

CENTRAL PARK: AN AMERICAN MASTERPIECE

Central Park, constructed from 1857 to 1873, is a unique and long-recognized masterpiece of landscape architecture and the most important work of American art of the 19th century. Central Park's co-designers, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, struggled to establish themselves as artists and to equate their work with the venerable tradition of landscape painting. When the Park was near completion, Olmsted affirmed its status as a "single unified work of art."

Like every other work of art, Central Park is entirely man-made. The only natural feature on the Park site is the metamorphic rock called Manhattan schist, which is approximately 450 million years old. To create the Park's naturalistic lakes and streams, low-lying swamps were drained, a naturalistic shoreline was established, and city water pipes were installed; to create the Park's vast, undulating meadows, swampland was filled with soil, and rock outcrops were leveled with gunpowder; to create the Park's three woodland areas, barren rock-strewn slopes were planted with millions of trees, shrubs, and vines.

Olmsted and Vaux estimated that if all ten million cartloads of soil and materials used to build the Park were to be placed end to end, they would have stretched for 30,000 miles (48,280 kilometers). A walk through Central Park was designed to be a moving experience. Olmsted used the term "passages of scenery" to explain the ever-changing views experienced while walking through the various landscapes: broad meadows, rustic woodlands, tree-lined allées, and a diversity of architectural structures.

As you walk along the Park's pathways, notice how the Park's scenery changes with the weather conditions and times of day. Come back to the Park throughout the year and marvel at the difference that seasonal foliage and vegetation bring to each carefully composed landscape.



One criterion used to critique a great work of art is its longevity — the ability to initiate emotion and communicate meaning long after its creation. In this sense, Central Park is a masterpiece that has survived the test of time.

Like every great work of art, Central Park requires constant care and attention to maintain its present beauty and energy. In the 1960s and 1970s the century-old preserve had become forsaken and dilapidated. In 1980, a handful of farsighted and passionate New Yorkers set out to revitalize the Park and founded the private, nonprofit Central Park Conservancy.

There is no greater testimony to the Park's resilience than the extraordinary renaissance it has enjoyed since 1980 when the Conservancy began to restore Olmsted and Vaux's masterpiece of landscape architecture. The Conservancy's mission remains the management, restoration, and preservation of Central Park, in partnership with the City of New York, for present and future generations.

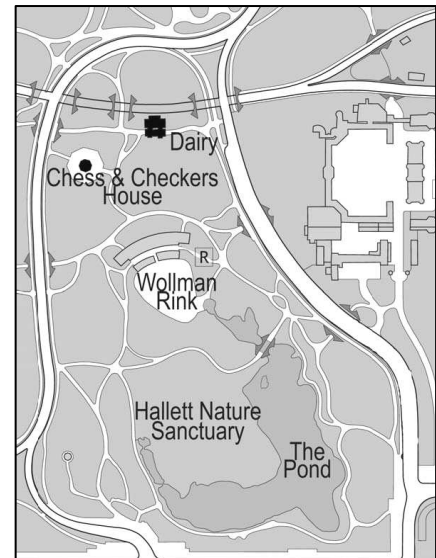


SELF-GUIDED TOUR OF CENTRAL PARK'S SOUTH END

The Dairy, Chess and Checkers House, Wollman Skating Rink, Pond and Hallett Nature Sanctuary

The Dairy

Calvert Vaux, Park co-designer and architect, designed this Victorian Gothic Revival structure with an ample loggia as a respite for Park visitors, particularly for children and invalids, where they could buy a glass of fresh milk and catch the cool summer breezes coming off the northern lobe of the Pond (now Wollman Skating Rink). However, when the building finally opened to the public in 1870, city officials established it as the Park's first "fast food" eatery. In the 1950s, the dilapidated loggia was torn down, and the remaining stone structure was reduced to a maintenance storage shed. In 1979, under the new Central Park Administration, the restored Dairy became the Park's first visitor center, and in 1981, the loggia was returned to its original Victorian elegance by the newly formed Central Park Conservancy. Today the Dairy is the Park's premier gift shop.



Chess and Checkers House

In 1866, Calvert Vaux designed the largest and most elaborate rustic summerhouse in the Park for children and their caregivers, known as the "Kinderberg" (Dutch for children's mountain). The open-air shelter, made from unmilled timber, was built atop a large rock outcrop. Children and their caregivers sat at rustic chairs and tables to play games that they could borrow from the Dairy. After many years of neglect and disrepair, the structure was torn down in the early 1950s. In 1952, the present brick Chess and Checkers House was built and chess tables were placed around it, making it a haven for enthusiasts of both time-honored games. In 1984, the Chess and Checkers House was refurbished and a wisteria pergola was added. In May 2007, it reopened as the official visitor center for the Park's south end, and as the volunteer headquarters. Visitors can borrow different games and sit at the 24 chess tables under a modern-day pergola to match wits and enjoy the summer shade.

Wollman Skating Rink

When the Park was being planned, New Yorkers demanded a place for the new sport of ice skating because the rivers surrounding the island of Manhattan rarely froze. Immediately, the Pond and the Lake — both man-made water bodies — became the most popular winter destinations in the Park. Frustrated by the whims of Mother Nature, however, Park visitors wanted the guarantee of ice skating all season long. In 1950, Kate Wollman donated the money for the rink, which was placed on the northern arm of the Pond. In the 1980s, the rink was reconstructed by the City of New York with assistance from real estate developer Donald Trump, whose organization manages it today.

The Pond and Hallett Nature Sanctuary

The Pond is one of the Park's masterpieces of engineering and technology. Designed to resemble a quiet woodland lake, it is actually lined with geosynthetic materials and filled with city water by subterranean pipes. Concrete shelves, constructed along the naturalistic shoreline, feature many plants and shrubs that contribute to the impression of a bucolic lagoon set deep in the woods. From the 1870s until 1924, visitors to the Pond could ride on swan boats, still a famous attraction at the Boston Public Garden. The Promontory is a rocky woodland slope that juts into the Pond. In 1934 it was renamed the Hallett Nature Sanctuary, set aside for wildlife and closed to the public. Tours of the Sanctuary are given in season by members of the Central Park Conservancy youth programs.



WWW.CENTRALPARKNYC.ORG