

# The Spatial Narratives of Black Manhattan: Guided Tours and their Recounting of Black History



Perry L. Carter, *Texas Tech University*  
Candace Bright, *East Tennessee State University*



# Spatial Narratives

[W]e are interested in the spatial configuration of history—the way historical stories are arranged to be told in space to produce what we term ‘spatial narratives’ of history....

But often spatial narratives involve a complex configuration of geographic elements including buildings, markers, memorials, and inscriptions positioned with great care to provide a spatial story-line or to capture the key locational and chronological relations of an historical event.

Azaryahu, M., & Foote, K. E. (2008). Historical space as narrative medium: on the configuration of spatial narratives of time at historical sites. *GeoJournal*, 73, 179-194.

# Spatial Narratives

This project is concerned with the spatial narratives of the city — i.e. Manhattan.

Unlike the spatial narratives described by Azaryahu and Foote, these are spatially pieced together narratives.

Narratives conveyed through the routing from one site of *narrative matter* to the next, and the next, and the... in order to tell place-based stories.

In this instance place-based stories of Black Manhattan.



# Narrative Matter



June 4, 1917, the Daughters of the Confederacy unveil the "Southern Cross" monument in Arlington, Virginia. (Bettmann/Getty Images)



# Narrative Matter

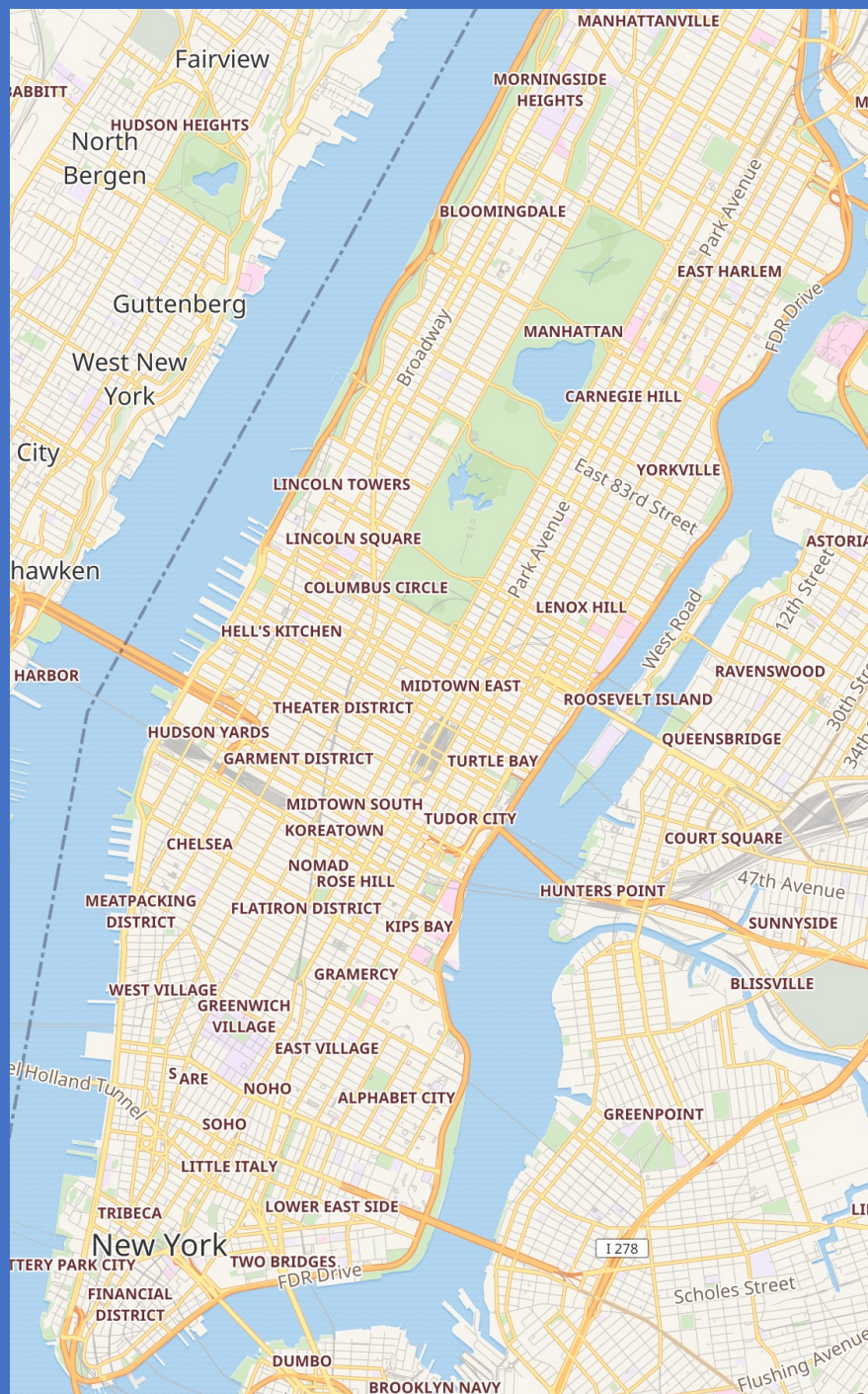


The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.

