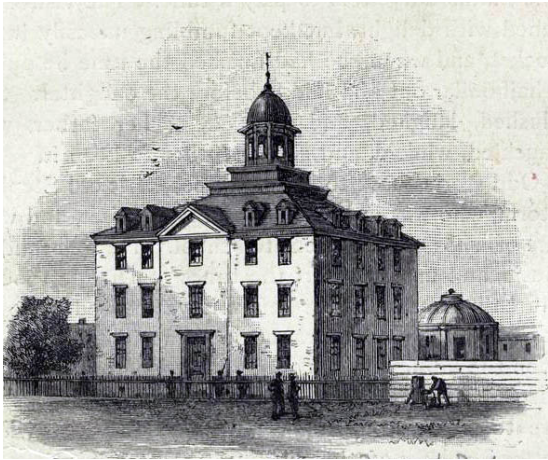


Figure 3-17 The New Gaol.

To signal a brief moment of peace in New York, the British troops departed and the Common Council decided in March 1765 to allow the use of a room in the barracks to “Hill, the weaver, and family – a recent immigrant unable to provide for himself yet” (*MCC*, 1675-

1776, 6: 412).²² Hill’s stay would be brief.

“the most publick place”

Only two years after the end of the French and Indian War, events foreshadowed the Common’s next major role for New York City. As tensions built toward the American War for Independence, the Common stood as the initial battlefield where British troops and American colonists met. The strong sense of possession that the colonists had developed for their homeland manifested most powerfully in their claim to the Common.

A meeting of tradesmen and mechanics took place on the Common in November 1765 to protest against the King’s recent Stamp Act. Having gained enormous new territories from the French in the Treaty of Paris, King George III sought to lay some of the financial burden on the American colonists. In the angry response to the

²².Hill was one of thousands of new immigrants. Between 1756 and 1771, New York increased its population again by fifty percent, growing from 13,046 to 21,863.

King's increased taxes, the Sons of Liberty would surface as the driving force behind New York's revolutionary fervor and the Common would serve as their stage. After the Stamp Act took effect on November 1, 1765, there were frequent mass meetings and demonstrations usually involving the burning in effigy of those associated with the new law. *Montresor's Journal* reported on December 17 that "This night about 8 o'clock the Effigies of Lord Colville, Mr. Greenville and General Murray were paraded several times through the streets . . . they were carried to the Common and there burnt" (Scull 1882:347). According to the *New York Mercury* (December 9, 1765), a number of the city's inhabitants met on December 6, 1765 "in the Green opposite the Workhouse" to choose a committee "to wait on the Gentlemen of the Law in this Place, and intreat them to follow business as usual, without paying any regard to the Stamp Act."²³ Seven days later Hill the weaver was evicted and British troops were back in the barracks on the Common.

I

In May 1766 the British government under William Pitt repealed the Stamp Act and the Sons of Liberty demonstrated their approval by erecting a pine staff on the Common with a large sign inscribed "George III, Pitt & Liberty." This staff became known as the Liberty Pole. (See *fig. 3-13*)

The British soldiers quartered in the barracks and parading on the Common quickly came into conflict with New Yorkers opposed to British policies. On March 31, 1766, several Sons of Liberty "fell on an officer of the Royal Americans on the Common about Dusk, behind his back and beat him unmercifully and broke his sword, which he had drawn in his Defence"(Scull 1882:356-357). True first blood spilled, however, when a group of soldiers cut down the Liberty Pole. On August 11, the day after the toppling of the pole, an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 American colonists rallied at the Common. They hurled bricks and stones at the troops who emerged from the barracks to disperse them. The British responded with bayonets, wounding

²³ For further information on the demonstrations on the Commons see David T. Valentine, "History of Broadway," *Valentine's Manual*, 1865, 556-560; Henry B. Dawson, "The Park and its Vicinity," *Valentine's Manual*, 1855, 433-471; Paul A. Gilje "Republican Rioting," in *Authority and Resistance*, 202-225.

a number of colonists (*Weekly Post-Boy*, 1232, Aug. 14, 1766; *Weekly Post-Boy*, 1233, Aug. 21, 1766).

Two days later the Sons of Liberty raised a new pole, and on August 13, 1776 a group of artillerymen parading on the Common clashed with an angry crowd of New Yorkers who pushed through the line “saying that the Ground [the Common] was theirs” (Scull 1882:382). For four years the Sons of Liberty erected poles and the British troops found ways to destroy them. After the destruction of the fourth pole in January 1770, the Sons of Liberty requested leave from the Common Council to erect a fifth pole on the Common as “a monument of freedom” in “the most publick place” (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 7: 203-204). Upon the Council’s rejection, Isaac Sears, a leader of the Sons of Liberty, purchased the one-twelfth share of the Harris House lot that the Common Council had not acquired and there erected the final Liberty Pole, forty-six feet high and topped by a twenty-two foot mast and a gilt vane reading Liberty. This pole stood until British capture of the city in 1776.



Figure 3-18 “A Southeast view of the City of New York in America circa 1763”, Thomas Howdell. Note the palisade still standing.

The claim by New Yorkers that “the Ground was theirs” and the reference to the Common as “the most publick place” are of historical significance. It seems no accident that the Common served as the initial battleground between American colonists and British soldiers. New Yorkers’ sense of communal possession of the Common reflected a greater sense of possession of all American soil. Having British troops quartered and drilling on this important public space represented a great insult and cause for anger among colonists. It is also significant to note that by 1770 New Yorkers considered the Common “the most publick place” rather than simply an isolated location to put an almshouse, gaol, and powder house.

The revolutionary period of the Common witnessed a number of other changes as well. A 1763 engraving of a southeast view of the city shows the palisade still standing, but in the 1766 Montresor Map they are gone. (Compare *figs. 3-15 and 3-18*) The Common Council voted in 1760 to extend Broadway from Ann Street to Reade Street and Trinity Church laid out its land to the west of the Common into streets and lots. (See *figs. 3-9, 3-15, and 3-16*) In 1761, the church ceded these same streets to the city. The population moving into the area surrounding the Common would be served by the new St. Paul’s Chapel, constructed in 1764-66. (See *fig. 3-15, R*) On that part of the Common known as the Negroes Burial Ground, just north of City Hall Park on the west side, potteries such as that run by Crolius and Remyey leased ground from the Common Council. (See *fig. 3-9*) In 1774 additional barracks for British troops, measuring 20 feet by 200 feet, were constructed on the green between the original barracks and the almshouse (Stokes, 4: (1770, February 6): 805, (1771, October 28): 823, (1776, May 24): 929, 5 (1779) 1080) (See *fig. 3-19, B*). Sometime between 1776 and 1782, during British occupation of New York City, two more barrack buildings were built on the north side of the Bridewell. (See *fig. 3-19, C*) Judging by the British Headquarters Map, drawn in 1782, these barracks appear to

have been approximately 300 feet in length, abutting Broadway across from Warren Street.



Figure 3-19 Detail showing the Upper Barracks (A), the Lower Barracks (B), and the third set of barracks (C) from the *British Headquarters Manuscript Map of New York and Environs*. Cartographer unknown. C. 1782.

