Archiving the City: Power, Imagination, and the Commissioners' Plan of 1811

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Prologue: Bolts and Vegetables

How ironic, I mutter to myself. New York's street gridded plan, my chosen topic for an Archives & Narratives graduate course at Fordham University, is seemingly breadth with manuscripts, collections, and documents, yet I find myself agonizing over two seemingly inconsequential mysteries. As I make my way to downtown Manhattan after disappointingly leaving the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room in the New York Public Library, I again think; how ironic.

Both mysteries involve John Randel, a surveyor, cartographer, civil engineer, and *de facto* leader of the 19th century planning initiative, but the similarities end there. The first mystery involves Randel, an old woman, and an incident of vegetable throwing. The second, once again features Randel, but this time Central Park and metal bolts are the components of the puzzle. Both mysterious propel me out of the historical societies, and libraries, and into the gridded streets of Manhattan.

Part 1: The Plan, the Archives, and an 'Estimable Old Women'

Introduction

In this article, I examine the ways in which Manhattan's grid street plan of 1811 has been narrated, archived, and remembered. To do this, I examine specific

collections and manuscripts, but I also question and problematize how this information is made available for consumption. As my archival endeavors evolve, my interests shift from frantically collecting the documents of the commissioners, to a different set of sources – those who resisted the plan, and I question why these specific sources have been left out of the official narrative.

Before Manhattan's gridded streets, the tip of the island of was a knot of fragmented streets shaped by local conditions lacking a unifying order. The upper part of the island was a combination of farms, country roads, and the unknown.[1] At the start of the 19th century, as streets emerged as a necessity for the global and rational metropolis, the city began building accordingly. An 1803 ruling condemned streets that "served only their private advantage, without a just regard for the welfare of others, and to the almost total neglect of public convenience and general usefulness."[2] This precedent laid the groundwork for the Common Council (the City Council of its time) to appoint Gouverneur Morris, John Rutherfurd, and General Simeon De Witt as "Commissioners of Streets and Roads." The inaugural assignment the three men were given was momentous; design a plan for the controlled growth of a young, expanding, metropolis.[3]

In 1807 the commissioners appointed John Randel, Jr. as their secretary and surveyor. Randel

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[1] Hillary Ballon, ed., *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011* (New York: Columbia University Press).
[2] Ballon, *The Greatest Grid.*
[3] Artis Wright, "Designing the City of New York: The Commissioners' Plan of 1811," New York Public Library, last modified July 30, 2010, https://www.nypl.org/blog/2010/07/30/designing-city-new-york-commissioners-plan-1811.

had the task of drafting and executing the street grid plan for Manhattan, which, the commissioners contended, "Appeared to be the best; or, in other and more popular terms, attended with the least inconvenience."[4] In March 1811, Randel submitted three hand-drawn manuscript surveys, each nearly nine feet long. These surveys have been called "a work of genius," by Thomas G. Lannon, an assistant curator of the New York Public Library, with the maps still archived in the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs.

The second half of this article hopes to add to the ongoing academic dialogue concerning the "city as an archive."[5] I dispute the view that archival sites must be municipal buildings and libraries, and instead argue urban spaces can and should be counted as an archive. Using the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 as a real and symbolic guide, I examine how state and social power has been negotiated, contested, archived, remembered, and confirmed within an urban context. Finally, to experience the city as an archive is to be mobile, with walking as perhaps its most essential mode. Keeping with this, research will be interspersed with my own experiences and interactions as a both a city dweller and archivist.

My aim is not to historicize Manhattan's gridded street plan. There is already an abundance of wonderful scholarship dedicated to this cause. Rather, this article is interested in how historical production is facilitated and focuses on the relationship between state power, memory, and the city. The Commissioners' Plan of 1811 can best be thought of then, as a device used examine these themes.

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[4] Sam Roberts, "No Hero in 1811, Street Grid's Father Was Showered With Produce, Not Praise," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/21/nyregion/21randel.html.
[5] Vyjayanthi Rao, "Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive," *New Literary History* 40, no. 2 (2009); Michael Sheringham and Richard Wentworth, "City as Archive: A Dialogue between Theory and Practice," *Cultural Geographies* 23, no. 3 (July 2016).