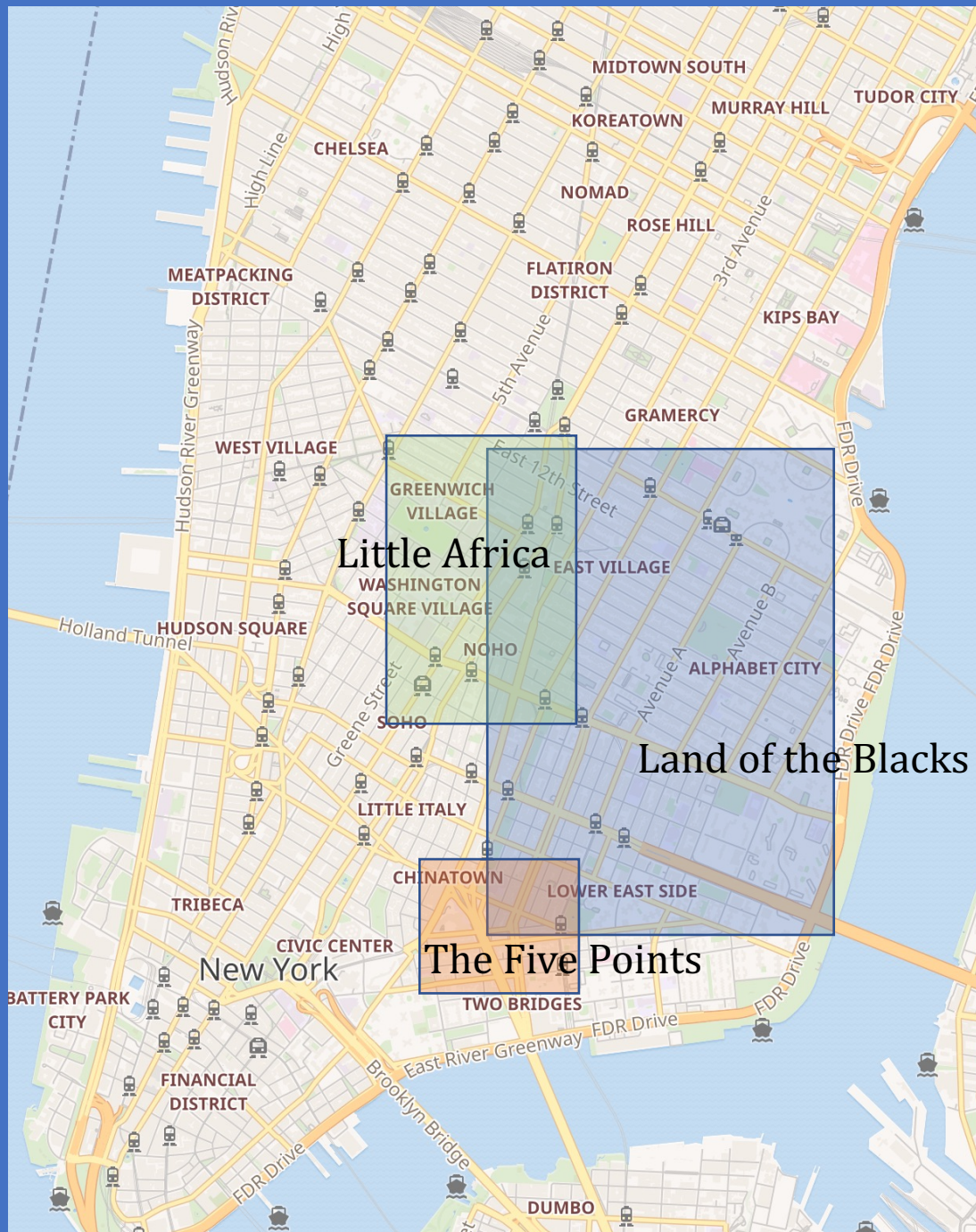


# A Brief Geographic History of Black Manhattan

- In 1619, the Spanish sailor Jan Rodriguez chose not to return to the Dutch ship *Jonge Tobias*. Instead, he married a Lenape woman and settled on *Manaháhtaan* ("the place where we get bows")
- In 1625, the Dutch East India Company founded the settlement of New Amsterdam at the tip of Manhattan Island. The Company brought with them eleven enslaved African men.







- **Land of the Blacks (1643-1716).** Land settled by formerly enslaved people located outside the wall of New Amsterdam.
- **The Five Points (1827-1897).** A Black and Irish neighborhood built on top of what had been the Collect Pond. It existed largely as a densely populated, disease-ridden, crime-infested slum.



- **Little Africa (1834-1910).** The neighborhood was home to influential Black institutions such as Mother Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Free School.





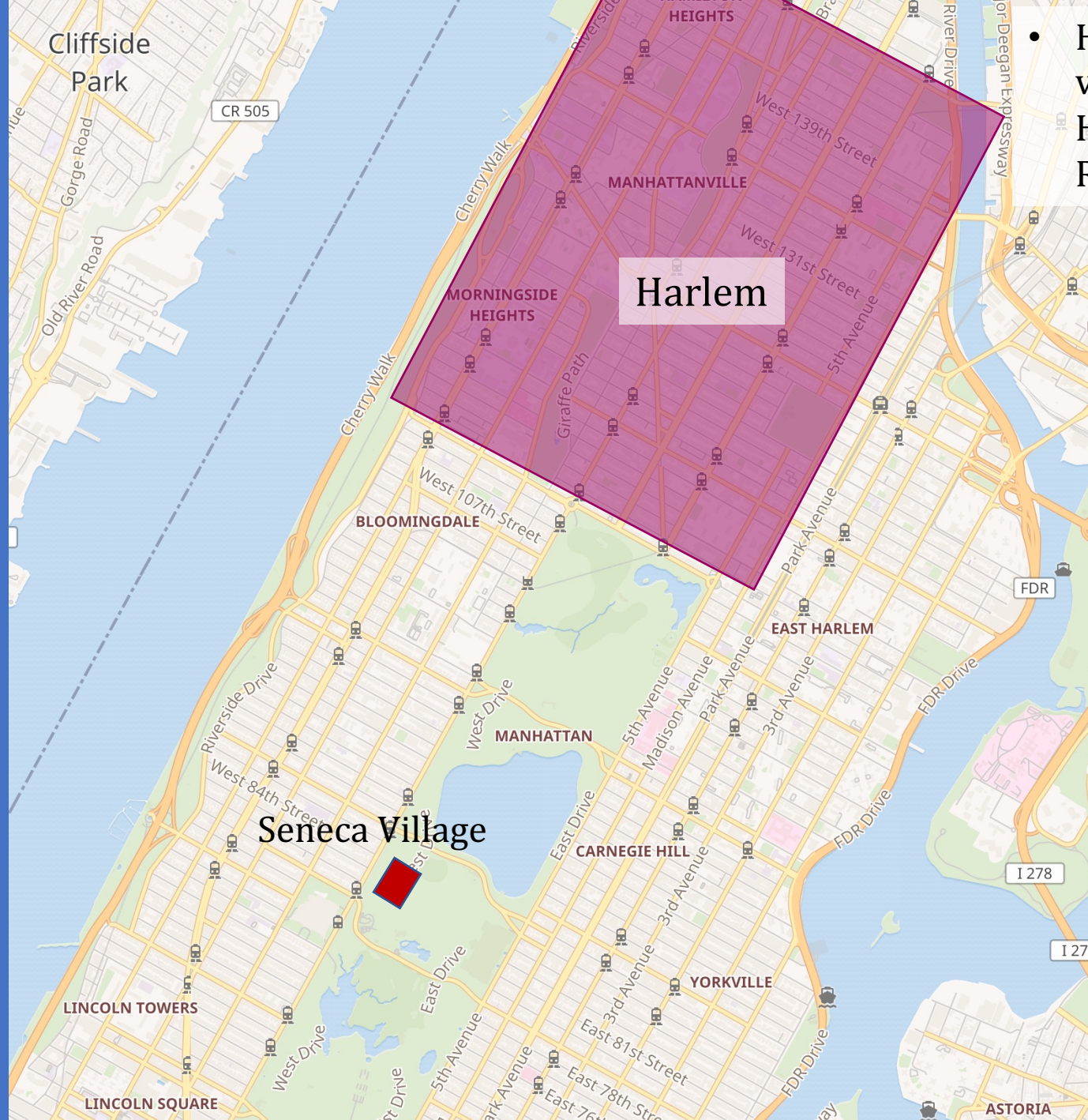
- The Tenderloin / "African Broadway" (1870-1906). Home to several Black-owned hotels and entertainment venues such as the Marshall Hotel, the neighborhood was a Black Bohemia where Black writers and entertainers held court at bars and restaurants. It was also a cash machine for the corrupt NYPD. Cleared to build Penn Station.

