

Kiah Friedman
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Madison Square Park

Madison Square Park is a public park and plaza located in the Flatiron District. Bordered by numerous historical landmarks, it is one of the most visited and important squares in Manhattan. On a daily basis, the park booms with pedestrians and tourists, meandering through the paths and enjoying the impressive surrounding architecture, or just walking through to get from point A to point B. Filled with lush greenery, adequate seating areas, playgrounds and plenty of nearby retail stores, the park is a very popular spot for both locals and visitors of New York City.

From the time of its creation to present day, the land has been used for many different purposes, including but not limited to being a potter's field, a baseball field, a children's shelter, an army arsenal, and a number of other things.¹ Each time the function of this public space changed, the demographic of who visited the space changed with it. Looking back on the creation of Madison Square Park, the people who visited the space then, and their reasons for visiting are drastically different from those who inhabit the park today.

Analyzing Madison Square Park's numerous historical uses over time plays a huge role in determining the types of people who visited the location in the past and those who visit the park today. In order to do so, conducting research from reputable online sources that share a timeline of the space's different functions is important. Websites mandated by the city through

¹ Lauren Price, "Tracing the Colorful History of Madison Square Park from the 1800s," 6sqft, April 07, 2015, accessed May 02, 2017, <https://www.6sqft.com/tracing-the-colorful-history-of-madison-square-park-back-to-the-1800s/>.

government programs such as the Department of Public Parks and other federal organizations contain trustworthy information on the history of Madison Square Park as well as current programs and information on the park. Through analyzing documents such as censuses, data on the average cost of living in the area, and urban planning blueprints, conclusions can be made on how the demographics of the park have changed throughout the years.

I chose to research Madison Square Park as I am a frequent visitor myself. My personal opinions as to why I enjoy the space so much sparked my curiosity as to why others visit the park, and how it has become a largely popular location. Through direct observation of the area, one could say that its current success is due to the number of restaurants, retail stores, and tourist attractions in the vicinity. This hypothesis made me even more curious as to what factors attracted visitors to this space from its creation to present-day, and how the multiple different functions of the park overtime affected those who visited it.

From 1791 to 1794 the 6.2 acre plot that is present-day Madison Square Park was used as a potter's field, with most corpses coming from the nearby Bellevue Hospital and almshouses. As potter's fields differ from traditional cemeteries in that those buried there are not recognized, there were little to no visitors to the burial ground, with the exception of gravediggers and groundskeepers.² In 1806 the land became an army arsenal and parade ground, used by military personnel to store equipment and practice military drills. Two years following the War of 1812, the land changed its name from Parade Ground to Madison Square, in honor of James Madison, who was president at the time.³

² Reed Tucker, "The hidden cemeteries of NYC," New York Post, October 27, 2014, , accessed May 02, 2017, <http://nypost.com/2014/10/25/the-hidden-cemeteries-of-nyc/>.

³ "A President's Square," Madison Square Park Conservancy, July 14, 2016, , accessed May 03, 2017, <https://www.madisonsquarepark.org/news/mad-sq-history-a-presidents-square>.

Madison Square continued to be used solely by military personnel until 1825, when the land became home to the New York House of Refuge children's shelter. The land was not yet a place that drew attention from pedestrians and visitors. In 1839 the House of Refuge burnt down, and the city decided to turn the land plot into a public park. For the next eight years, the land underwent landscaping, including the ground being leveled, pathways being created, trees and shrubbery being planted, the creation of open lawns, and the installation of benches, fountains, and monuments. The park, encased in a cast-iron fence, finally opened up to the public on May 10th, 1847.

Madison Square Park instantly became popular among locals, as a place to simply relax and enjoy the scenery, but also as a place for public celebration of historical events. Examples of celebrations of historical events that have taken place in Madison Square Park include the 100 year anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1876 and the return of Admiral Dewey in 1899.⁴

The park grew increasingly popular, and by the end of the 19th century was considered one of the most elite neighborhoods in Manhattan. By this time, Madison Square Park was surrounded by luxury hotels and residences, including the Fifth Avenue Hotel, known to accommodate many well-known guests such as Ulysses S. Grant and Edward, the Prince of Wales (see image 1 in the appendix).