The council also acquired the land and house to the west of the almshouse that had belonged to the John Harris family. In 1768 John Harris died and by January 1770 the mayor

filed an official request with the Common Council to have the house razed because disorderly British troops were living there. The board decided against the mayor's appeal, voting instead that the house be "Let to such Gentlemen, professors of Physick & Surgery as have the management and care of the hospital" (*MCC, 1675-1776*, 7: 200). In fact, the actual transition to hospital took over a year and a half. Finally in September 1771 the Common Council announced:

"The Institution of a publick Infirmary or Hospital within this City, being not only a laudable but usefull Undertaking, having for its object the Relief of the indigent & diseased and founded upon the most extensive and generous Principles; this Board being

truly sensible of the same, and willing to patronize and encourage so benevolent an Establishment, have agreed to grant all the right and Interest in and to the westernmost half of the Lot formerly belonging to John Harris Dec'd & others, but now to this Corporation. Containing in breadth in front of the Common 124 feet, and in length 248 feet for the purpose of building the said Hospital thereon" (*MCC, 1675-1776, 7: 311*).

The "Gentlemen, professors of Physick & Surgery" would only enjoy use of the Harris house as a hospital for a short period. In 1775 the house was razed and New York constructed in its place a Bridewell for the "correction" of "the great number of vagabonds daily skulking about this city"(*New York Mercury, February 7, 1774*). With the almshouse and the gaol already on the Common and the council having newly acquired the Harris house property, the land to the west of the almshouse seemed the most logical location for the Bridewell. Made of dark gray stone with wood trim and standing three stories in its main structure and two stories in its supporting wings, the Bridewell supplemented two rooms in the Gaol that had been fit for vagrants in October 1767 (*MCC, 1675-1776, 7: 87*; For more information on the Bridewell see Davis 1855). (See *fig. 14*)

Upon receiving news of the battles at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, the Sons of Liberty seized control of the powder magazine by the Collect Pond. By June the British troops had been evacuated and the American colonists hastily built barricades and batteries. For over a year, while the Continental Army maintained control of Manhattan, the Common served both as military parade grounds and as a central gathering place. Illustrating the vital role the Common now played in the lives of New Yorkers, George Washington had the Declaration of Independence read to a cheering crowd on the triangular green on July 9, 1776.



Figure 3-20: 1809 drawing showing the Bridewell (center), City Hall (right), the workshop or Free School No. 1 (left), and the wooden fences around the Park and the Bridewell. The small building

in front and to the left of the Bridewell is a fire engine house.

American control came to an end in September 1776 as the Continental army suffered a major defeat in the Battle of Long Island and fled northward out of Manhattan. Thousands of American prisoners of war taken during the battle found themselves incarcerated in their own prisons – the Bridewell and the New Gaol, as well as prison ships, churches, sugarhouses, and even Columbia College. Treatment of the American prisoners was harsh as the cells became severely overcrowded. The provost marshal, William Cunningham, starved “more than 2,000 prisoners . . . by stopping their rations,” which he sold. Additionally, he allegedly admitted just before his death in 1791 that:

There were also 275 American prisoners and obnoxious persons executed, out of which number there were only about one dozen public executions, which chiefly consisted of British and Hessian deserters. . . . for private execution . . . the unfortunate prisoners were conducted, gagged, just behind the Upper Barracks, and

hung [sic] without ceremony, and there buried (Stokes, 5:1016).²⁴

One prisoner wrote in his diary about visiting “ye Burying Ground & see[ing] four of ye Prisoners Buryed in one Grave” (Jabez Fitch, *The Diary of Jabez Fitch*, quoted in Stokes, 5:1038). Unfortunately the records do not show exactly where the British buried the bodies. One British map from the period shows a burial ground just to the north of the Upper Barracks which would have put the bodies under present-day Chambers Street or just to the north thereof. (See *fig. 3-19*)

“an ornament to the city”

British evacuation of New York City in late November 1783 heralded the coming of a new phase in City Hall Park’s development. A rush of New Yorkers moving back to the city caused the areas surrounding the Common, which inhabitants increasingly called “the Fields,” to grow densely residential. Despite its ruinous condition due to British abuse and a disastrous conflagration that accompanied British withdrawal, New York had a powerful resurgence. The population boomed from about 12,000 at the end of 1783 to 23,610 two years later.²⁵ During what historians often refer to as the Federalist Era in New York’s history, the Common which had seemed so distant and isolated half a century earlier now formed the backyard for many residents as the population swelled from 23,610 in 1786 to 33,131 by 1790, and then doubled again to 60,515 by the turn of the century. Changes would inevitably come.

Exactly what those changes would be, however, caused a great deal of disagreement. Influenced by eighteenth century developments in Europe, parks in the United States became increasingly associated with cities. The notion had developed that parks

²⁴ From Danske Dandridge, *American Prisoners of the Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., The Michie company, printers, 1911), 220: “When an old building that had been used as a prison near the City Hall was torn down a few years ago to make way for the Subway Station of the Brooklyn Bridge, a great number of skeletons were found in its cellars. That these men starved to death or came to their end by violence cannot be doubted.”

²⁵ An in depth discussion of the factors leading to New York’s stunning resurgence can be found in Burrows & Wallace 1999:265-273.

should be landscaped and designed, yet should maintain the unstructured feel of the “country in the city” (Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992:4). As the city reestablished itself and then surged to new heights, a conflict emerged between the Common Council’s traditional sense of what sorts of municipal buildings should exist on the Park and the public’s growing sense that the Park should be an ornament to the city. Illustrating the spirit of the New York’s evolving perception of the role of the Common, an author going by the pen-name “Agricola” recalled in *Loudon’s New York Packet* in November 1784 “a plan for embellishing and planting the Fields, which was proposed about fifteen years ago.” Apparently the sentiment had already surfaced around 1770 that the Common should be more than simply an open field. In the style of the great European cities, the Common should become a *park*. To advance the pride and stature of newly independent New York, Agricola proposed “to plant and fence in next spring that triangular spot” and that it be named “Washington’s Mall” (*Loudon’s N.Y. Packet*, November 29, 1784). An editorial in the *New York Packet* on August 15, 1785 expressed a similar desire, calling the Common “a public nuisance, from which the inhabitants are infested during the summer season, with continual clouds of stinking dust.” The author went on to suggest that “this place laid out with judgment and taste, would be a blessing to the inhabitants of New York, and an ornament to the City” (Stokes 5: 1203). These sentiments appear to have been a bit premature for a city struggling to recover financially from the war. Beautification would have to wait another seven to nine years.

Meanwhile the Common Council worked hastily to improve the Park. In April 1784 repairs were made to the Bridewell and the New Gaol while rooms in the barracks were leased to tenants who promised to make improvements (Stokes, 5 (1787, February 9): 1215). A gallows erected near residents of present-day Park Row in April 1784 was moved to the space between the almshouse and the Gaol. Apparently gallows were not something New Yorkers wanted to see out their windows. (For the two executions held “in the Fields” see the *N.Y. Gazetteer*, April 30, 1784. For the relocation of the gallows see *MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 70.)

The spring of 1785 saw efforts to reestablish the garden in the rear of the almshouse and the construction of a fence surrounding the Bridewell. In fact, by June of 1785 the Common Council approved a plan for “enclosing the Ground commonly called the fields” with a post and rail fence. The council was getting ahead of itself, however, as the money to complete the job would not be available for seven more years. (See *fig. 14*) (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 128, 138, 144).