- San Juan Hill (1880-1958) African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Puerto Rican neighborhood. Noted for its Jazz clubs. San Juan Hill was the home of the musicians James P. Johnson, Benny Carter, Thelonious Monk, and Herbie Nichols. Cleared to build Lincoln Center.



San Juan Hill, 1939. | Lee Sievan (1907-1990). Museum of the City of New York. 92.70.1

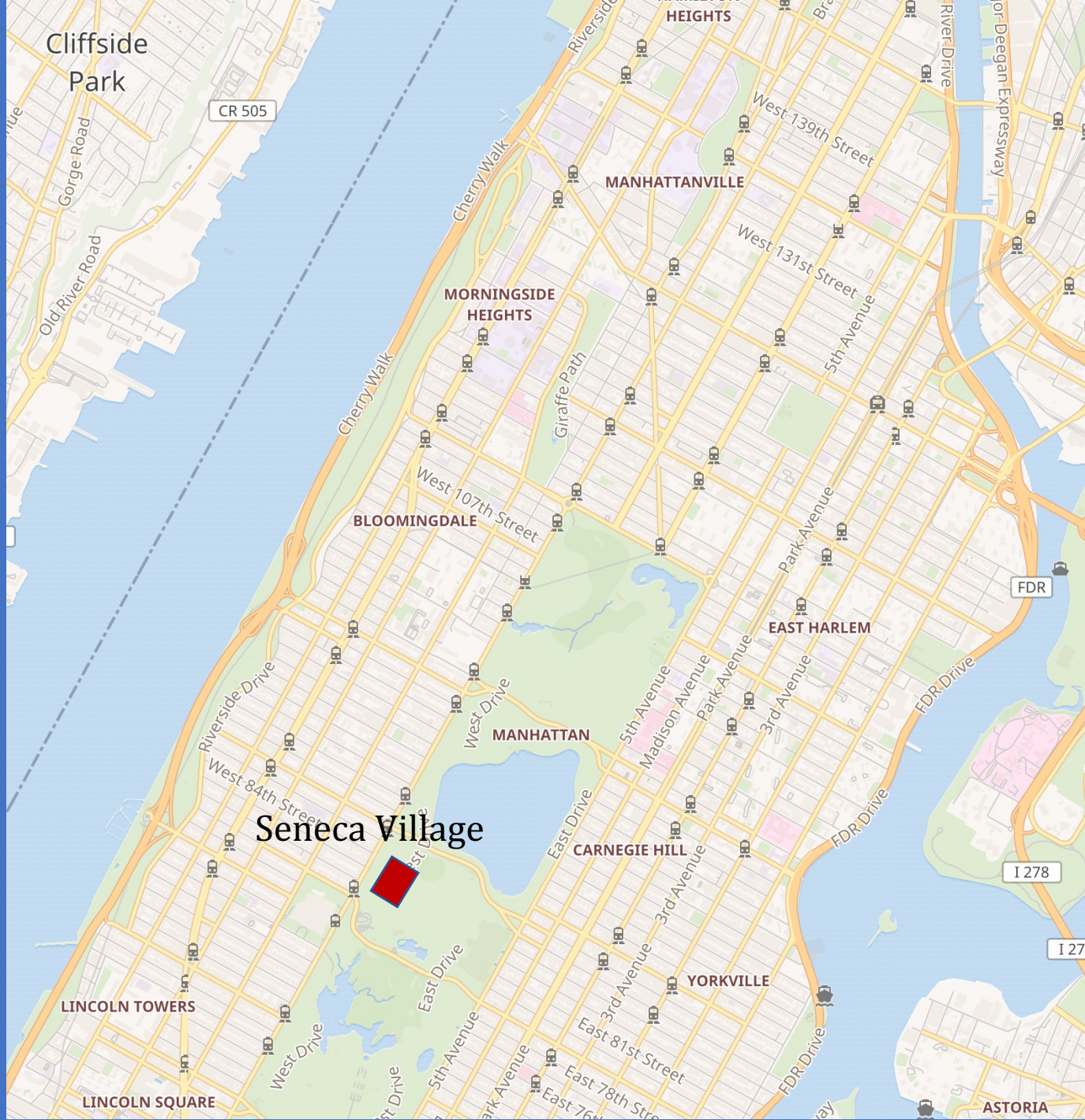




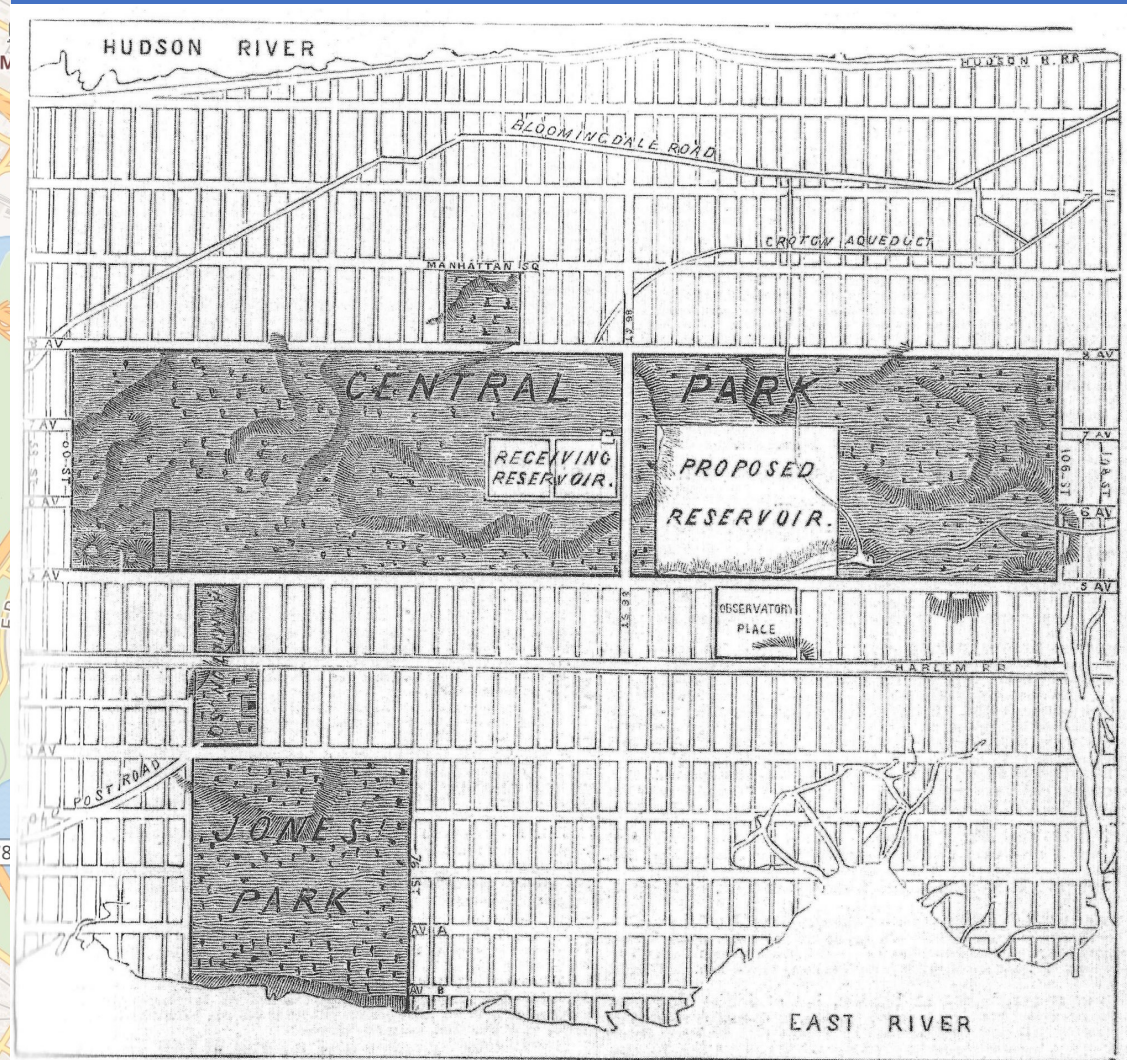