Commercial buildings continued to be constructed surrounding the park, attracting a wave of business workers. Some of these now-landmarked buildings are the Metlife Building, the New York State Supreme-Appellate Courthouse, and the famous Flatiron Building (see image

⁴ "Madison Square Park," Madison Square Park Highlights : NYC Parks, , accessed May 03, 2017, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/madison-square-park/history>.

2 in appendix). Restaurants and shops began to border Madison Square Park in large numbers, helping the park maintain its elite status, as the restaurant Delmonico's boasted diners such as Oscar Wilde, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and J.P. Morgan.

By 1990, the park was in need of significant repair on a number of the monuments located inside. The City Parks Foundation took initiative in the "Campaign for the New Madison Square Park," in which the park was not only restored to its former glory, but underwent many upgrades like the addition of a reflecting pool. The popular fast food chain Shake Shack opened in the park in 2004, attracting workers on lunch break, tourists, and pedestrians passing by.⁵

Materialism definitely impacts those who visit the park, as present-day Madison Square Park is surrounded by clothing storefronts, and galleries like Eataly. Today the park features a playground for children, a dog run, many seating areas, pathways, lawns, a Shake Shack, fountains, monument, and a few contemporary art installations.

Observing Madison Square Park today, the people who visit are very diverse. The once elitist neighborhood definitely still has its wealthier patrons, but people from all different backgrounds and social classes join together. It has become a place for business men and women who work in nearby offices to take their lunch break, a place for homeless people to seek refuge on a park bench, a place for families to bring their children to play and walk their dogs, and a major tourist attraction for those seeking to enjoy a beautiful outdoor park surrounded by historical buildings (see image 3 in appendix).

⁵ Lauren Price, "Tracing the Colorful History of Madison Square Park from the 1800s," 6sqft, April 07, 2015, accessed May 02, 2017, <https://www.6sqft.com/tracing-the-colorful-history-of-madison-square-park-back-to-the-1800s/>.

Overall, Madison Square Park's function has changed a numerous amount of times since its creation. With each time the park's use has changed, the type, amount, and frequency of visitors has changed as well, ultimately leading it to be the famously successful public park that we know to be booming with people today.

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Appendix

Image 1

Fifth Avenue Hotel⁶



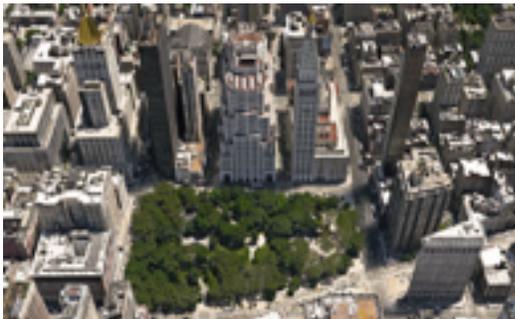
Image 2

Flatiron Building⁷



Image 3

Aerial View of Present-Day Madison Square Park⁸



⁶ Lauren Price, "Tracing the Colorful History of Madison Square Park from the 1800s," 6sqft, April 07, 2015, , accessed May 02, 2017, <https://www.6sqft.com/tracing-the-colorful-history-of-madison-square-park-back-to-the-1800s/>.

⁷ "AD Classics: Flatiron Building / Daniel Burnham," ArchDaily, February 02, 2011, , accessed May 03, 2017, <http://www.archdaily.com/109134/ad-classics-flatiron-building-daniel-burnham>.

⁸ Lauren Price, "Tracing the Colorful History of Madison Square Park from the 1800s," 6sqft, April 07, 2015, , accessed May 02, 2017, <https://www.6sqft.com/tracing-the-colorful-history-of-madison-square-park-back-to-the-1800s/>.