The framework applied is inspired by the work of Ann Stoler, Michel Rolph-Trouillot's *Silencing the Past,* Foucault's concepts on power, and Edward's queer practice of the archive, among several other noted scholars of knowledge production and historical narration.

The Plan

The plan most commonly referred to as the "Commissioners' Plan of 1811," is often highlighted as marking a significant turning point in the age of the city and modern urbanism. Although the merits of the 1811 grid as a design have been debated, just about all scholars agree it is the city's foundational act of planning and is crucial to its identity. These documents largely informed the commissioners' original design for the streets of Manhattan above Houston Street and below 155th Street, which put in place the rectangular grid plan of streets and avenues.[6]

Ruthless Utilitarianism

There was nothing new about grids. City planners have used them for thousands of years and they were deployed throughout the American colonies, from small New England towns to much larger urban centers. What *was* new about Manhattan's plan was its "ruthless utilitarianism" and its designation as the first large-scale act of eminent domain in the city's history.[7] The city commissioners brazenly used this legal maneuver to

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[6] Reuben Skye Rose-Redwood, "Mythologies of the Grid in the Empire City, 1811-2011," *Geographical Review* 101, no. 3 (2011): 396.
[7] Edwin Burrows, *A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 420.

take land, and swindled proprietors to pay for the paving of the new roads. Money for the lost property was weighed against an estimate of how much the value of the surrounding property would increase once the new roads were paved. In many cases, landowners (and their tenants) lost property and owed the government money in the final tally.[8] The physical force unleashed during the implementation of the grid has been compared to a military campaign, with the aggressors being "the armies of street openers and . . . builders." This military analogy presupposes a victim—or at least an enemy—that the aggressors ultimately defeat despite any resistance they may encounter.[9]

The plan displaced countless nineteenth-century New Yorkers and generations of Manhattanites were affected. Some fifty years after Randel submitted the manuscript surveys, the *New York Times* estimated that 20,000 squatters lived in Manhattan. Patches of the island north of 57th Street were covered in wooden shacks, built largely by immigrants unable to find affordable housing in the gridded and developed downtown.[10] Squatters displaced by the grid plan experienced a cycle of eviction and resettlement, moving from the site of Central Park to the east side, then the west side and the north end of the island. During the mid-19th century, writers typically described the poor as sinful and uncivilized nuisances, but by the end of the century, when urban development covered the island, journalists began to write nostalgically about "shantytown." For the city's squatters, however, there was nothing romantic about the loss and destruction of their homes, and

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[8] Burrows, *A History of New York City*, 420.
[9] Reuben Syke Rose-Redwood, "Re-Creating the Historical Topography of Manhattan Island," *Geographical Review* 93, no. 1 (2003): 124.
[10] Lisa Goff, *Shantytown, USA: Forgotten Landscapes of the Working Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 2016), 151.

they resisted their evictions with protest and aggressions.[11]

Despite displacement and evictions, the master narrative of the Manhattan grid has been presented as a total and complete victory of enlightenment ideals and rationality over the archaic and unscientific. For instance, The *Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811–2011*, an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, hails itself as the most in-depth examination of this subject. It describes the grid as “the city’s first great civic enterprise and a vision of brazen ambition” and asserts “the 1811 plan is a plainspoken but highly heroic statement.”[12] Several other exhibitions, and numerous other historical works echo these sentiments. But narratives are never definite, and the story of Manhattan’s street plan is not as simple as the triumph of order over chaos. Gridded streets were used to increase real estate values, and planners used state-sanctioned eminent domain powers to enforce their vision of the city.

The Archives

Reconstructing the archival narrative of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811 presents unique challenges. For one thing, most key documents involving the grid are topographic maps and logbooks. The two key documents scholars have used to narrate the Manhattan's gridded streetscape are *The Appointment of the Commissioners* (1807) and *Remarks of the Commissioners* (1811).[13] The

[11] Goff, *Shantytown*, 151.
[12] Hillary Ballon, ed., *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011* (New York: Columbia University Press).
[13] Transcription of The Appointment of the Commissioners, April 3, 1807. Digitized copy can be found at

former touches on the laying out of Streets and Roads in the City of New York and is housed at the New York State Archives. In the latter, which is stored in New York State Office of General Services, the state-appointed street commissioners explained the economic "convenience and utility"[14] were their primary motivations for choosing the grid plan.