- Harlem (1918-Present) Haarlem began as a Dutch village in upper Manhattan in 1660. The Harlem Hellfighters ushered in the age on Black Harlem. Harlem Renaissance (1924-1929).







- Seneca Village (1825-1857) A settlement of mostly free Black property owners located three miles north of New York city at the time. Cleared to build Central Park.





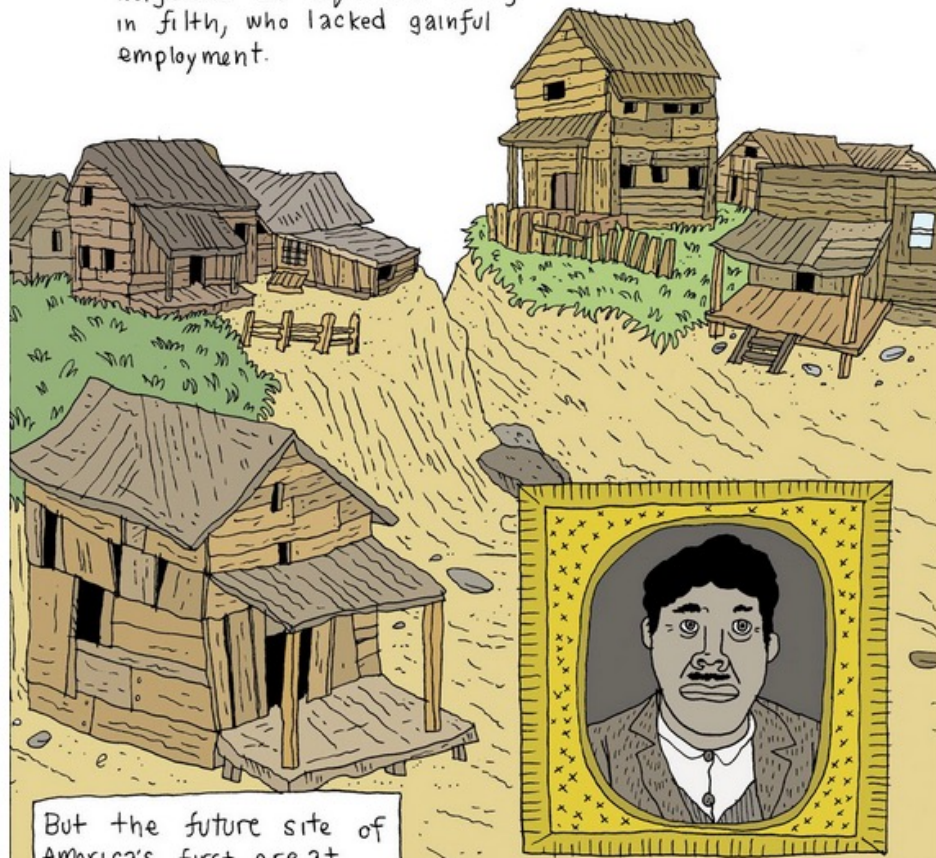
# Central Park Was Once Seneca Village, Home to a Thriving Free Black Community

A graphic history of the community displaced for the vast public park in 1857.