Housing vagrants, criminals, widows, debtors, and a host of other unfortunate people in one confined area led to the need for additional burial grounds. By June 1785 the first burial ground established in 1757 had become insufficient. This is, in all probability, where Provost Cunningham added bodies to the space during the Revolutionary War years, and the population of the almshouse continued to bloat in the years following the war. In June 1785 the keeper of the almshouse requested a “more convenient Piece of Ground for the interment of the Dead from the Alms House.” The Common Council obliged, designating “the vacant Ground in the Rear of the Barricks & not in dispute be used for the interment of the deceased Persons of the Alms House & Bridewell.”²⁶

The Common Council’s scheme to earn income from tenants in the barracks while having the barracks repaired by those tenants failed on both fronts. The buildings stayed in a ruinous condition and the income remained meager. Reassessing the scheme, the council noted “the Disposition of the Barracks which were going to ruin for want of Repair & yielded a very trifling Emolument” and, acknowledging a complaint from the Commissioners of the Almshouse that the “Hospital of the House was very much crowded with the sick,” ordered that four rooms in the barracks be

²⁶ A committee of the Common Council recommended in November 1785 that two burial vaults be built behind the almshouse garden. However, there are no records of payments made for such vaults so it seems unlikely that they were actually built. *MCC, 1675-1776*, 6: 85-86; *MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 151, 158; Stokes, 5 (1785, November 14): 1206. This mention of property disputes is an early reference to the bitter negotiations between the city and private individuals that would develop by the end of the century over the land forming the northern boundary of the Park.

immediately converted to a hospital for the almshouse (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 278-279, 314).

The late 1780s, fueled by New York City's preeminence as the capitol of the fledgling nation, continued to see a flurry of efforts to improve the existing institutions on the Common. A stable and storehouse were erected at the almshouse. Renovations were made in the Bridewell. A fence was built around the Goal yard. Vagrants in the Bridewell were put to work filling the Goal yard with dirt (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 214, 381, 388, 449). However, these projects were essentially efforts to swim against the current. The fate of the Common had its first manifestation in October 1789 when the Common Council ordered that the powder magazine "in the hollow near the almshouse" be taken down and the materials used for the almshouse store (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 494). The neighborhoods surrounding the Common having grown thickly residential, concerns about the presence of gunpowder grew. These safety concerns would soon develop fully into aesthetic concerns about the rightful image of New York as a city of the world.

By January 1790 authorities ordered the city treasurer to sell the barracks and, when efforts to sell them failed, the Common Council had them razed. In their place, interestingly, the city would build a second and much larger almshouse in 1797, demonstrating how municipal authorities clung to traditional notions of where penal institutions should be located.

By late 1790, changes to the Park came rapidly. On October 5, 1790, the council ordered:

that a foot Walk of sixteen feet broad be paved with Brick or flat Stone along Chatham Row to the Northwest Corner of the Presbyterian Church Yard beginning at said Corner and ascending 9/10 parts of an Inch on every ten feet to the pavement at Andrew Hoppers Door.

“That a foot Walk of sixteen feet broad be paved with Brick or flat Stone along the westerly side of (Broadway)Great George Street” . . . from corner of Vesey at the intersection of the Kennel to the intersection of Barclay Street and then to the intersection of Robinson and then to Murray.

“That a Foot Walk be paved from the Corner of the Bridewell Fence to as great a Distance as the situation of the Ground and the convenience of the public Buildings will admit in order that a Descent for as much of the Water from the Ground in front thereof as possible may be obtained to the North River and then to descend to Franckfort Street (*MCC, 1784-1831, 1: 602*).

This order marks the city’s first attempt to delineate the Common as an entity in and of itself, no longer simply a commons but now a triangular city *park*. The third paragraph of the above resolution creates a sidewalk running eastward from Murray Street in front of present-day City Hall. Thus the Park of 1790 was substantially smaller than today’s City Hall Park which extends another two blocks north to Chambers Street. In fact, the section of Chambers Street that now forms the northern edge of City Hall Park had not been dug out, and the “commons” of the city extended amorphously northward encompassing the Collect, the swamplands and beyond. The order to dig Chambers Street would come only two years later.

The framing of the Common south of Murray Street with a sidewalk is not without present-day significance. From the early 1790s until today, with one giant exception, that portion of the Park has always remained truly a public park, complete with pedestrian walks, benches, landscaped trees, and fountains of water. The one exception was the Federal Post Office constructed in 1870 at the southern tip of the park triangle. As a massive building which turned most of the rest of the park in to a parking lot and obstructed the view of City Hall, the post office caused a great deal of

resentment among New Yorkers. Its destruction came as a result of public outrage at the federal government's usurpation of a vital public space. Demonstrating once again the conflicting notions of proper use of the space, the Common Council bowed to public pressure in 1939 and had the building razed. Thus as late as the mid-twentieth century, the city still wrestled with the question of how best to use the space. The struggle begun in the 1790s between those who viewed the Park as an ornament and those who viewed it as the center of municipal institutions continued for a hundred and fifty years. Interestingly, City Hall would soon bridge both visions, standing as an ornamental monument and also as the very seat of government.

Though the city did not lay out Chambers Street until 1796, the Common Council had their eye on this project beginning in June 1790. The six-year delay came as a result of a boundary controversy between the city and the Kip Malcolm family, who claimed the land where Chambers Street presently stands. It is unclear whether Kip Malcolm descended from the Rutgers family and the Calk Hook Farm. Finally, after two years of bitter negotiations, the city and Mr. Malcolm settled on a boundary line, and agreement that gave the city possession "of certain Houses & Lots (in rear of Bridewell) of Land in the Sixth Ward, lately recovered in Ejectment." Without hesitation, at the same meeting on April 30, 1792, the Common Council ordered the digging out of Chambers Street (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 1: 554, 709-710). Unfortunately for the municipal authorities the controversy had not ended. Four more years of legal haggling prolonged the process until workers finally cut Chambers Street in 1796. The northern boundary of the Park was thus set. The common lands north of Chambers Street quickly developed into a gridwork of streets as developers leveled hills, filled wetlands, and even filled the Collect Pond.²⁷ Only the characteristic triangular Park would remain undeveloped, but not unchanged.

²⁷ The development process of the lands north of City Hall Park remains unclear. What resulted by the late 1790s was massive privatization of city-owned common lands, leaving the Park as a public space in a sea of private property.