Tucked away in the reserved corners of the New York Public Library and New-York Historical Society, I begin to pour over the notes and field books of John Randel other leaders of the plan. Rare book rooms and appointment-only consultations add to the allure of the archive, to borrow from Farge, as if these privileged spaces contain locked away secrets of the past not meant to be consumed by the public. I painstakingly flip the pages of the commissioners' manuscript report looking for insight. I request more and more documents related to the plan. But in midst of this frenzied approach to research, I recall the words of Ann Stoler; "the mining of the *content* of government commissions, reports, and other archival sources rarely pays attention to their peculiar placement and *form*.[15] The archival approach I was pursuing, this frantic hoarding of documents, did not allow for critical analysis or thought. Trouillot touches on this when he describes historical positivism saying "the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative."[16] But historical narratives and archives are

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http://thegreatestgrid.mcny.org/greatest-grid/key-documents/58. Transcription of the Remarks of the Commissioners, March 22, 1811. Digitized copy can be found at http://urbanplanning.library.cornell.edu/DOCS/nyc1811.htm.

[14] Remarks of the Commissioners, 1811.

[15] Ann Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1-2 (2002): 1.

[16] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the*

always about power. Afterall, they can decide which stories are told and which are marginalized. Through archives, the past is controlled and the present and future is contested. This represents a tremendous amount of power over shared memory, a collective past, and a modern society.[17] It is then the responsibility of the historian to track how some narratives emerge as dominant while others get silenced in the process of historical production.

By franticly collecting the written documents, maps, and manuscripts of the commissioners I was following a script that has been normalized by the routine repetition of past practice in the discipline. I would never find the marginalized in this way. The archive of the state is neither neutral nor impartial. They are established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. At this moment my methodological approach changes. I begin to look for counter-narratives to the story of the Commissioners' Plan of 1811. Who resisted the plan? Why have their stories been excluded from the dominant narrative?

The Archival 'Turn'

Before delving into a discussion on resistance to the 1811 plan, it seems appropriate to briefly examine some of the flashpoints of academic thought involving the concepts of the archive. Archives have traditionally been thought of as apolitical brick and mortar spaces where documents deemed to have some historical significances are housed and organized, usually by the government or

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Production of History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 5.

[17] Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1-2 (2002): 1.

other institutions. This definition of the archive surfaced as manifestations of centralized power and enlightened ideals. As such, older forms of preserving historical memory lost credibility to the written document.[18] But since the cultural turn, the concept of archiving has changed. The shift from archive-a-source to archive-as-subject owes much to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. For Foucault, archives are not the "the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents, attesting to its own past" or is "the library of libraries." Foucault sees the "archive" as a figurative social construct upon which to view knowledge, memory, power, and societal ills.[19] Derrida adds to the view of archiving as a theoretical field with *Archive Fever*. Derrida also points out human emotion and feeling in archiving, saying "the archaization produces as much as it records the event."[20]

Scholars who approach the archive with the most apprehension tend to be those interested in the histories of (nonelite) women, slaves, peasants, colonized populations, and other marginalized actors who until recently did not get to produce written sources with their views on themselves and events around them. Instead of reading sources verbatim, these historians engage the archive more analytically, emphasizing the interpretative nature of analysis and inspecting not just the content of documents but also their form. This type of framework has (broadly) been called reading 'against the grain.'

Resistance to the Grid & Counter-Narratives

Reinvigorated, I returned to the archive. Seeking to

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[18] Maria Martinez, "Archives, Bodies, and Imagination: The Case of Juana Aguilar and Queer Approaches to History, Sexuality, and Politics," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 165.
[19] This is fleshed out by Foucault in *The Archeology of Knowledge*.
[20] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

foreground displaced and silenced nineteenth-century Manhattanites in the record, I consulted librarians and archivists alike trying to find dissenters to the use of eminent domain. I request *A Plain Statement, Addressed to The Proprietors of Real Estate*, housed at The New-York Historical Society by Clement Clarke Moore. In the manuscript, Moore ridicules Randel and the triad of commissioners. Moore comments in the 1818 pamphlet, "Nothing is to be left unmolested which does not coincide with the street-commissioner's plummet and level. These are men who would have cut down the seven hills of Rome."[21] Moore was born into a small fortune and doubled it by investing in real estate. He was also a poet and penned the *'Twas the Night before Christmas* poem. Next, I am steered towards the notes of John Jacob Astor, who loathed the seizure of private property and called it the "evil."[22] But these men spoke out against the plan from a position of immense wealth and privilege. The notion of using these sources as counter-narratives rings false.