BY LUCAS ADAMS • DECEMBER 5, 2016



In lower Manhattan, most civic leaders dismissed their northern neighbors as squatters living in filth, who lacked gainful employment.



But the future site of America's first great public park was a place of immense opportunity for those priced out of lower Manhattan, especially recent immigrants and African Americans.

In 1825, Andrew Williams, an African American who worked as a bootblack bought three plots of land from carters John and Elizabeth Whitehead near present-day 84th Street and 8th Avenue.

Williams was joined by many other African Americans, and soon a thriving community of free African Americans known as Seneca Village was born.

The village was home to three churches. There was also a school, housed in the basement of one of the churches.

Almost all residents worked in service trades, and lived in handmade cabins and shanties.

Over half of the residents of Seneca Village owned their homes, which was highly unusual for the time, as noted by Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar: "African-American residents there had a rate of property ownership five times as great as New Yorkers as a whole."

Landowners in Seneca Village were also able to vote, which led to some African Americans who lived in lower Manhattan buying land in the village to gain suffrage.





# The Tenement Museum's Reclaiming Black Spaces Tour

- (1) Tour starts across Orchard Street from the Tenement Museum.
- (2) Land of the Blacks.
- (3) (3) M'finda Kalunga Community Garden/Second African Burial Ground.
- (4) Elizabeth Jennings Graham.
- (5) Wesley Williams.

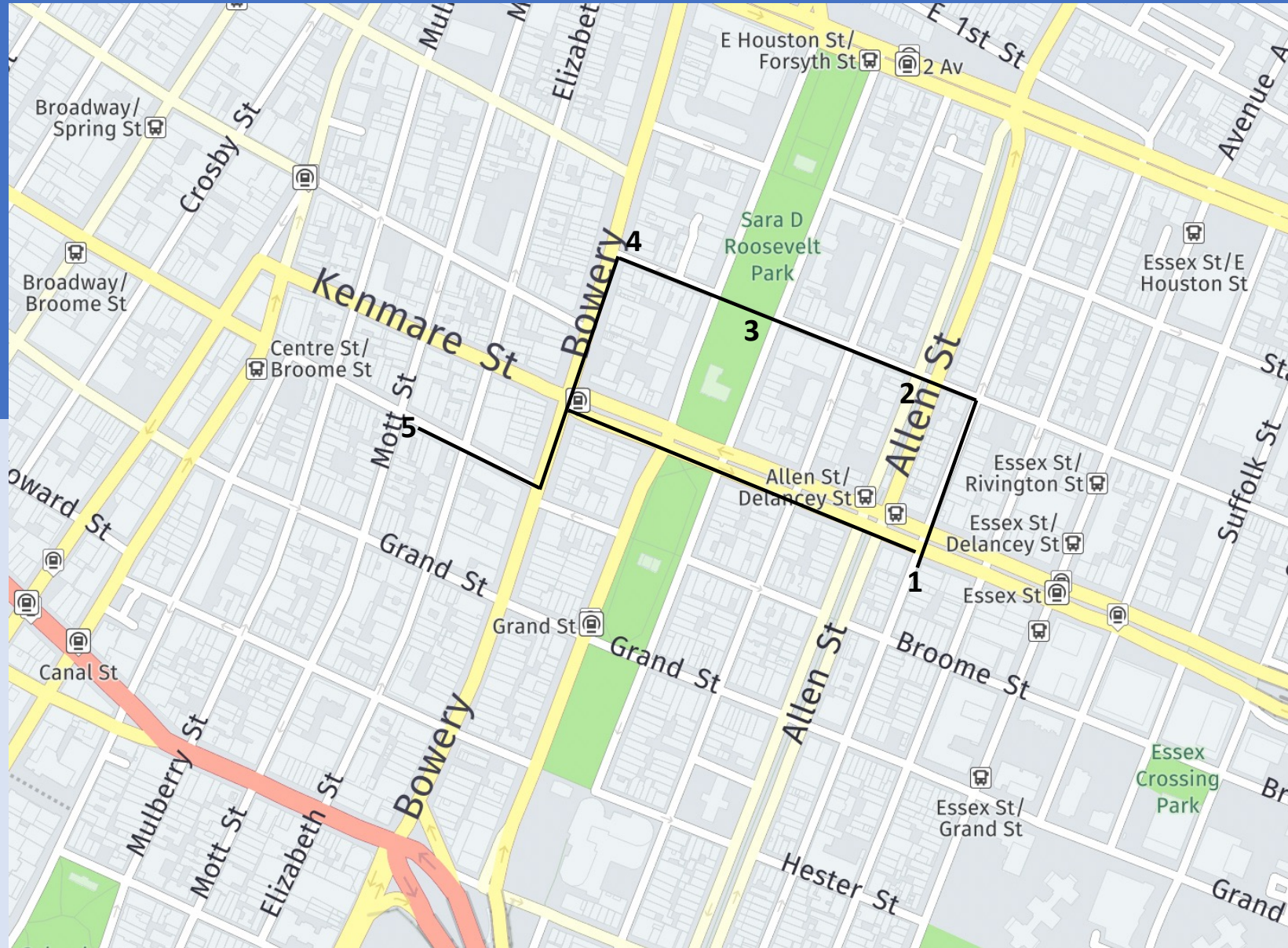






Figure 2: Second building from the right is the former home of Sebastiaen de Britto, who was granted six acres by the Dutch in the Land of the Blacks.



