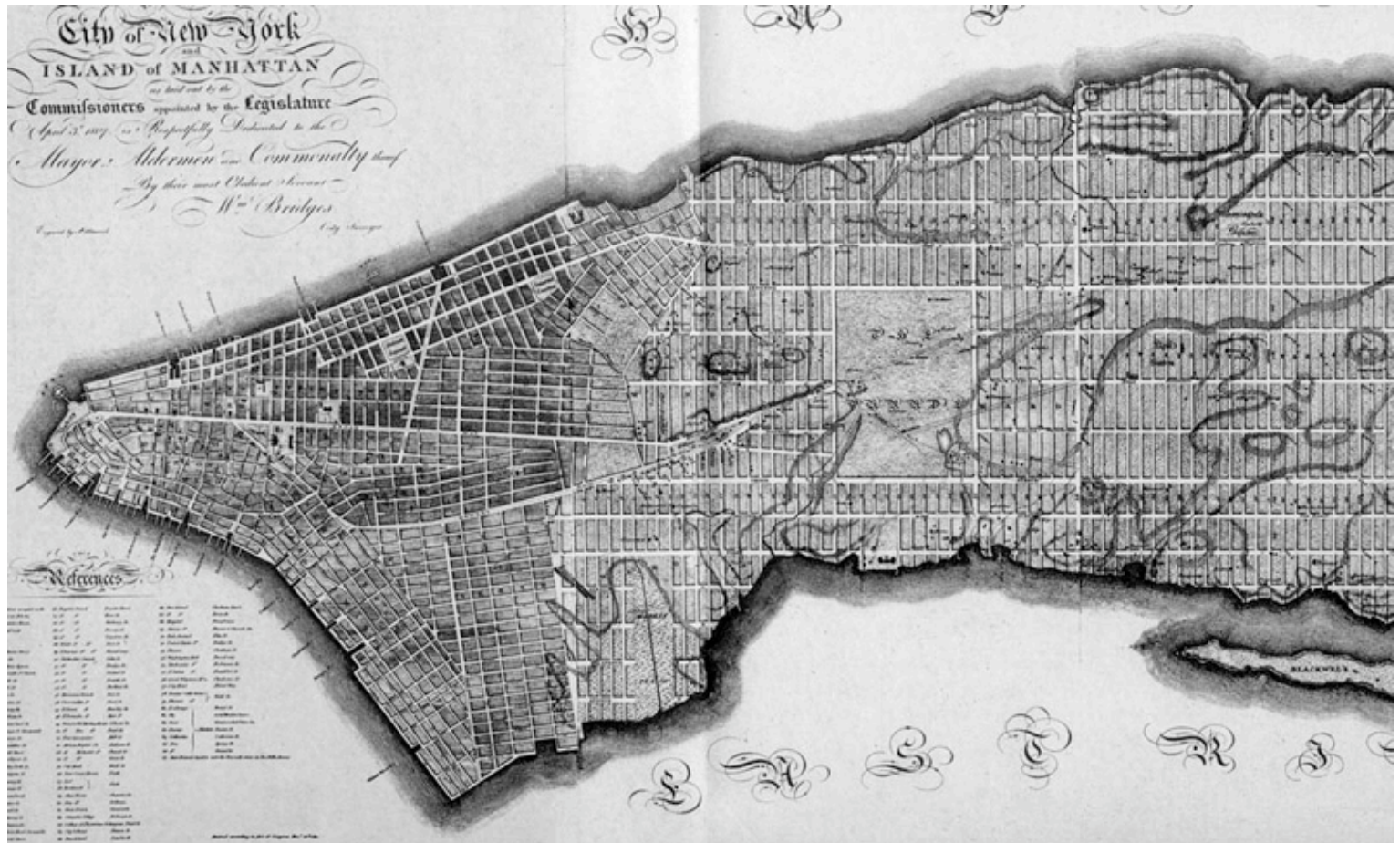




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The Treasure Map Of Manhattan

The 1820 Randel Farm Map was less about mapping farms than carving a welcoming grid for the skyscrapers that would replace them.

By William Bryk

For over two hundred years, land has been New York City's most valuable resource. The best evidence of this is the last decade's skyrocketing rents. Rent, being the price of using real estate, is the market's measure of the value of land. And, as Mark Twain quipped about land, "they're not making it any more."

Parenthetically, Twain was wrong. New Yorkers have created real estate for centuries. Roughly one-third of downtown Manhattan is now landfill. Brooklyn's Red Hook was an island before the dredgings from Erie Basin transformed it to a peninsula.