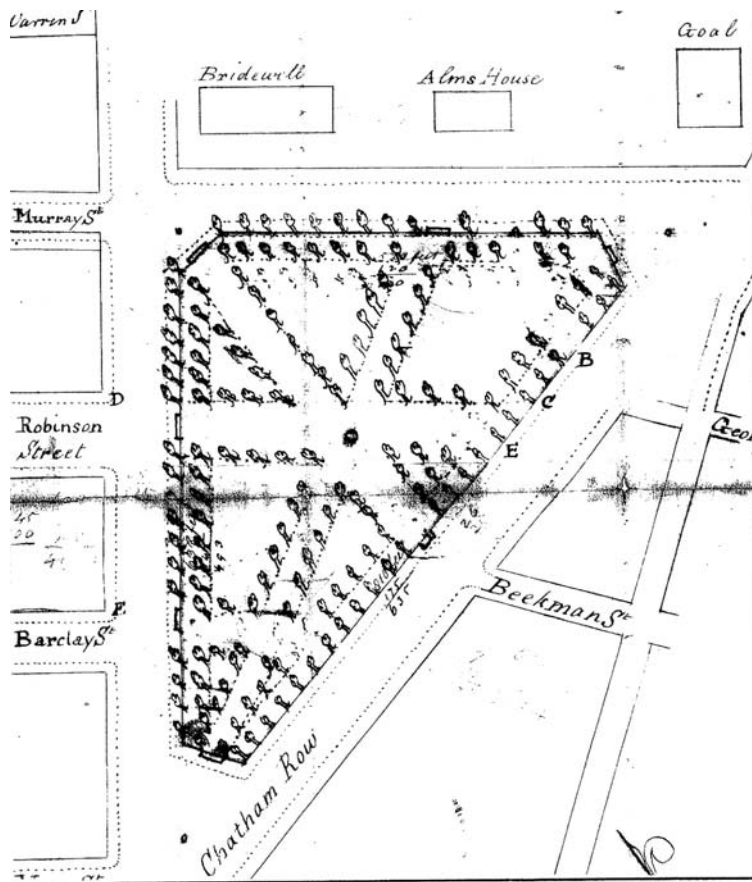


Figure 3-21 Detail of the “Map of the Area Later Bounded by Chambers, Nassau, Fulton & Church” dated 1789-1794.

In the heat of July of that same year, authorities ordered the improvement of “the Ground commonly called the Fields in front of the Alms House & Bridewell” (MCC, 1784-1831, 1: 733). The committee

in charge reported three months later that they had secured posts and rails to enclose the Fields in order to protect the trees intended to be planted there. A year later the city contracted with a Mr. Williams “to plant trees in the Fields” (MCC, 1784-1831, 1: 754, 2: 46). A “Map of the Area Later Bounded by Chambers, Nassau, Fulton & Church” dated 1789-1794 shows in detail the location of trees in the Park. (See fig. 3-21) This map is undoubtedly a “tree plan” made by Mr. Williams upon the order of the Common Council. By the following March, 1794, the trees stood in the ground and the city felt compelled to “employ a Person to keep the Boys & Cattle from injuring the Trees.” Again in 1796 the council took action to repair the park gates since they were “out of order & the Ground & Trees were injured by Cows & other Creatures getting in (MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 68, 220). In 1807 the city’s first guidebook, called *The Picture of New-York*, noted that the Park was a “beautiful grove” planted with elms, planes, willows, and catalpas, and that rows of poplars lined the sidewalk (A.T. Goodrich & Co. 1818:155).

The powder house had been demolished in 1789, and by 1796 the city decided that the old almshouse had become obsolete as well. As the city grew, the number of indigent residents grew as well, and the crumbling old building from 1736 no longer served New York's poor relief needs. In May 1796 the council decided that a new almshouse would "be erected on the Rear of the Ground of the present Alms House" (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 2: 239, 243-44). Clearly, the council could have selected a piece of ground north of the Park but instead they held to their traditional notion of what types of municipal buildings should exist in the Park. The poor, the criminals, the debtors, and the vagrants would reside on the northern portion of the Park, at least for a few more years.

Paid for by lottery, the second almshouse was a three-and-one-half-story brick building with a raised basement and U-shaped plan, designed in the Federal style with columned entrance porches. (See *fig. 3-22*) Significantly larger than the first almshouse and enjoying modern conveniences such as Peale's Improved Fireplaces and a sewer connection to Chambers Street, the second almshouse represented a growing city that took pride in its public buildings. It almost seems the municipal authorities must have planned the second almshouse with the idea that it might in the future serve other public roles less offensive.

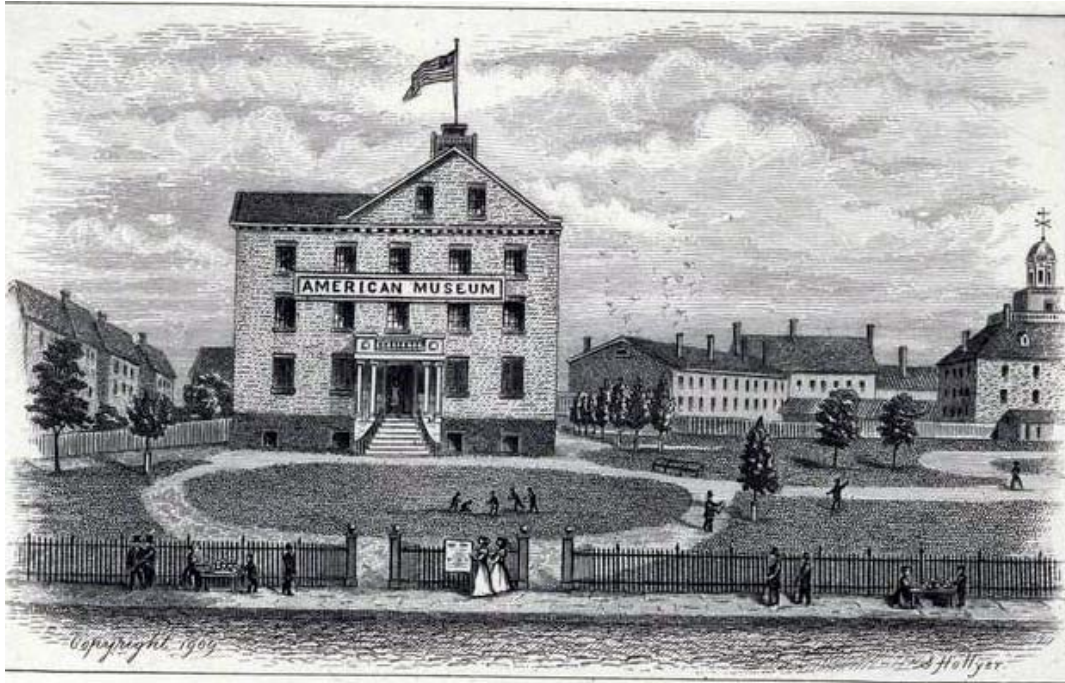


Figure 3-22 A view of the north end of City Hall Park from Broadway. Visible from left to right: the Second Almshouse / New York Institution, the State Arsenal / Free School No. 1 (at an angle), the New Gaol (with cupola). Also note the iron fence and the landscaped green. Samuel Hollyer, *American Museum, north end of City Hall Park, N.Y.C., 1825, 1909*.

In May 1797 almshouse residents moved from the old building to the new. Less than two months later the order came to raze the former. Much had changed in the sixty years since the first almshouse had been constructed. New York City had grown from small colonial port to booming independent municipality. With the city's population reaching almost 60,000, the decrepit old almshouse could serve no more purpose on ground as valuable and central as the Park, and its stones were ordered to be used "for the purpose of putting the Ground lately purchased for a burying Ground in order & the erection of a small Building for the Superintendent" (*MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 358, 374*).

Other changes occurred. As the state erected a prison in Greenwich Village starting in 1797, state prisoners stayed in the western half of the Bridewell. In 1799 the state

prisoners moved out and criminals in the New Gaol moved in, leaving only debtors in the Gaol. Thus the Gaol, which New Yorkers had commonly referred to as the Provost during and after William Cunningham's reign, became known as the Debtors' Prison and it would fill up surprisingly quickly (*MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 338*).