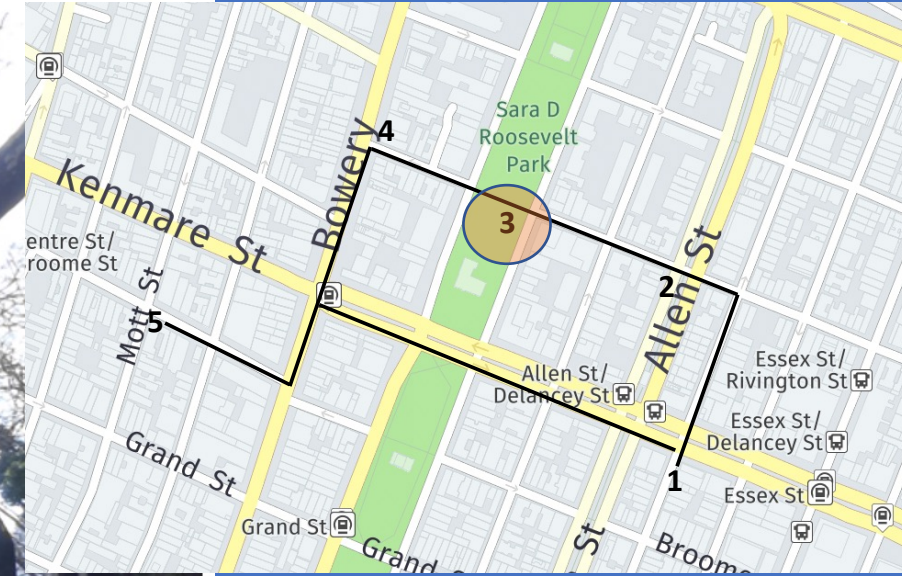


Figure 3: The M'finda Kalunga garden, formerly one of Manhattan's burial grounds for the enslaved.



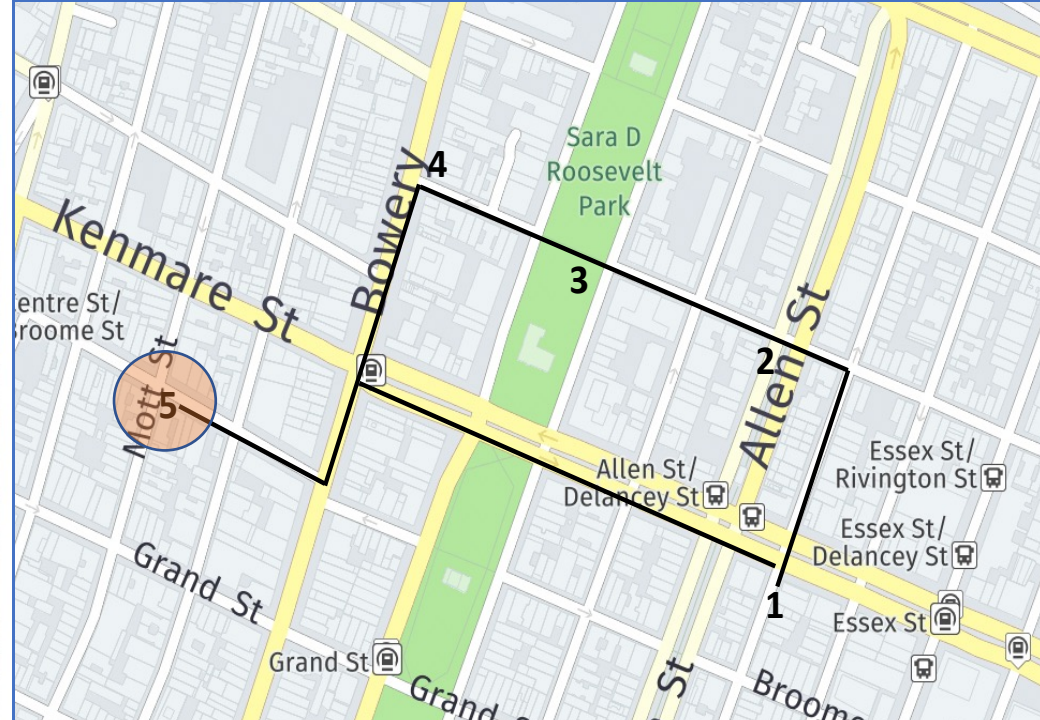


Figure 4: Fire Engine House Number 55



# Free Tours by Foot's Harlem Walking Tour



- (1) Tour starts in front of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- (2) Harlem Hospital.
- (3) Shiloh Baptist Church.
- (4) Planet Harlem mural by Paul Deo.
- (5) The hotel Theresa.
- (6) The Apollo Theater.