The story of New York's Street gridded plan has been told as the triumph of order over chaos. But so far, the only archival remnants of detractors are the rich and powerful. What of the records of the subaltern? Of the poor and displaced? What of the tenants and renters in downtown Manhattan? Do they exist? Perhaps inspired by Ghosh who combed the archives for traces of the Indian slave he had come across by accident, I continue to look through the notes of the wealthy hoping for the same outcome, but to no avail. Besides the fabulously wealthy, resistors have not been included in this narrative.

Vegetables and an 'Estimable Old Woman'

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[21] Clement Clarke Moore, *A Plain Statement, Addressed to the Proprietors of Real Estate, in the City and County of New-York: By a Landholder* (New York, 1818).

[22] Gerard Koeppel, *City on a Grid: How New York Became New York* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2015), 151.

Feeling disillusioned, I halfheartedly scan Gerard Koepal's *City on a Grid* (2015) and a throwaway passage piques my interest:

> Many likely apocryphal stories about physical aggression have been passed down through the years, perhaps founded in truth but embellished with time, such as the surveyors' supposed retreat from a barrage of cabbages and artichokes hurled by "an estimable old woman" who objected to men running a line through her kitchen.[23]

Fascinated, I turn to Koepal's notes and see the story is from Martha J. Lamb's 1877 text *The History of the City of New York.* Lamb was a New England raised writer who in 1883 *purchased The Magazine of American History* and became its editor. But before this, she had published dozens of fiction, nonfiction, and historical works. I immediately delve into a digitalized copy of *The History of the City of New York,* and there she was…a briefly mentioned and nameless vegetable hurler. But who was this "estimable old woman" (Koepal uses this phrase, lifting it from Lamb) that courageously threw food at Randel and his underlings? After dedicating a substantial amount of time looking for the archival evidence of the poor and working-class, had I finally located a subject to foreground historically? And how did Lamb come to know learn about this episode in the first place? But in searching manuscripts, digitized collections, other writings on the period, I only found recitations of the same story. The only new information I could gather was she had sold vegetables for a living as well. The further papers of Martha J. Lamb are also not of any help. A once promising lead turns to disappointment.[24]

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[23] Koeppel, *City on a Grid*, 102.
[24] A digitized copy of *The History of the City of New York* can be found

Many writers of history have conflated oral histories, and particularly *gendered* oral histories with unreliability and skepticism. Koepal clearly thinks this way calling the episode "apocryphal." Not surprisingly, both the vegetable hurler and Martha Lamb are women. While the traditional archive has overlooked poor elderly women, by counting oral traditions as an archive this voice might be foregrounded. By expanding the metaphorical archive to include spoken traditions more voices would be heard.

The Archivist's Dilemma

The problems posed by the archive are not unique to a sociocultural historian of nineteenth-century New York. When engaged in scholarship on underrepresented populations, on the marginalized, the othered, the poor, the gendered, and ethnic minorities, many historians have struggled to give voice to silences. Scholars of Atlantic slavery especially speak of a desire to know the unknowable, fill the gaps, and rewrite historical narratives. As Jennifer L. Morgan says, the social historian recognizes that their "scholarship is about more than simply the commitment to writing history but is also fueled by a sense that through correcting archival erasures we are poised to make a much more important intervention, one in which endemic wrongs are righted."[25] To be clear, it would be utterly distasteful to compare the plight of working class nineteenth-century Manhattanites with victims of chattel slavery, but nevertheless I do feel some desire to foreground this elderly woman in history. She who had bravely resisted state enforced property seizures by

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at https://archive.org/details/ldpd_6499144_000/page/n11. Collections can be found at https://asteria.fivecolleges.edu/findaids/sophiasmith/mnsss39.html.

[25] Jennifer L. Morgan, "Archives and Histories of Racial Capitalism: An Afterword," *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (December 2015): 155.

vegetables. But the written documents simply do not exist.