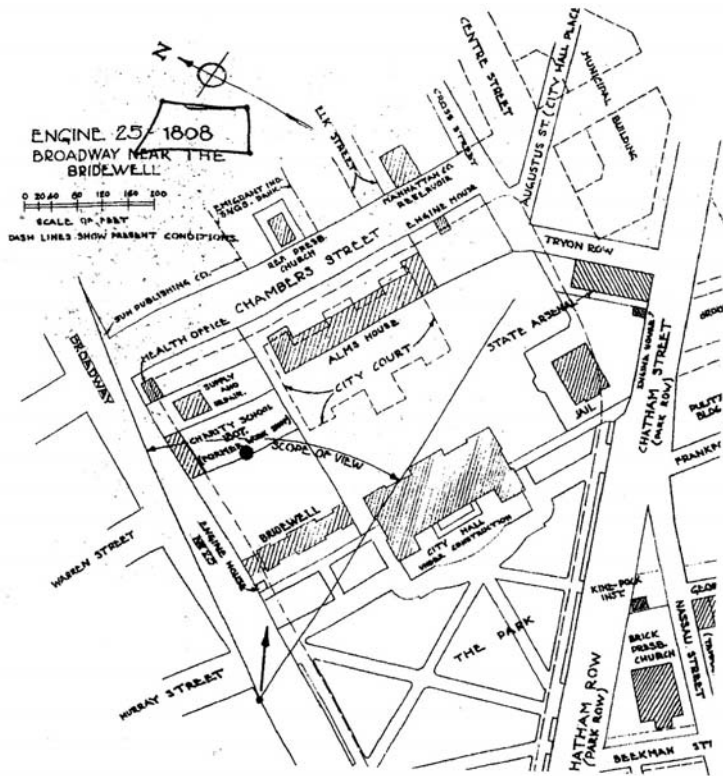


Figure 3-23 Map of City Hall Park in the year 1808 by Kenneth Dunshee, *As you pass by* (New York: Hastings House, 1952), 189.

Two additional small buildings appeared on the Park land at the end of the eighteenth century. With conflagrations becoming more

numerous across the city, a number of engine houses were constructed including one beside the Bridewell on Broadway and one to the east of the second almshouse on Chambers Street (Dunshee 1952:189; *MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 547*) (See *figs. 3-20 and 3-23*). The construction of engine houses on the Park is very much in keeping with the public orientation of the other institutions there. Like the Bridewell and the almshouse themselves, the engine houses would soon be sacrificed in the next phase of the Park's evolution.

“symbol of New York City as a great commercial city”

The turn of the century marked the last major shift in the use of present-day City Hall Park. As the population exploded, the geographic center of the city migrated

northward and the Park found itself the center of activity. The decision to build City Hall there represented a compromise between those who wanted the Park to stand as a monument in a proud and beautiful city, and those who argued for the continued existence of municipal institutions. City Hall touched both competing visions: it was an ornament and an institution suited for a genteel neighborhood. Interestingly, the Common Council would decide to convert a number of the old buildings instead of tearing them down.

The proposal for a new City Hall came in 1800, and the decision to erect the new building on the Park led to the redesignation of the entire northern end of the Park as the seat of municipal government. New buildings were constructed and old buildings converted to house offices and functions of the expanding city government. New York would soon come to call the area City Hall Park, a name and a role that it continues to hold over two centuries later.

New York's first City Hall, constructed by the Dutch and called the Stadt Huys, stood on Pearl Street. The second stood on the site of present-day Federal Hall at the junction of Wall and Nassau Streets. As the city grew into a metropolis, the building on Wall Street could no longer accommodate the government's needs and a new city hall was proposed in 1800. Two years later the city held an architectural competition which Joseph-Francois Mangin and John McComb, Jr. won. (See *fig. 3-24*) Apart from design, the Common Council wrestled with the question of location. Eventually they agreed that the Park provided the ideal open space in which the beautiful new building could be properly displayed and admired. The decision to build the new City Hall in the Park, on the site of the first almshouse, also reflects the northward shift of the geographic center of New York. Residential neighborhoods had rapidly developed north of the Park and all signs pointed to further expansion in that direction. Of additional significance is the fact that in the 1790s the city's economic elite had begun to build their mansions facing the Park on the Broadway side, turning the Park region into a fashionable district (*MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 616; Hall 1910:385-424*).

The city laid the cornerstone for the new City Hall on May 26, 1803 and construction continued for eight years (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 3: 258). During this time of ongoing construction, the Common Council made many other moves to relocate the seat of municipal government to the Park. A week before groundbreaking for City Hall, the council ordered the “two stables standing in the Alms House yard removed,” and a week after groundbreaking they ordered the barn in the almshouse yard pulled down. An old wooden fence near the almshouse soon met the same fate (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 3: 245, 258, 269).

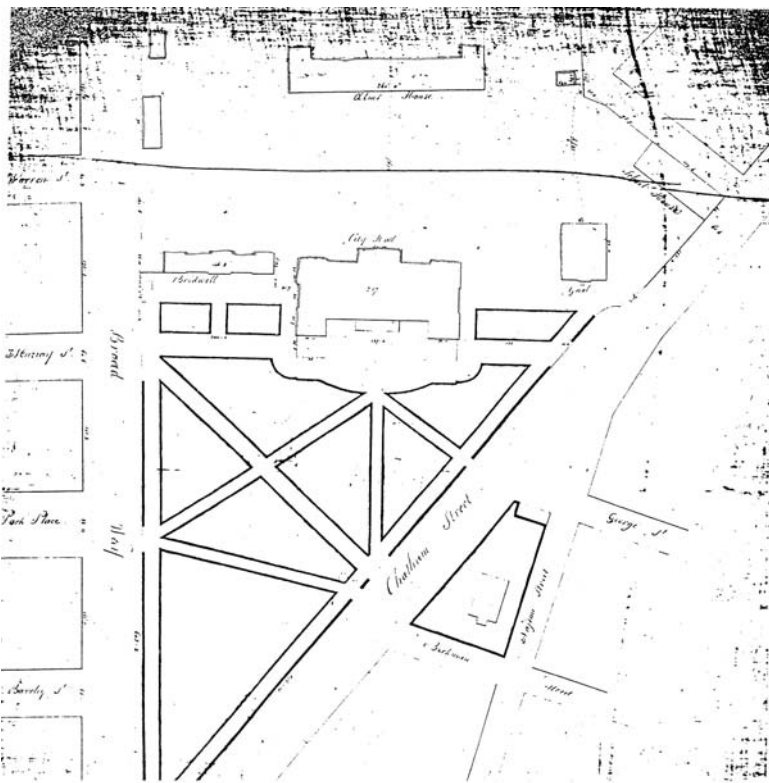


Figure 3-24 Detail showing the Office of the Board of Health (A), The Old Workhouse / original Free School No. 1 (B), Second Almshouse / New York Institution (C), City Dispensary / Soup House (D), Bridewell (E), City Hall (F), and New Gaol (G). From Joseph F. Mangin,

Plan of the Corporation Ground from the Park to Chamber Street. 1804.

