

A Timeline of Park History and Design

Early History



In 1636, the Dutch governor, Wouter Van Twiller, granted 62 acres to Roeloff and Annetje Jans as a farm, but Roeloff died the next year. (The 62 acres are almost precisely today's Tribeca, top left.) Annetje then married the somewhat famous Everardus Bogardus, second minister of the Reformed Dutch Church of New Amsterdam, renamed the Dominie's Bouwerie, or "The Minister's Farm." In 1670 Governor Francis Lovelace bought the farm; in 1672, the Dutch briefly retook Manhattan, but the English got it back in 1674. The farm was confiscated from Lovelace by the Duke of York, for whom the whole city is named. In 1705 the royal family (by this point, York's daughter, Anne, was queen) gave the farm to Trinity Church, making it the gigantic landlord of lower Manhattan which it still is today. For the next hundred and fifty years the Bogardus family did try to regain title, unsuccessfully. Thus, it was that "Trinity Lower Farm" owned the tiny chunk of Duane Street that became our park.

1794



As the city laid out the streets of the neighborhood in 1794, Duane St. turned out to be inconveniently wide at the point where it intersected a grid with a slightly different axis. The triangle that occurred was too small for building, too big for a street. Three years later, this tiny remnant of Trinity Church's "Lower Farm" tract became Duane Park.

- Duane Street named for James Duane, a leading figure in the Revolutionary War, delegate to the constitutional convention, judge of the United States District Court, and first mayor of New York after independence.

1797

City purchased the land from Trinity Church for \$5.00

- Duane Park created and set aside as public park
- 1804 planted with a formal garden with triangular and circular beds ornamented with trees and enclosed by an iron fence.

1811

The Commissioner's Plan (Randel's Map) shown above left

- Duane Park is shown; but lot line is not delineated
- However, a map from 1803 created by ___ and withdrawn from the city shows Duane Park.



1825

“Forest trees” were added and grew to a feather height, as we can see in an 1858 print of an American Express wagon and its magnificent team of horses (driven by both Henry Wells and William Fargo, the founders) passing along Duane Street.

1871

By the time Wells and Fargo were depicted dashing along Duane Street, the neighborhood was deep into change. The wave of northern search for fresh air and bowery surroundings had long passed over it, leaving houses converted into warehouses and new, bulky brick structures, home to the relentless commerce of a growing city. A horse-drawn railway went up Hudson Street and the first elevated railroad tracks in America darkened nearby Greenwich St. and West Broadway. The little park also went into decline; an 1871 report notes that “The Duane Street Park possessed a half-destroyed fence and was in a state of dilapidation.” Taking note of the disrepair, the city undertook a facelift, resulting in “an elegant little triangular spot, filled with deciduous trees, evergreens, and shrubs.” In keeping with the norm for urban picturesque landscape, it was wholly fenced around, with sidewalks on all three sides. Like an engraving, it was something you could peer at but not get into.

Duane Park renovated:

- Trees and shrubs added
- Perimeter sidewalk with trees added
- Fenced enclosure added

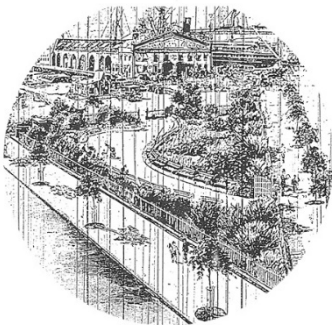


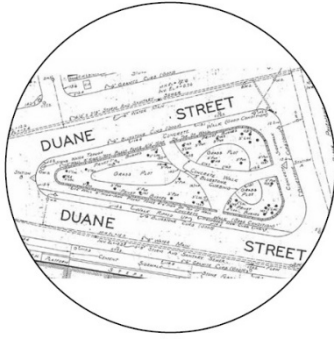
1886-88

In 1886 the newly elected reformist mayor, Abram Hewitt, proclaimed that all New York City parks should be more like Central Park or Prospect Park in Brooklyn: places to wander amid greenery. Following that lead, the park superintendent, Samuel Parsons, Jr., chose Calvert Vaux to re-do many of the city’s small parks, including ours. It was a reasonable choice, as Vaux was famous for his work with Frederick Law Olmstead on both Central and Prospect Parks. Vaux must have scratched his head over how in 92/100s of an acre to fulfill Parson’s instructions to “create a feeling of quiet and restfulness by having pathways that meander.” Told to provide “seclusion and a sense of quasi ownership,” Vaux drove pathways through all three sides of the triangle and planted the remaining land with “green grass...a few shrubs along the fence, and a small flower bed.” Post-age stamp Central Park. In addition, there was a horse trough at the west end.

Duane Park redesign by Calvert Vaux:

- Meandering pathways
- Promoted feeling of quiet and restfulness
- “Seclusion and sense of quasi ownership”





1934

The immediate neighborhood of Duane Park was food, food, food by 1934. In addition to coconut processing at 165 Duane (a German immigrant, Leopold Schepp, had patented a method of drying and canning it, giving rise to a million snowball cakes), the street was lined with warehouses full of butter, eggs, flour, candy, all for wholesale distribution to Manhattan and beyond. Large trucks backed up to loading docks (many of them still there—the docks, not the trucks) to take on cargo and trundle off with things like refrigerated boxes stacked with butter pats. Oddly, shoe manufacturing and warehousing also prevailed; 166 Duane was mostly shoes and even the coconut building had floors of boxed shoes. More trucks. To accommodate these trucks backing in, the city removed the south sidewalk of Duane Park, and the park itself became something of a gathering spot for workers with lunchpails.

