

## **An Aperture into the Marble Arch**

### I. Introduction

Washington Square Park is known to be one of New York's most densely used greenspaces. Iconic for its white arch, the park has a rich and colorful history. The park serves not only as a public park but as a campus quarters, activist site and an attraction to tourists. I write research with an anthropological approach - its history, tradition, culture and its sprouting to its modern-day park.

### II. Early Establishment and Rule

Lenape tribe Indians originally knew the site of the modern-day park as Minetta, a marshy ground area with plenty of waterfowl and trout. Later on, the stream was long buried and the Dutch West Indian Company immigrated and established a trading post in the lower tip of Manhattan. In order to feed the growing population, in 1642, the director freed a number of slaves and granted them farming land in the area, some of which encompassed the Square, for a portion of the crops. This land was later overtaken by the English to establish English and Dutch owned estates.

Later on, after the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the space was used as a potter's field and burial ground. There were various epidemics that began to plague the city, the most widespread being Yellow Fever. The site was filled in about twenty years. New York's Common Council then decided that after the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the former cemetery would become a parade ground. The decision to make this a parade ground also upraised the value of the surrounding real estate. Still today, there are about 20,000 bodies that can be found along with tombstones under the park.

### III. A Neighborhood

Within a few years, urban development started to come about and a neighborhood started to sprout around the parade ground. New York's University's first home, the Gothic Rival Building, was built and the area slowly became a vibrant and energetic space. Because of its patriotic associations, the parade ground later was given its modern name, Washington Square. Henry James, in his book, *Washington Square*, wrote that the Square had a "riper, richer, more honorable look- the look of having had something of social history."

### IV. Zooming into The Arch

A renowned architect of his time, Stanford White designed the iconic Washington Square Arch. Built in honor of George Washington's inauguration in 1889, the arch was originally built in wood and White placed two of Washington's poses on each side of the arch: *Washington at War* and *Washington at Peace*. It was later commissioned to build the arch in marble in its current location today, half a block away from the original. The sculptor wanted the poses to represent "Fame and Valor" as if he was "watching the maneuvers of his army.

On the West side of the arch with Washington at Peace, there are two figures behind him representing Wisdom and Justice. Wisdom is embodied by the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, Athena. Justice is draped, crowned, and holding a balance scale and an open book. The open book has the words "Exitus acta Probat" meaning "the outcome justifies the dead. This is interesting because the park really has served as a platform for fighting for justice. White designed the arch after the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and

including many other allegorical figures and motifs to bestow a modern yet classical form. Unfortunately, White passed away before he could see the arch fully finished.

#### V. The Fountain and Renovations

The fountain today serves as one of the city's popular gathering places. The arch and the fountain are two of the most prominent and iconic features of Washington Square Park. The fountain marks the center of the square surrounded by the children's play areas, chess and scrabble playing area, and where most of where all the activity takes place.

The fountain had renovations, but it was first built in 1852. The renovation occurred upon the command of Robert Moses because he wanted it to also serve as a wading pool. He also wanted to extend Fifth Avenue through the arch and have the fountain serve as a centrifugal point for cars to turn. However, there was much backlash against this plan. Many of the area residents including Eleanor Roosevelt wanted the park closed to all automobile traffic. The Manhattan borough President then suggested an elevated pedestrian walkway above a four-lane road. The "Save the Square!" battle lasted about seven years. In 1958, in a "ribbon-tying" ceremony, it was announced that the park would officially be free of vehicular traffic.

The fountain today serves as an area where people can soak their feet in at night and a source to cool off during the summer. The fountain still serves as a center for performance space where people can gather to hear songs, watch dances, magic tricks, art, poetry and to engage in political movements.

There have also been other efforts to redesign and transform the park. The true transformation, however, occurred in 1970 when the park was renovated into a plaza with an open ground and trees providing shade. This plaza has served well ever since throbbing with activism and liveliness.

## VI. Culture and Activism

Emerging from a parade ground, The Square slowly became a headquarters for activism. Before the first World War, the square started to evolve into a hub for bohemian artists and writers. Radicals started migrating to Greenwich Village to pursue their and to witness advocacy and social change taking place in its heart. The park was a home to fight for issues such as women's rights, pacifism and workers' exploitation.

The park was also a site for people to gather to show their compassion in times of turmoil and disaster. When the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, one block east of the park, occurred in which 146 immigrant workers passed away, thousands gathered at the park to mourn in tearful processions.