Increasing land values also lead landowners to change the uses of their property to maximize profits, dramatically illustrated by agriculture's near-disappearance from the City's economy. As late as 1900, the City had over 2,000 farms averaging 25 acres – over 78 square miles of agricultural land.

Then the construction of railways, subways, and trolley lines into the outer boroughs put the countryside within commuting distance of downtown. Developers began buying open land for new housing. This increased the value of the remaining farmland, and the taxes levied on it. More sales followed. By 1930, about 200 farms remained; by 1980, only 15.

Oddly, the Census Bureau reports that the number of farms in the five boroughs increased to 23 in 2002, the most recent date for which statistics are available. But most were farms only in a legal sense, being greenhouses for trees, flowers, and houseplants.

The present condition of Manhattan in particular makes one wonder what the island looked like before we began mucking with it. Fortunately, as even colonization involves land use, requiring surveying, measurement, and mapping, the landscape has been carefully recorded since the early 17th century.

Old Manhattan's most important map lies, appropriately enough, in custody of the Manhattan Borough President. Drawn in 1820 by John Randel Jr., who had been chief engineer and surveyor for the board of street commissioners authorized in 1807 to organize the city's streets, the Randel Farm Map was part of Manhattan's most important planning: the street grid.

I saw the map about 25 years ago. I was gossiping about politics with Harry Kleiderman, a friend who worked in the borough president's office. Suddenly, he asked whether I wanted to see the Randel Map. Without waiting for an answer (I didn't know what the Map was), Harry reverently opened a large steel cabinet. Drawn to a scale of one inch to 100 feet, the map had been created on heavy lined cloth, carefully divided, and each part mounted on rollers to prevent cracking along fold lines. It was called a Farm Map as a term of art, literally referring to a map that delineates farms and estates in a semi-rural area.

What I saw was what Manhattan had once been. After surveying the entire island, including its 21 lakes or ponds, 62 miles of streams, and numerous hills, plateaus, valleys, woods, and open land, Randel had recorded the existing land forms in watercolor. Then he had drawn the proposed streets with India ink. There was the Collect Pond, where John Fitch had sailed the first working steamboat; Kips Bay, which had once reached as far as today's Third Avenue in the East Thirties; and Minetta Brook, which flowed from 23rd Street through Washington Square to the Hudson. Within a century of their delineation, nearly all the natural features recorded by Randel would vanish beneath pavements and landfills (although some claim the

waters of Minetta Brook surface in the lobby fountains of 33 Washington Square West and 2 Fifth Avenue).

The city's streets had evolved spontaneously into lower Manhattan's narrow, winding ways during its first two centuries under Dutch and British rule. Under the charter granted by Royal Governor Thomas Dongan in 1686, the City of New York owned all of Manhattan that had not been granted or sold to individuals. This public domain was called the Common Lands, often used by small farmers to graze their cattle.

After the Revolution, in 1796, the Common Council had mapped the Common Lands, dividing them into rectangular parcels for eventual sale to pay the City's debts. Many of these lots lacked direct access to a public thoroughfare, which reduced their possible sale value.

North of Houston Street, a street pattern had begun evolving in response to the needs of individual landlords and residents. It seemed irregular and inadequate to many prominent citizens, particularly those who wished to buy and develop the Common Lands. But the City's authority to determine street alignment and widths in the lands it had already sold was unclear. Any suggestion for new streets that might require the taking of private land was vehemently opposed by those whose land might be taken. Taking by eminent domain was tedious and costly. And, under existing law, the Common Council, the City's governing body, was unable to bind its successors. These things constituted what the Common Council called "obstacles of a serious and perplexing nature."

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As Reuben Rose-Redwood noted in his fascinating, idiosyncratic *Rationalizing the Landscape: Superimposing the Grid Upon the Island of Manhattan*, the city's elites saw lower Manhattan's narrow, twisting streets as vulnerable to fire and disease. Indeed, the public health was advanced as the primary rationale for straight streets and avenues, to be planned and implemented with the full support of the public authorities. But it was not the only one. Planning advocates argued that a plan would establish "order" and "regularity" to maximize "public convenience and benefit." These words have the flavor of euphemism: then, as now, the question of who would benefit was on many citizens' lips.