Part II: The City as an Archive

Randel's Bolts

After John Randel submitted his plan in 1811, the young surveyor set out to inscribe the grid throughout Manhattan. Randel resurveyed the island with instruments of his own invention, placing wooden stakes or pegs at every one of the more than fifteen hundred planned intersections. Once done with that task, his crew set about replacing the pegs with more sturdy markers. At some fifteen hundred and fifty intersections, according to Randel's notes, when he would encounter bedrock or boulder, he placed iron bolts to mark his spot. As the city extended up the island, these bolts seemed to have been destroyed as the terrain was transformed.[26]

In 2004, using John Randel's original maps, a team of geographers and professional excavators combed through Central Park looking for remnants of the plan. It has long been suspected that the 1811 Commissioners' Plan was set to include the famous park, but as the grid expanded, some prominent New Yorkers increasingly called for open grounds, which resulted in the Greensward competition and the creation of Central Park.[27] Despite the long odds, an iron bolt, partially destroyed, but plainly set in a bed of lead was found by the team. Fearing desecration, the exact location of John Randel's bolt has not been revealed to the public, although the allure of the bolt has created a thriving online community of amateur historians dedicated to finding it.

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[26] Marguerite Holloway, *The Measure of Manhattan: The Tumultuous Career and Surprising Legacy of John Randel Jr., Cartographer, Surveyor, Inventor* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2014), 200.
[27] Holloway, *The Measure of Manhattan*, 200.

Memory and Power

Before delving into a headier discussion on the city as an archive, it is important to briefly discuss memory and power in a modern metropolis. While there can be no one framework for understanding the complexities of the city, the importance of collective memory cannot be overlooked. Collective memory, identified as a legitimate aspect of memory studies by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, is a social phenomenon that refers specifically to a group's recollection of the past in the present.[28] History, memory, and power are strongly intertwined in the public realm, informing our understandings of the past. In a modern metropolis, symbols of power are common and plain to see. City centers for instance, are filled with presidential monuments, statues of war heroes, and other permanent sites of commemoration, emphasizing a shared past and collective victory. But public spaces infused with the symbolic power of national ideologies have also become fertile ground for groups looking to challenge authority. It is no surprise that a wide array of groups, from Civil Rights organizations to white nationalists have gathered at key spaces of collective memory to link their movements with preexisting national symbols and lay claim to the power of the state.[29]

The scholar of the archive and the historian interested in memory face many of the same challenges. They both attempt to document what has been remembered and what has been forgotten. What memories are ultimately made visible do not randomly emerge, rather they result from decisions and actions embedded within and constrained by

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[28] For more on this see Halbwach's *On Collective Memory*.

[29] Kevin Loughran, Gary A. Fine, and Anthony Hunter, "Urban Spaces, City Cultures, and Collective Memories," in the *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (London: Taylor and Frances Inc., 2015), 199.

society. [30] The landscape and order of contemporary Manhattan reminds us that the grid was not a natural or pre-ordained condition; the city we experience today is a direct result of brazen state enforcement by way of 19th century eminent domain practices. In this sense, the physical space New Yorkers exist in is both a real and symbolic representation of state power. State power is constantly produced and reproduced through the workings of everyday life in Manhattan.

The City as an Archive

To be an archivist is to explore, and to experience the *city* as an archive is to be mobile, with walking perhaps its most essential act. Leaving the Brooke Russell Astor Reading Room in the New York Public Library, I decide to wander the streets of Manhattan seeking inspiration, and perhaps even to try my luck at finding the bolt in Central Park. After all, the grid is not just ingrained in the physical fabric of the city; it is also the systems and people moving through it, even if they are doing so unconsciously. While walking, I recall the words of Trouillot, "history is the fruit of power, but power that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots."[31] When considering The Commissioners' plan, power can be found in the way the story has been archived and narrated, but it is also in its surreptitiousness. Put another way, the paved avenues and streets of Manhattan are reminders of the invisibility of state power.

I find myself in Columbus Park, in what used to be considered Five Points area. Nineteenth-century Five Points is precisely what the grid commissioners were trying

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[30] Reuben Rose-Redwood, et al., "Collective Memory and the Politics of Urban Space: An Introduction," *GeoJournal* 73, no. 3 (2008): 161.
[31] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 20.

to avoid. Their orderly future city of right angles is the opposite of what developed at the notorious, crime and immigrant infused Five Points. But the abominable intersection (hence the 'five points' moniker) lost its points long ago: all that is left is Worth Street (now continuing to the east) with Baxter angling in from the north down to Worth and stopping there. Mosco, the old Cross Street, crosses nothing; it is just a single block long and severed from Worth and Baxter.[32] For those who saw the commissioners' grid as rigid, the vibrant and ear-piercing Five Points was a symbol of how Manhattan might have developed organically. Although just about everything in the neighborhood has changed over the years, while walking through what used to be the Five-Points area, I find myself inexplicably lost in thought and imagination.