Sometime between 1803 and 1806 the city erected three buildings in the northwest corner of the Park, one of which was a workshop for the City Hall builders. No records of orders to construct them have been found. In June 1803 the Common Council received a plea from the keeper of the almshouse to build a small school for the purpose of educating the growing number of children living in the almshouse. A

school does not appear to have been promptly built, but in March 1807 the council noted in their minutes that the trustees of the New York Free School accepted a \$500 contribution from the corporation and “the Occupation of the Old Work Shop adjoining the Alms House.” This seventy foot long workshop actually stood closer to the Bridewell than to the almshouse as indicated on April 6 when the trustees of the school requested “the Use of about twenty feet of the Bridewell yard adjoining their School House for privies” (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 4: 363, 394). The school taught its first day of classes on May 1, 1807. This workshop-turned-school adjoined Broadway across the street from and slightly north of Warren Street and appears in a plan drawn by Joseph Mangin in 1804. (See *figs.3-20, 3-23 and 3-24*)

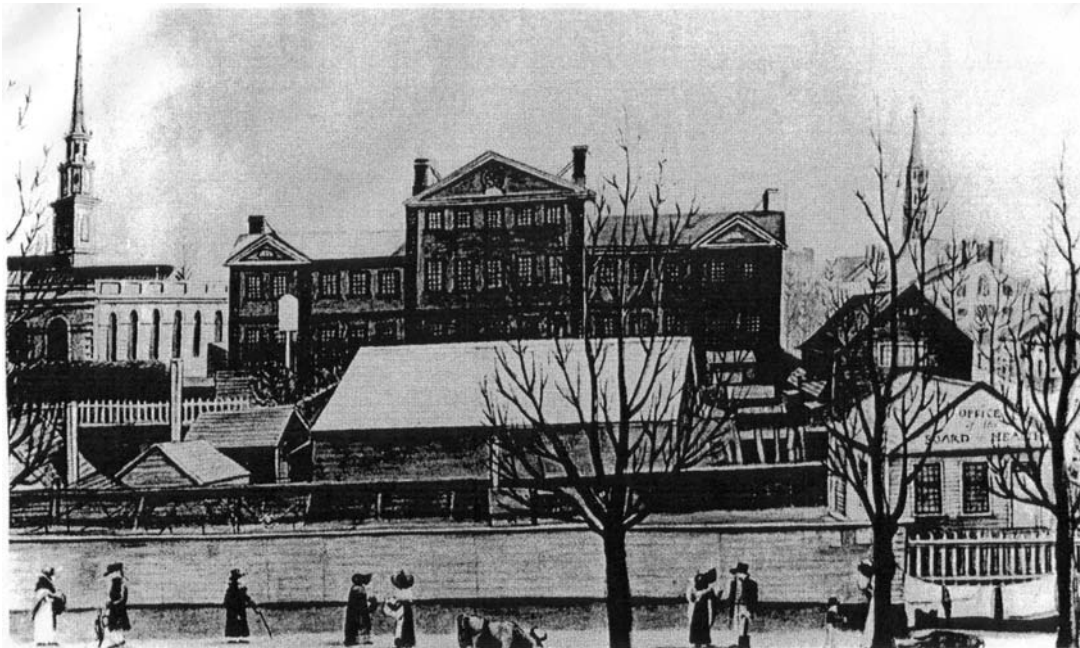


Figure 3-25 Watercolor showing view across Chambers Street at the northwest corner of the Park. From front to back: the Office of the Board of Health, The Supply and Repair Shop, the Old Workshop / Free School No. 1, and the Bridewell. City Hall appears on the left, as do additional small, unidentified buildings. Baroness Hyde de Neuville, *On Being Homeless*, 1808.

Also appearing in the 1804 Mangin Plan is a smaller building of about thirty-five feet in length that stood directly at the corner of Broadway and Chambers Street. This

small building housed the Office of the Board of Health. (See *figs. 3-23, 3-24 and 3-25*) The possibility exists that this Board of Health building may have been an older structure taken over by the corporation on March 17, 1800(*MCC, 1784-1831, 2: 615*). In the 1766 Ratzen Map, three small buildings appear in the northwest corner of what would become City Hall Park. Two of the buildings were enclosed by a fence and the third extended beyond the fence. (See *fig. 3-16*)

Sometime late in 1807 a third building appeared between the Free School and the health office. Set back about forty feet from Broadway, this building contained the supply and repair department for the city. This lot had been recommended to the Common Council in February 1807 as a good site to build a school, but apparently the need for a supply and repair building for the ongoing City Hall construction trumped that idea. This cluster of three buildings became popularly known as Corporation Yard and actually served as the first municipal government offices in the Park before the completion of City Hall in 1811 (Dunshee 1952:191; *MCC, 1784-1831, 4: 358*). (See *figs. 3-23 and 3-25*)

One more small building appears in the 1804 Mangin Plan, this one on the east side of the almshouse. The Almshouse Commissioners erected this thirty by thirty-five foot building as a soup kitchen (Hardie 1827:263). The Park also contained New York's first dispensary for a few years at the beginning of the nineteenth century. After being housed in the Health Office building from 1810 to 1818, it then moved into a building "fronting on Tryon Row" (Hardie 1827:287; *MCC, 1784-1831, 6: 318, 326*). Some discrepancy exists as to whether the soup kitchen and the City Dispensary occupied the same building. One source suggests that they were separate, with the soup kitchen at the corner of Tryon Row and Cross Street and the dispensary at the corner of Chambers Street and Cross Street. The source also suggests that the dispensary actually shared its building with Engine Company No. 25 and Hose Company No. 1 during the 1830s (Hall 1910:410; Sheldon 1882:353,357). Alternatively, Hooker's Plan of 1817 shows a building on Tryon Row labeled "City Dispensary & Soup House." (See *figs. 3-24 and 3-26*)

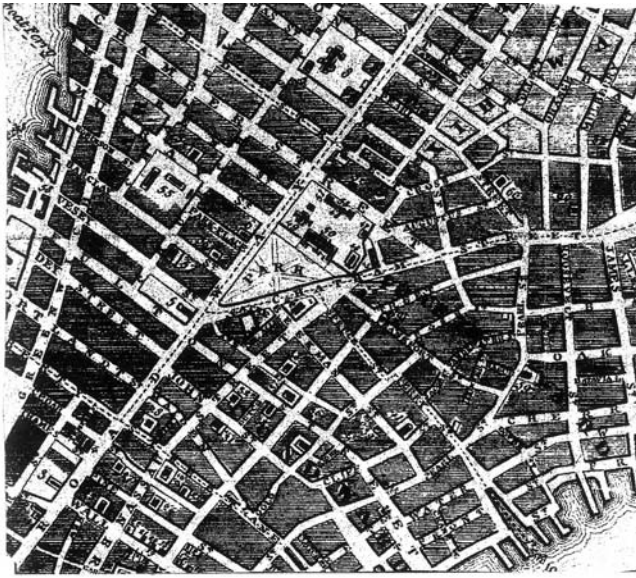


Figure 3-26 Detail showing City Hall Park in 1817 containing the Free School No. 1 (45), New Gaol (46), City Dispensary & Soup House (47), New York Institution (48), Bridewell (49), and City Hall (50). From W. Hooker, *Plan of the City of New York, 1817*.

