

## Sustainable EweMass: *Robert Moses and the Flock of Central Park*

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Central Park was founded in 1858 in the bustling city of New York. It was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and his partner, Calvert Vaux. Olmsted (1822-1903)<sup>1</sup> was a landscape architect who designed a multitude of parks around the United States, including Central Park, the U.S. Capitol grounds, The Biltmore Estate, and the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. With the help of Vaux, he created the “Greensward Plan” for a contest to design Central Park, and their design won. This plan “combined formal and naturalistic settings with architectural flourishes”<sup>2</sup>,



**Fig. 1.** “Sheep grazing on Sheep Meadow with horse-drawn buggy and view of Arsenal”, NYC Parks, Photo Archives (Accessed April 2022)

and even allowed for a flock of sheep (Fig 1) to graze in the part of the park called Sheep’s Meadow.

When Olmsted introduced sheep to Central Park under the Greensward Plan, they served a number of purposes (Fig 2). Critics claimed they “enhanced the Romantic English quality of the park. The animals served a practical purpose as well—they trimmed the grass and fertilized the lawn.”<sup>3</sup> Besides the practical bonuses the sheep

<sup>1</sup> “EXPLORE THE CAPITOL CAMPUS: Frederick Law Olmsted: Founder of American landscape architecture.”, Architect of the Capitol,

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/frederick-law-olmsted>

<sup>2</sup> “The Park That Built the Man”, Olmsted–Designed New York City Parks, NYC Parks,

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/olmsted-parks>

<sup>3</sup> “Sheep Meadow”, Central Park, NYC Parks,

<https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/highlights/10761#:~:text=Sheep%20Meadow%2otake%20its%20name,grass%20and%20fertilized%20the%20lawn>

provided to Central Park, they kept the atmosphere fun and were beloved by the visitors.



**Fig. 2.** "Central Park, Exteriors of Sheepfold", NYC Parks, Photo Archives, 6 March, 1934

In one instance in 1902, there was a new arrival of a lamb with black wool<sup>4</sup> -- this left the children bewildered with joy. The *New York Times* often reported on the sheep, keeping the public up-to-date on the health and activities of the herd. When the flock was removed from Sheep Meadow in Central Park by Robert Moses in 1934 and the Sheepfold was converted into a new

restaurant, the *Tavern on the Green*<sup>5</sup> (Fig 2), the park lost its best form of upkeep and an important focus of the park community.

It is important to remember that the sheep were moved in 1934, during the Great Depression, and President Frederick D. Roosevelt had just taken office. His election promise to the American population was the integration of his "First New Deal,"<sup>6</sup> which would usher in a new age of modernization and financial stability. While this was unfolding, many jobless people were setting up "Hooverilles" in Central Park. Authorities were concerned that the new residents of the Park, with little money for food, might pose a danger to the sheep. Though they had been an incredibly integral part of Central Park's community, the sheep had faced danger from park visitors in the past -- once they were even poisoned once from trash left behind.<sup>7</sup> Then in 1934, when

<sup>4</sup> "Central Park's Black Beauty", *New York Times*, *New York Times Archives*, May 18, 1902, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1902/05/18/118470824.html?pageNumber=29>

<sup>5</sup> "Sheep Meadow", Central Park, NYC Parks, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/highlights/10761>

<sup>6</sup> History.com Editors, "New Deal", October 5, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/new-deal>

<sup>7</sup> "PARK LUNCHEES POISON SHEEP: 30 of Central Park Herd Ill After Eating Refuse Left by Picnickers", *New York Times*, *New York Times Archives*, June 4, 1921, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1921/06/04/98701024.html?pageNumber=14>

Robert Moses became the City Park Commissioner, the flock of sheep were moved to Prospect Park. One question that remains is whether Moses decided to relocate the sheep from Central Park in fear of the residents of “Hoovervilles” killing and making a meal of them, or if it was done in the name of modernization and progressive ideals, which the New Deal promoted heavily.

Robert Moses (1888-1981) was the New York City Park Commissioner from 1934-1960, and was the figure who oversaw the conversion of the Sheepfold into the finished *Tavern on the Green* (Fig 3) restaurant. During his time as Park Commissioner, he also took on the role of New York City Planning Commissioner from 1946-1960<sup>8</sup>. Moses was a controversial figure, as much of his work in city planning had negative impacts, wiping out historic



**Fig 3.** “Sheepfold Opening, Tavern on the Green, Opening Night”, NYC Parks, Photo Archives, 20 October, 1934

neighborhoods and communities in the name of modernization and progress. Though it is difficult to claim with accuracy why Moses had the sheep removed, it took away an integral element of this monumental park. The flock of historic Dorset sheep are now all but lost, and the joy they brought to the surrounding community along with it.

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Moses: Planner Robert Moses constructed many public parks and promoted new construction of infrastructure, often opposed by preservationists for destroying historic fabric.”, The New York Preservation Archive Project, <https://www.nypap.org/preservation-history/robert-moses/>