In February 1807, the Common Council petitioned the State Legislature for assistance in laying out streets. Within two months, the State had created a board of "commissioners for laying out streets and roads in the City of New York," authorized to create a legally binding plan within four years. On March 22, 1811, the plan – memorialized in Randel's map – and a report justifying it were submitted.

They had created what Rose-Redwood called "a rectilinear matrix" – a grid – of twelve avenues, running north and south, and 155 cross-streets. The lands north of what is now Houston Street had been divided into five acre lots, each facing on at least two avenues, with each lot's north and south boundaries fixing the location and spacing of the adjacent streets. The existing contours and uses of the land were largely ignored by the shockingly utilitarian grid, reflecting the Commissioners' belief that, as William Bridges, a city surveyor, wrote, "...a city is to be composed principally of the habitations of men, and that strait sided, and right-angled houses are the most cheap to build and the most convenient to live in."

So the existing streets, roads, hamlets, and farms shown in Rendel's map would be largely destroyed by the grid's development, which was sanctioned by the authority of the State. For example, the existing New York Hospital lay squarely in the grade of 117th Street. According to Randel himself, 64 percent of all barns, 86 percent of all sheds, and 29 percent of all churches and parsonages in the areas that he had surveyed would be obliterated.

The plan thus began the imposition of an elite's vision of the city upon the diverse visions spontaneously evolving through the existing free market use of land.

But Randel's map, though nearly two centuries old, was perfect and exquisite. Harry and his colleagues maintained it as a Holy of Holies because, in the world of Manhattan real estate, it was: Randel's hand-drawn streets are the core definition of Manhattan land use. I lightly brushed the parchment's edge with a finger. Perhaps it will be my one experience of touching an object literally priceless. Then Harry rolled it up and closed the drawer.

A few days ago, I found a much less valuable map while cleaning out some old files. The Complete Street Guide to New York, a tourist's atlas published in 1959. From its first page, one is in another city entirely, immersed in the language used when Eisenhower was president, Rockefeller governor, and Wagner mayor. All houses of worship, including synagogues, are classified as churches, and one looks in vain for a mosque. There was still candor in the names of City agencies: Tax Collection had not yet been sanitized into Finance, Welfare into Human Resources, or the Morgue into the Medical Examiner.

The lists at the back of the Guide emphasize nearly half a century's changes. Department Stores include Altman's, Best & Co., Franklin Simon, Gimbel Brothers, Hearn's and Oppenheim Collins: all gone. Scheduled passenger air service to Europe was so new that international travel still meant voyaging by sea. The West Side up to 59th Street was still lined with piers as a comb with teeth from the fruit docks off Washington Market (now TriBeCa) to "Liner Row," Piers 84-97, where the ships of the Cunard White Star or French Lines often left on the same morning tide. New York saw its peak year of passenger travel by liner in 1957. Jan Morris wrote in Manhattan '45 that the top day was September 3, 1957, when 12 liners disembarked 9,000 passengers. Yet 1957 was also the first year in which as many left New York by air as by sea. Twenty-five years after the Guide's publication, The New York Times discontinued its daily listing of shipping arrivals and departures as no longer newsworthy.

The reader learns that "The Third Avenue L line in Manhattan has been recently discontinued, therefore all stations of same Line in Manhattan should be disregarded in this Guide." Back in the Gilded Age, after a saturnalia of corruption that had filled every willing legislator's wallet, the Metropolitan Elevated Railroad Company had received a 999-year license to build an elevated railroad on Third Avenue. A huge iron trestle bore its trains between the Battery—via Coenties Slip, Pearl Street, the Bowery, and Third Avenue—and the Bronx. It became a favorite subject of John Sloan and the Ashcan painters, and Brendan Gill recalled the L darkening "the avenue with its Piranesi crosshatch of heavy black steel uprights and sooty crossies."

In 1955, despite politicians' promises that the L would operate until the Second Avenue subway was completed, pressure from real estate interests forced its abandonment and demolition within six months. The trains' soot, rattle, and noise had protected the low-rent offbeat restaurants, Irish bars, cut-rate hairdressers, thrift shops, barber colleges, tattooists, and flophouses beneath them, preserving something of the 19th century's gritty charm. Now the developers could replace them with skyscrapers.

Yet the most irritating change is the reduced hours of the Public Library at Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. From opening day on May 24, 1910 until the mid-70s fiscal crisis, it was open from 9 am to 10 pm, six days a week, and on Sundays from 1 pm to 10 pm. Although we have now known nearly a generation of nearly unparalleled prosperity, the City fathers have never restored the traditional hours of the people's reading room.