Even as Joseph Mangin undertook the landscaping of the southern end of the Park and the entire area acquired a new air of prestige, the Park did not lose its status as the meeting place for political demonstrations. On July 2, 1807, one week after the Chesapeake Affair, a crowd gathered in the Park to protest the impressment of Americans by the British Royal Navy. These protests would continue as New York led the new nation in opposition to British policies and eventually into the War of 1812. In May 1808 the Park served as a meeting place for members of the Tammany Society of New York who carried bones of the prison ship dead of the Revolutionary War period. After placing the dead in vaults in Brooklyn, they returned to City Hall Park and displayed the standards of the different societies until dismissed by the Grand Marshal (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 5: 70-71, 129-30; *Public Advertiser*, May 25, 1808; Stiles 1865:128-157; *Public Advertiser*, May 27, 1808; *Centinal of Freedom*, May 31, 1808). Later, during the War of 1812, the *N.Y. Evening Post* reported a mass meeting in the Park to induce citizens to volunteer to help construct fortifications against British attack (*N.Y. Evening Post*, August 11, 1814).



Figure 3-27 New York Free School, Chatham Street, 1808.

As completion of City Hall neared, municipal authorities took further steps to clean up the Park's image. In 1808 the Free School ended its brief stint in the former workshop and moved across the park to a

former state arsenal on the corner of Chatham Street and Tryon Row. (See *figs. 3-22, 3-23 and 3-27*) In 1809 the council ordered the whipping post removed from in front of the Bridewell because, as noted by a visitor named Timothy Dwight, "the infliction of punishment was found to be so revolting to the feelings of the Community." 1809 also witnessed three gas lamps installed in the Park and, in 1810, turnstiles were added to the Park's gates to help regulate pedestrian flow (Dwight 1821-1822:448-84; *MCC, 1784-1831*, 4: 716-717, 5: 572, 6: 372).

Completed in 1811, the new City Hall measured 215 feet by 105 feet and stood two and a half stories high. The south, west, and east sides of the building consisted of expensive Massachusetts marble from the Johnson & Stevens Quarry in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. As a money-saving measure the council decided to build the north side of the building with brownstone from two New Jersey quarries. This decision indicates that city planners did not foresee the degree to which New York City would continue to grow. The expectation was that the true heart of the city would remain south of the Park and few people would even see the north side of City Hall. In retrospect, it appears city planners were not paying close attention to population trends. Between 1790 and 1800 the population doubled from 33,131 to 60,515. By 1810 the population had climbed by another 36,000 people to reach 96,373. By 1820 the city's numbers would increase again by 30,000. New York City

was growing, and the only direction to expand on Manhattan Island was north. City Hall Park quickly found itself the very center of urban life. (See *fig. 3-26*)

By 1812 city government offices had moved out of their Wall Street home to their new French Renaissance-inspired home in the Park. The move ignited a flurry of grounds improvements and changes beginning with the removal of all residents of the almshouse to the new hospital complex at Bellevue. The Common Council renamed the emptied almshouse the New York Institution and designated the building as “an Institution for the promotion of arts and sciences in this City.” Among the public and semi-public institutions that found a home in the New York Institution were the Academy of Arts, the Academy of Painting, the American Institute, the New-York Historical Society, the City Library, the American Museum, (See *fig. 3-22*) the Lyceum of Natural History, the Chambers Street Savings Bank, and the Deaf and Dumb Institute. For eighteen years the building housed these institutions “of arts and sciences” until 1830 when the city government outgrew City Hall and the Common Council took over the entire building for use as city offices (*MCC, 1784-1831, 7: 270*).

In 1814 the grounds both south and north of the City Hall received a facelift as the Common Council ordered “a Plan for the laying out of the grounds adjoining the new City Hall . . . in the manner which . . . would be most proper and advantageous for the Public Interest and the beauty of the City.” In August 1816 a committee of the Common Council recommended a botanic garden to be planted between the New York Institution and City Hall. And in 1817 the council ordered:

The Ground between the City Hall and the old Alms House and that between this time and the first of May next, the whole space to be laid down in Grass, bordered with trees and thrown open for the benefit of the City in the same manner as the spaces in front of the Hall, reserving however so much as may be necessary in the discretion of the Committee to be enclosed for

the use of the Hall and Bridewell” *MCC, 1784-1831*, 7:
715, 8: 600, 790-791) (See *fig. 3-22*).

Even the space in the northern portion of City Hall Park maintained a strong public orientation. Despite the existence of city government buildings, the ground would be laid out with trees and grass and “thrown open” for New Yorkers to enjoy. With such careful landscaping being planned, the space would need protection from wandering cows and pigs.²⁸ As the fence built in 1792 had only enclosed the southern portion of the Park, a proposal for a fence continuing to Chambers Street came swiftly. In March 1817 the Common Council looked into the propriety of building a fence made of iron but changed their mind the next month and agreed upon a “neat Diamond slat fence” made of wood. But again two months later the decision came to give the beautiful City Hall and its grounds a proper iron enclosure imported from the foundries of England. An iron fence would be erected “commencing at the Engine House opposite Warren Street and running northerly to Chamber Street; thence along Chamber Street to a point in line with the west end of the New York Institution” (*N.Y. Gazette*, June 19, 1817; *MCC, 1784-1831*, 9: 84, 125, 206)²⁹ (See *fig. 3-22*).

Four years later the city authorities decided to replace the wooden fence surrounding the southern portion of the Park with an iron fence. Starting from the southern tip of City Hall Park, the new fence was to “be so extended as to connect it with that already erected, and that the Engine House on Broadway be removed” (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 11: 686)³⁰. Though no mention of new iron fencing on the Chatham Street

²⁸ Apparently the fence constructed in 1817 did not succeed in keeping the cows out since the Common Council passed a resolution in October 1824 to construct a pound to impound the cattle trespassing on the Park. (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 14: 99)

²⁹ On March 30, 1829 the fence along Chambers Street would be continued as the Common Council “Resolved . . . removal of the present fences and other incumbrances on the ground in front of the Institution on Chamber Street, and for the continuation of the Iron fence from the point where it now terminates on that Street to the Rotunda.” (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 17: 754)

³⁰ An 1809 print by George Hayward shows a five to six foot high wooden picket fence running north along Broadway to the engine house which stood across from Warren Street. Another fence with a diamond slat top runs from the engine house in front of the Bridewell, and a plank fence runs north from the engine house to the workshop/school. (See *fig. 3-26*)

side has been found, the work presumably continued around the entire southern half of the Park. The southern entrance received special treatment with the erection of four marble columns to support the new iron gates. Six years later the marble columns were further adorned with ornamental granite shot brought to the city from the island of Rhodes as a “symbol of New York City as a great commercial city” (*N.Y. Mirror*, 8:33; *MCC, 1784-1831*, 16: 264) (See fig. 3-28).



Figure 3-28 City Hall Park, 1822.

Adding to the cultural orientation of New York’s elegant City Hall Park was a new building constructed in 1818 on the northeast corner. Known as the Rotunda or the Round House, this edifice was built by John Vanderlyn to exhibit his panorama *The Palace and Garden of Versailles*. (See fig. 3-29) As New York’s first art museum, the Rotunda added to the prestige of the booming city. After the great fire of 1835 the post office occupied the building for a decade and then the city converted the Rotunda into public offices (Avery and Fodera 1988).