To describe a city– its physical and material urban fabric – as an 'archive' is not a far-reaching concept. The archeological evidence of the past, the graffiti, the monuments, historic buildings, the plaques, are evident in an urban space. But wandering the city as I am, allows for a certain imaginative quality that defies temporal and spatial boundaries. I am indescribably able to picture the elderly vegetable peddler clearly. I imagine both her life and her food throwing incident. Perhaps the episode even occurred in the wild Five Points area, not far from where I am walking. The energy and euphoria of the city can give you a feeling that you are in contact with the past, much like an archivist who comes across a dusty scrapbook. I cannot know any details about her of course, but her plight is clearer to me than it ever would be in private reading room.

Still deep in thought, I recall what Brent Edwards dubs the *queer practice of the archive*, "an approach to the material preservation of the past that deliberately aims to retain what is elusive, what is hard to pin down, what can't

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[32] Koeppel, *City on a Grid*, 11.

quite be explained."[33] This concept is apropos for this discussion, with one variation; when dealing with the *city* as an archive, the elusiveness and 'what can't quite be explained' is not the material preservation, but a sensual almost euphoric awakening and the power to imagine. Yes, cities are indeed a form of archive –but not only in an architectural and physical sense, but also in the feelings they evoke. In this way, the city as an archive becomes a deeply personal form of archival collecting.

Urban imagination as an archival tool relies heavily on speculation. Is this academically unethical? Worse yet, by romanticizing the lives of those displaced and evicted by Manhattan's street grid plan, do we underscore the fact that their lives and experiences *can't* be reclaimed? This is something Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts* engages with. The essay calls for "critical fabulation," which means a way of writing an impossible story to "amplify the impossibility of its telling." [34] I would not suggest my idea of urban imaginative speculation should replace empirical documentation; rather, that these two realms might work in unison. In sum, we imagine the elderly vegetable peddler only to emphasize the gaps in the traditional archive and highlight impassibleness of telling her story, not simply to fabricate historical events.

Central Park

After spending months researching the Commissioners' Plan of 1811, I am driven to wander Central Park to try to locate the mysterious bolt. So, on an exceptionally peaceful day I walk the park and think about my archival endeavors. Through the foliage, brush, and trees, the sounds and sights

[33] Brent Hayes Edwards, "The Taste of the Archive," *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (2012): 944.

[34] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26, no. 26 (2008): 3.

of the city begin to recede. Once again, as I had done in Columbus Park, I imagine life before the grid. After all, the hills and rocks of the park are reminiscing of Manhattan's topography before the plan. Something peculiar happens just then, perhaps triggered by the serene landscape: I lose interest in the bolt. What would locating the object accomplish? After all, would this frantic collecting, free of analysis, be a return to how I started archival adventures? The imaginative energy of the city makes it an archive, not a singular metal bolt. I decide to abandon my search and enjoy Central Park instead.

Conclusion

With its standardized city blocks and rectilinear street layout, New York's grid plan has come to epitomize the triumph of rationality over chaos. This narrative relies almost extensively on a recitation of the remarks, documents, and manuscripts of John Randel and the commissioners. In using eminent domain, the plan displaced countless nineteenth-century New Yorkers and affected generations of Manhattanites, but these lives exist outside of the official archive. This article adds to the view of archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval, but of knowledge production. By considering the power dynamics and silencing effects involved in the collection, organization, and use of written sources, historians can challenge ingrained societal norms and codes. I have tried to find the poor, the marginalized, and the displaced in the official record but to no avail. My search for counter-narratives also ended with disappointment, which led me to walk the gridded streets of Manhattan.

The city is indeed a form of archive. This archive includes graffiti, monuments, historic

buildings, and plaques, and other contested sites of power. But the euphoric energy of the city encourages us to imagine past lives. This imaginative quality defies temporal and spatial boundaries. In this way, we can break the wheel of the traditional archive and emphasize gaps.