Figure 6: Harlem Hospital



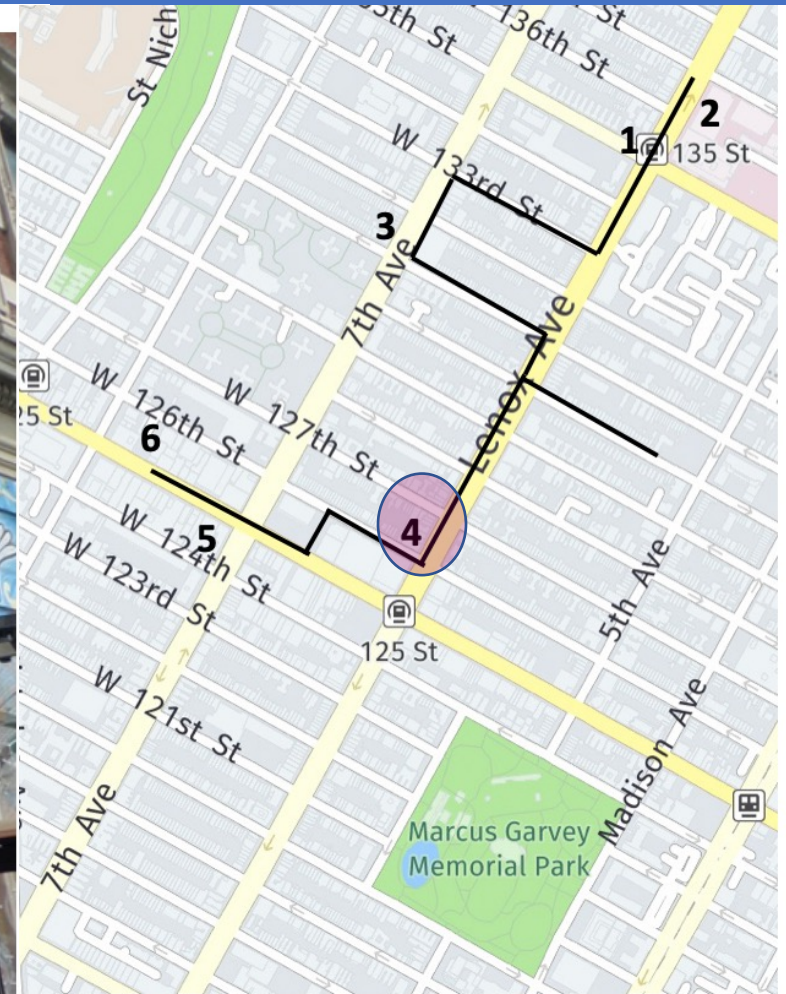


Figure 8: The Planet Harlem mural by Paul Deo





Figure 9: The Hotel Theresa



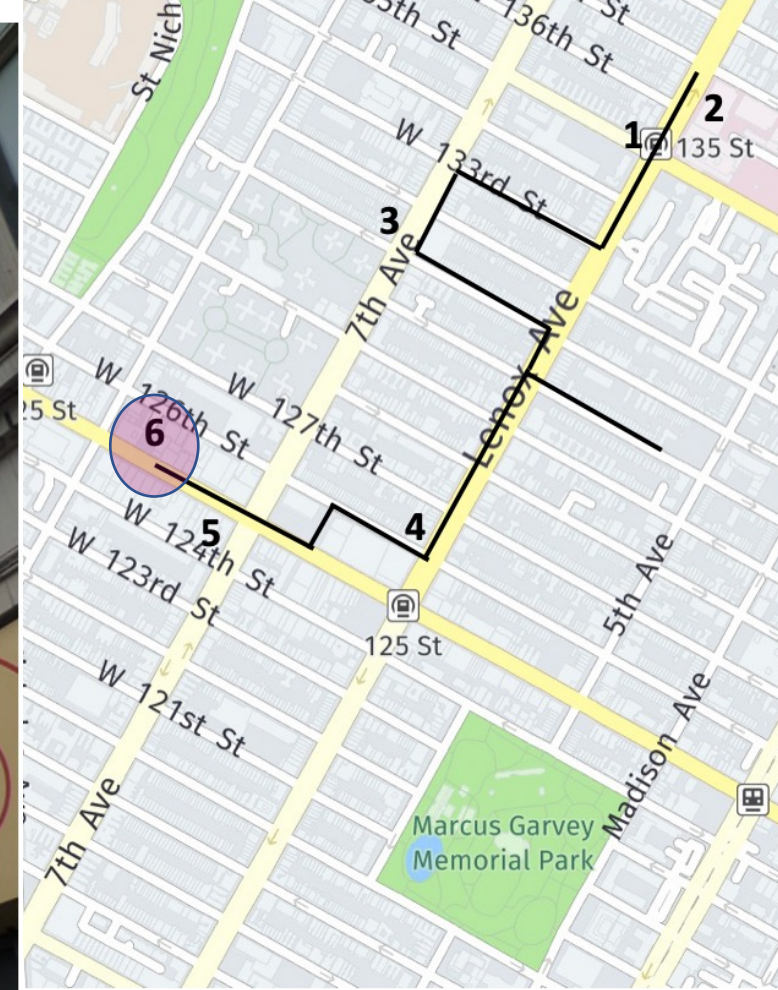
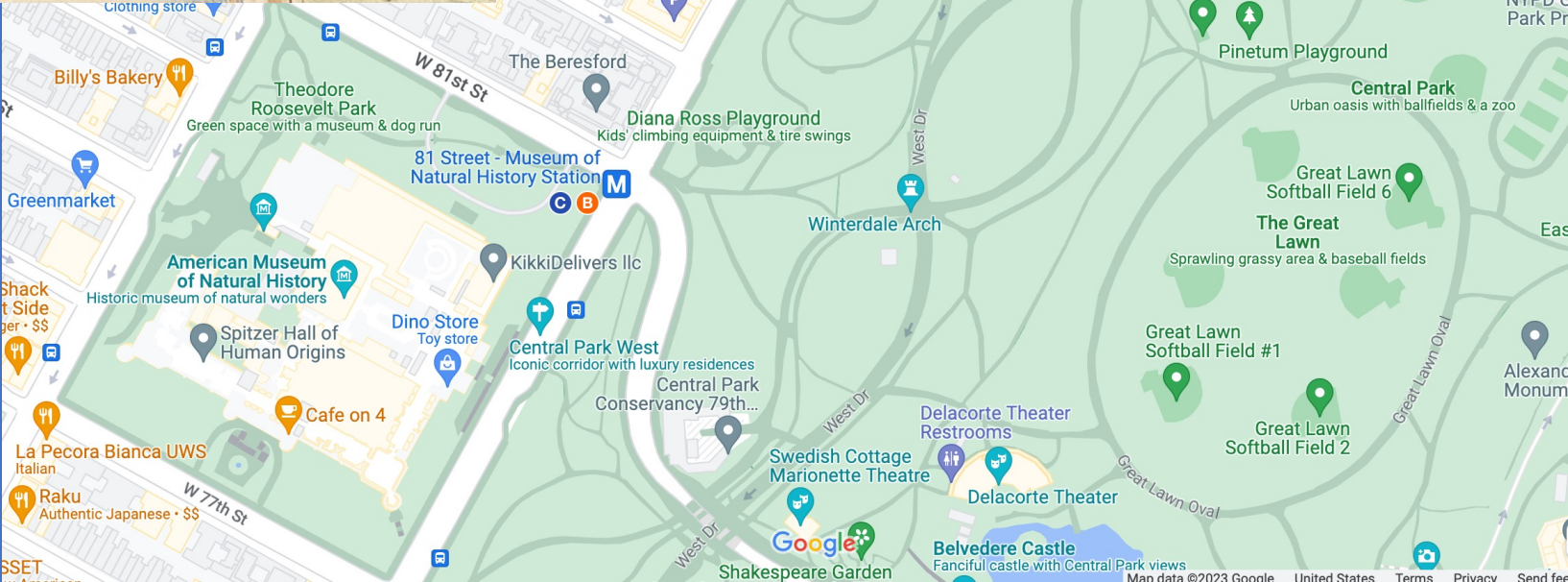
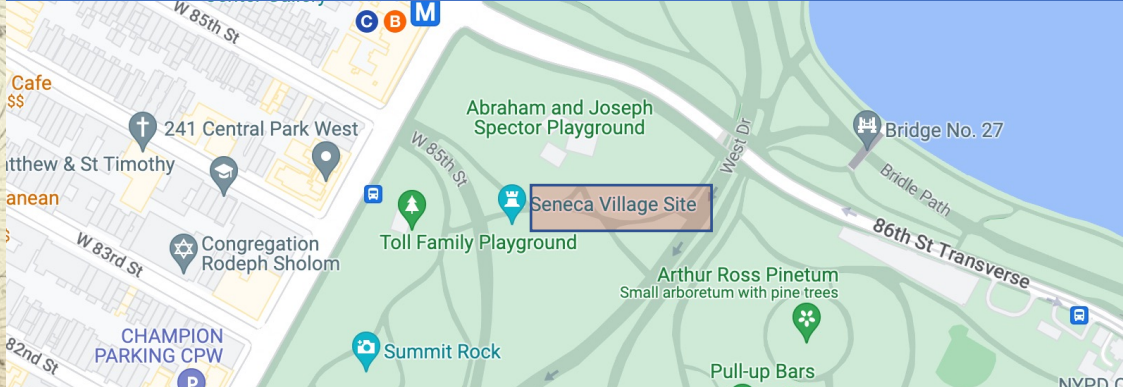
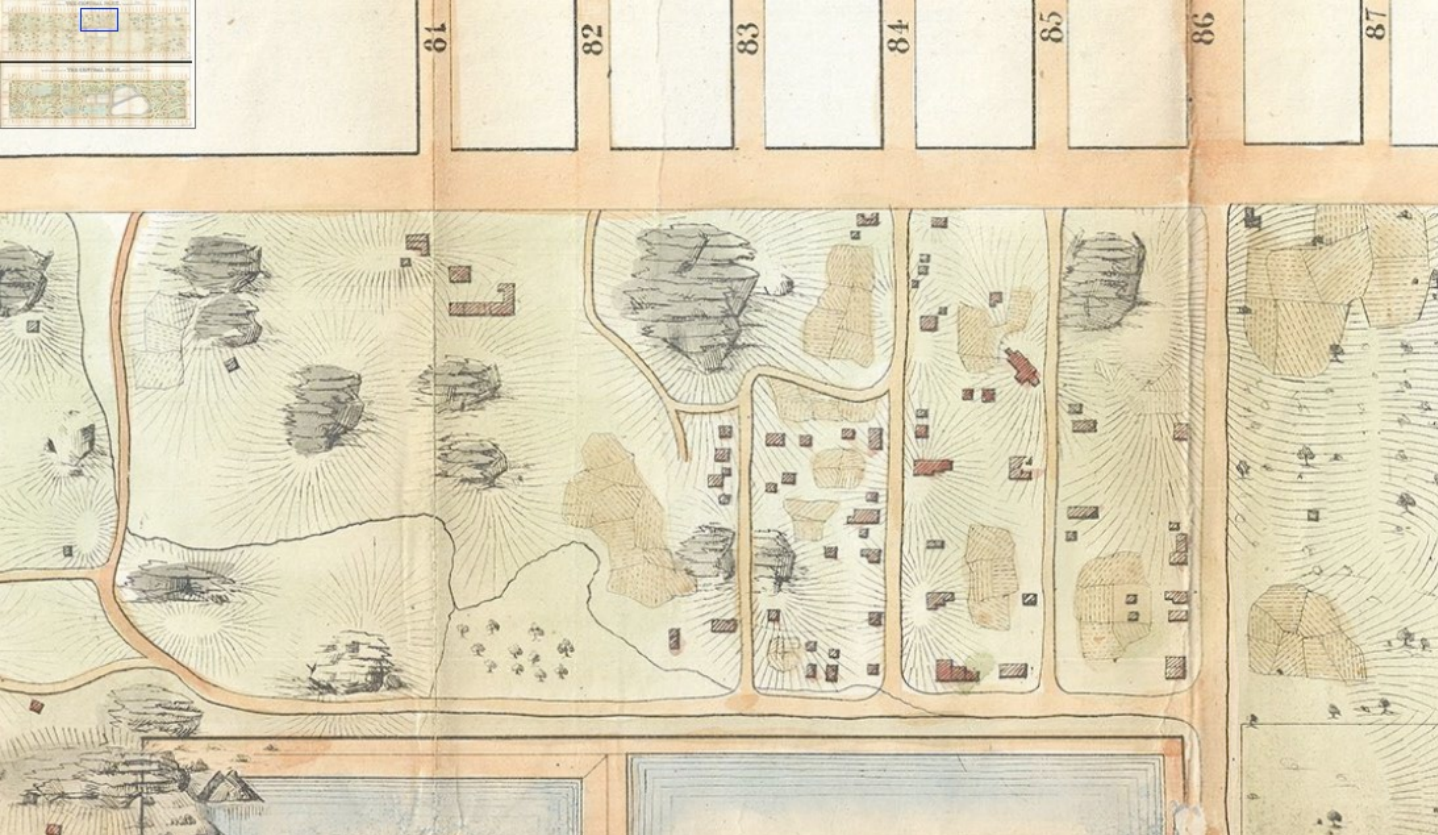


Figure 10: the Apollo Theater







# The Central Park Conservancy's Seneca Village Tour





Landscape is the unity of materiality and representation, constructed out of the contest between various social groups possessing varying amounts of social, economic, and political Power.

Don Mitchell (1996). *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*, page 28.





# Sources

- *African or American?: Black identity and political activism in New York City, 1784-1861.*  
by Leslie M. Alexander
- *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863.*  
by Leslie M. Harris
- *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City.*  
by Carla L. Peterson
- *Before Harlem: The Black Experience in New York City Before World War I.*  
by Marcy S. Sacks
- *Wake: The hidden history of women-led slave revolts.*  
by Rebecca Hall
- *Black Manhattan.*  
by James Weldon Johnson
- *Before Central Park*  
by Sara Cedar Miller
- *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America.*  
by Jonathan Gill
- *Paradise Alley & Strivers Row*  
by Kevin Baker
- *Harlem Shuffle*  
by Colson Whitehead