Sometime before 1825 the city razed the buildings of Corporation Yard, though no clear record of their removal has been found. A print of the northwest corner of the

Park drawn in 1825 show the buildings replaced with grass and a circular walkway. (See *fig. 3-22*) In 1819 the Common Council ordered the Superintendent of Repairs, who would have been responsible for the buildings in Corporation Yard to “cause the small wooden building in the rear of the old Alms House to be removed” (*MCC, 1784-1831, 10: 570*). This order may have been referring to one of the three major buildings in Corporation Yard, but numerous other small wooden buildings may easily have existed near the New York Institution.

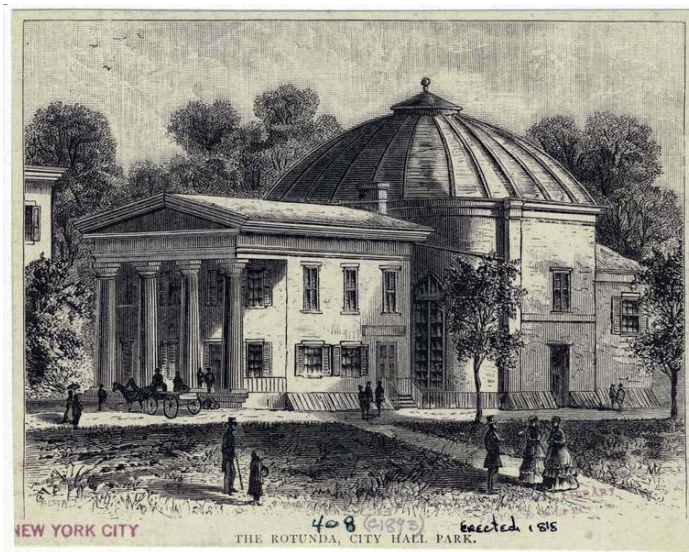


Figure 3-29 The Rotunda, built in 1818.

In 1824 an order came from the Common Council to remove the Gaol and all the other small buildings between the Free School on Tryon Row and the Park. The council planned to sell the land on which the Gaol

stood and use that money to build a bigger prison north of the city and much farther from the now-fashionable City Hall Park area. Fortunately the order was not acted upon and in 1829 a new recommendation came to convert the Gaol into a hall of records for the city. In 1830 the prisoners in the Gaol transferred to a building at Bellevue and the renovation work began (*MCC, 1784-1831, 19: 193-195*). In the conversion from jail to hall of records, the building received a significant facelift. (Compare *figs. 3-17 and 3-30*)



Figure 3-30 The Hall of Records, formerly the New Gaol.

In May 1830 the New York Institution met the same fate as the Gaol. In an uncharacteristically descriptive entry, the Common Council declared in their minutes that the former

almshouse would thence forth be called the “New City Hall” and would serve only public purposes:

First, for your Police Office; Second, for your House of Detention; Third, for your Grand Jury; Fourth, for your Fourth District Watch; Fifth, for your Commissioners of the Alms House; Sixth (where the museum is now) for a Court Room Forty two feet by Ninety three, with Judges Chamber, Clerks Office, and Jury Rooms connected therewith; Seventh, for the Collectors of Assessments, eighth, for the Public Administrators Office and Court; Ninth for your Marine Court, and the rooms that may be necessary for its accommodation, there will then remain several apartments which may hereafter be appropriated. “The attention of your Committee has also been drawn to the nuisance that now surrounds the back part of your Bridewell and Debtors Jail, and do in their opinion herewith suggest a plan that will entirely remedy and remove the nuisance. It is further proposed by your Committee, that the Iron railing of the Park be extended on the Chambers street front, and that the Ground be laid

out in an ornamental manner, as per plan, and be reserved exclusively for Mr. Hunters family and the Keeper of the House of Detention, that the whole building be newly painted white, and windows trimmed on Chamber street with green blinds which will in the opinion of your Committee, make the front equal in appearance to any of the private buildings opposite, particularly as the proposed plan is to make the front on the Park, the business front.

“In the consideration of this subject the attention of your Committee has been drawn to the present condition of the City Prison, as well in relation to the imperfect arrangement of this building as to the manifest neglect of that peculiar class of individuals which chiefly constitutes its inmates. Your Committee are perfectly aware that the happiness and security of Society require that a place of confinement should be prepared for persons awaiting their trial, but they would at the same time deprecate the idea of degrading them into the character of felons, by placing them in the society of such, or into a building which possesses the character and all the revolting attributes of a common prison.” Proposal to move detainees into the New York Institution building. “As that part of the Institution to be occupied as above stated will be separated from the Court of Sessions (now preparing) by a small space of ground, it will be readily seen that by running high walls so as to include that space into a yard, as it is now occupied, the intercourse between the two places will be entirely concealed from the public eye (*MCC, 1784-1831, 19: 76-80*).

Thus, from an assortment of public buildings that had occupied the Park just thirty years earlier, only City Hall and its converted annexes remained. This redesignation of old Park buildings into governmental offices sealed and solidified the Park's transition into its final stage of development. To make the conversion official and unambiguous, the Common Council declared in March 1831 that the second almshouse, the Gaol, and the Rotunda were legally designated as part of the 'City Hall of the City of New York.' (*MCC, 1784-1831*, 19:583). In 1838 the demolition of the Bridewell removed the last vestige of the Park's former roles and qualified the area alternatively known as the Vlacte, the Common, the Fields, the Green, the Square and the Park as, once and for all, City Hall Park.

Conclusion

Evidently, the history of City Hall Park from 1652 to 1838 is not a simple story. It is a history layered with different uses and evolving function. Taken in conjunction, these changing uses provide a way of reading the development of New York City from minor Dutch port to world metropolis. Driven primarily by massive demographic growth, the emergence of City Hall Park as a central urban space parallels the growing pains of a city struggling to define itself.

The first theme to emerge was the question of public property versus private property and the personality of a municipal corporation. New Yorkers struggled with the concept of public space, a struggle reflected in the early growth of the city. As initial population boom strained the resources of the municipality, institutions for vagrants, criminals, the poor, the old, and the orphaned became located on the Common. Building a sense of civic life within a largely democratic society, New Yorkers joined colonists from all thirteen British North American colonies in protest and revolt. The American War for Independence remains probably the most important event in the history of the United States, and the New York City Common served as an initial battleground. The sense of possession that Americans had developed for their

homeland was reflected in their battle for the Common as “the most publick place.” Independence fostered a desire to raise New York City up as a great metropolis of the world. As some residents argued for beautification and hiding away repulsive institutions, the Common Council adhered to traditional uses of the Park. By the nineteenth century, however, City Hall Park was too small to house the wide variety of institutions planted there. Population boom caused the penal, poor relief, and municipal systems to become too complex to be squeezed into the tiny Park. As the Common Council perceived that the Park could ultimately not accommodate all the roles it had traditionally held, New Yorkers who did not want a poorhouse or a pesthouse or a prison in the heart of their great city received a boost. The penal and poor relief institutions were dispersed and, ultimately, only the complex of City Hall buildings remained in the Park. Today, City Hall Park stands the same way: the seat of government, an ornament and monument, a treasured public space, and a testament to New York City’s formative years.