Duane Park is redesigned by Parks Department (W.L Silvers)

- Sidewalk is narrowed
- Entry paths created from three sides of the park

1940s

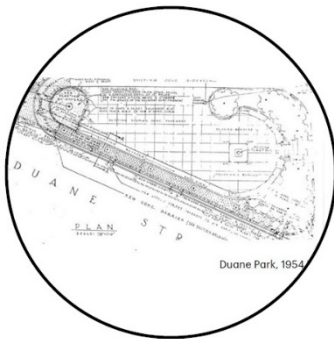


The design was judged old-fashioned and the park was pretty much scrapped. The area had changed, greenery was hard to maintain in the middle of a warehouse district, and workers wanted benches on which to eat their lunches and have a smoke. As seen in this photo was taken in the 1940s, much of the planted area was dug up and paved with concrete, and the ornate cast-iron fence was replaced with a much simpler steel one. In the center of the Hudson St. side, designers added a large flagpole whose outsized base was carved with an inscription to honor the land's original Dutch owner, Annetje Jans Bogardus. The Hudson St. side was given imposing brick pillars. All the old trees were cut down and replaced with ten evenly spaced sycamores around the edges.

Duane Park redesign:

- Formalistic design
- Portions of planted area replaced with paving
- Tall flagpole added

1954



Duane Park was never very big, but in fact its edges have been chewed away over the centuries. In the last resizing, in 1954, the western end was lopped off (taking out that tenth tree at the western nose) and paved as part of Duane St., and the sidewalk on the south side was taken away and made a part of the street, probably to increase the back-up area for trucks loading food from the butter, pickle, and cheese warehouses. Lacking a sidewalk, the city designers took out the planted area on that side and replaced it with cobblestones, plus a concrete barrier to keep trucks from driving into the trees.

Duane Park area reduced:

- Western tip of the park and southern sidewalk replaced by roadway



1994

In 1994, as the neighborhood was once again changing and the butter, eggs, pickle, and electrical warehouses were shutting down, a group of neighbors looked at the park with dismay. The city could not keep up with litter, the planted areas were mostly barren and hard-packed, dogs had done their damage, and the design was no longer suitable, either. The Friends of Duane Park was born. Questionnaires poked into every doorway came back with an encouragingly uniform response: fix this eyesore. Fence it, plant it, keep it clean, bring back flowers and greenery, how can we help? Many, many people pitched in, raising money, filling in gaps in the fence, tilling, fertilizing, and planting. The money went for plants, but also for the hiring of an hour-a-day caretaker to stay ahead of the litter. A year later, it looked a lot better, but still had the unsuitable too-much-concrete design from 1940.

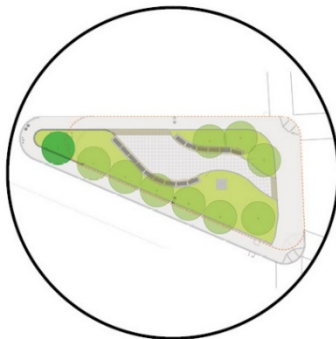


1996-1998

Encouraged by the success of just a year's work, the Friends set their sights much higher: redesign the park and bring it closer to the Parsons-Vaux ideal of "quiet and restfulness." In this they were immeasurably aided by neighbor and esteemed landscape architect Signe Neilson, who spent hundreds of hours developing a design that recalled the best features of the Vaux plan, then shepherded it through many layers of city bureaucracy. Nor could they have done it without help from Council-woman Kathryn Freed, who donated \$150,000 from the city's capital budget, and help from hundreds of contributors and patrons of the Loft Tour. The new park, whose ribbon-cutting took place in spring 1999, might be called the Vaux-Nielsen design. It recovers the secluded and green feeling of 1887, while maintaining a sense of security and providing space for those who like to sit amid the verdant park greenery.

Friends of Duane Park's Vaux-Neilson redesign:

- Evoked Vaux design through a reestablished meandering pathway
- Expanded planting areas



2021-2022

Celebrating 225 years of Duane Park

To mark Duane Park's 225th anniversary, the Friends launched a project to restore the park to its original historic footprint. In discussions with NYC's Department of Parks & Recreation (Parks) and Department of Transportation (DOT), the Friends suggested that the city agencies restore the roughly 26% of parkland that was whittled away in 1934 and in 1954. Returning this space to the park would allow us to restore the sidewalk on the park's southern perimeter and the trees and plantings that stood at its western nose. This Restoration Project is supported by residents and businesses on the block, is good for our climate, and preserves this small piece of New York history.

Friends of Duane Park Restoration Project:

- Restore and preserve 1797 footprint
- Retain Vaux design's meandering pathway; feeling of quiet and restfulness
- Restore and southern sidewalk and make plantings visually accessible
- Restore western tip of the park with tree and planting areas