Washington Square Park has also been a home, from its earliest movements, to LGBTQ activists to organize, rally and protest. Many of the earliest rallies would start from Central Park and end in Washington Square Park. June is LGBTQ Pride month where there is always be vibrancy and celebrations in the park for the LGBTQ community.

Just recently, hundreds gathered at the park for International Women's Day. People gathered to be a part of the International Women's Strike where women were encouraged to strike for one hour to demonstrate the impact they have in the workforce.

Advocates used Washington Square Park to plan the strike and as a starting point to march through Lower Manhattan.

## VII. Field Research and Findings

In order to better research and get a feel for the energy and aura of this greenspace for myself, I set out to go to the park and talk some people that were making use of the space. I didn't go with a planned script, but instead with the intention to strike up a conversation to open the flow and to really hear their voices. I wanted to know their personal significance with the park- personal associations, emotional attachment, its meaning to them. There were many findings which I was actually quite shocked to learn. In overview, most of the people I talked to were millennials, typically students or recent graduates.

There was one particular old lady I talked to who seemed to be around 80 or so. She told me that she started coming to the park to look at the Cherry Blossom trees. She had grown up in Brooklyn in a residential area where there was a lot of farmland and not too many trees and she was just really fascinated by the trees. "They're so vibrant and rich and I love looking at them." She said she even talked to the gardeners here to learn more about them. I remember approaching her deliberately because she seemed so please but staring at the blushing pink Cherry Blossoms.

I also talked to two other men who were seated by steps on the west side where there is a platform and a few steps. There were other men skateboarding from this platform, and so I wanted to talk to them and see how they associated with the park. They were quite open to conversation and said that they frequented the park specially to skateboard. They said that

this was like their “playground”. It’s refreshing to see people coming outside in our technology driven world and be active in a communal space like this.

#### VIII. Conclusion

Washington Square Park from its roots as a stream, then cemetery, then residential enclave and now its modern-day park, truly has a rich history. Although because of its real estate values increasing and developers replacing century old townhouse with tall apartment buildings, the historic remembrances will always remain. Washington Square has served as a ground for community to bring people together and offer a sense of belonging.



### **Annotated Bibliography**

"The Top 10 Secrets of the Washington Square Arch in NYC." Untapped Cities. January 24, 2017. Accessed April 25, 2018. <https://untappedcities.com/2016/03/25/the-top-10-secrets-of-the-washington-square-arch-in-nyc/>.

This website provides quick facts about the Washington Square Park arch which gives the reader a quick synopsis of the history of the arch. While most of the facts tell of the arch's history, the site also provides further insightful information about the park such as its rooftop access, architecture, public art interventions and more.

"History." Washington Square Park. Accessed April 27, 2018.

<http://washingtonsquareparkconservancy.org/history/>.

This immensely holistic website provides an overview of information about Washington Square Park. The website is essentially divided into different aspects about the park and provides a brief description about each aspect such as the fountain, renovation, a residential enclave and more.

This site is a good starting point to see which aspects of the park are interesting and which topics to research further.

"History of Washington Square Park |." New York City Food, Culture and Entertainment Guide.

Accessed April 27, 2018. <https://www.newyorktour1.com/blog/untold-nyc-history-washington-square-park/>.

This is a really informative source specifically detailing the history about the park. A holistic approach, this source gives information starting from the nation at war and the birth of the park



to today's counterculture it homes as such a big site for activism. For more political insight, this source is excellent.

"History of the Washington Square Arch & "Exitus Acta Probat"." Washington Square Park

Blog. February 22, 2011. Accessed April 27, 2018.

<http://www.washingtonsquareparkblog.com/2011/02/22/washington-square-arch-exitus-acta-probat-2/>.

An educative article, this source is great for learning more about the historical emergence of the arch in specifics. This article gives insightful views on the carvings of George Washington on the two sides of the arch and their significance. It is also really interesting how the author ties in this historical approach of the war to the theme of justice in the park.

Wilson, Michael. "A Statue Stirs to Life in Washington Square Park." The New York Times.

November 14, 2017. Accessed April 27, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/14/nyregion/a-wall-hanging-stirs-to-life-in-washington-square-park.html>.

This New York Times article was quite humorous because it spoke of a prank that took place in Washington Square Park on tourists. The prank was about a living, walking statue, which are common in Europe. It is refreshing and funny to hear about this prank and visitors' reactions to it.