

Speaker 1: Thank you for purchasing Free Tours by Foot and Atlantis Audio Tours self-guided audio tour. I wanted to let you know how this works before you get started. The Audio Tour is one long audio file. You can pause between stops as you walk there, allowing you to take your time and to stop to explore something more if you'd like. I'll let you know as we move between stops. You'll also find a Google map and a PDF in your confirmation email in case you'd like to check where you are or read along with your guide. Now let's get started with your tour, and I'll let you know when to pause to get to your next stop.

Catherine: Hi, this is Catherine with Free Tours by Foot here to take you on a tour of the middle section of Central Park. Our tour starts at the park entrance, right across the street from the front of the Natural History Museum. This will be north of 79th Street on Central Park West. The closest subways are the B and C trains at 81st Street in Central Park West. The museum across the street from where you're standing is the Museum of Natural History, and it is one of the largest museums in the world. It is comprised of 27 buildings and has over 32 million specimens.

The museum was originally housed in the Arsenal building near the Central Park Zoo. Founders included J.P. Morgan and Theodore Roosevelt Sr., father of the 26th US president. The current building was started in 1874. When you are ready to begin your tour, go ahead and go into the park. Follow the paved path from the entrance straight in until you come to West Drive, which will be a wider road with a lane for cars, one for bikes, and one for pedestrians. There will be a crosswalk to cross over West Drive. Cross the street, keep an eye out for bikes, and then turn left, walking until you come to a small brown building on your right.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: Before we really get started, I just want to give you a little bit of general information about Central Park so that you have a better understanding of what it is you're seeing during our time together. Central park was originally conceived as being an escape for city dwellers. The original design of New York City was laid out in 1811, and it created Manhattan's famous grid of streets. What it didn't include, though, was Central Park. By the 1850s, New York City had already quadrupled in size, and the city was starting to feel a little bit crowded.

Residents had begun spending time in landscaped cemeteries, believe it or not, as a substitute for actual parks. The city realized that a change was needed. They bought the land for Central Park in 1853, spending \$5 million. Then a design competition was held to determine what the park would look like. Out of 33 designs, the city chose the Greensward plan. The Greensward plan was the work of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. Their idea was that Central Park should look like a completely natural landscape.

That being said, this park is entirely man-made. It took a lot of time and a lot of work to create what you see today. Construction began in 1857, and it wasn't officially completed until 1873. Even just preparing the area was a huge undertaking. Over 1,500 residents needed to be cleared from the area, primarily in a spot called Seneca Village, which isn't too far from here. The rocks that you can see jutting out of the ground throughout the park were also a problem.

This rock, Manhattan schist needed to be cleared away in many spots, which they achieved by blasting it apart with gunpowder. More gunpowder was used to build Central Park than was used during the Battle of Gettysburg in the American Civil War. It was also discovered that the soil in the area was largely unsuitable, so they removed that, and different topsoil was brought in from New Jersey. By the end of construction, over 10 million cartloads of rubble were taken out of the park, and between four and five million trees were brought in and planted.

That's a lot of effort for something that's supposed to look completely natural. Central Park today is largely cared for by the Central Park Conservancy. You'll see their green and white signs throughout the park. Though Central Park is a city park and receives funding from the parks department budget, over 80% of the annual funding needed to maintain Central Park comes from the private, nonprofit Central Park Conservancy. Central Park is 843 acres total. That's larger than the Principality of Monaco, and it's very hard to see everything all at once.

This tour is mainly going to focus on the middle section of the park. The building that you're standing in front of is The Swedish Cottage. This cottage was built in Sweden in 1875 and made its way to the United States as a part of the 1876 World's Fair in Philadelphia. Sweden brought this as their entry to the fair and it was supposed to represent a traditional Swedish schoolhouse. Thousands of people attended this fair among them, Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park.

The building caught his eye, and he decided that it would be a perfect addition to his newly completed park. Since 1947, the Swedish Cottage has been home to a Marionette Theater Company. This company is under the direction of the City Parks Foundation and is still operating, making it the oldest company of its kind in the country. Shows here have included *Peter Pan*, *Cinderella*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. Now take the path along the side of the cottage. You will come to a set of stone steps leading up to a garden. Stop and press play.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: These stairs lead up to Shakespeare Garden. This area originally became a garden known as Garden of the Heart in the 1880s. In 1913, it was decided that the garden would be dedicated to poet and playwright William Shakespeare. All of the flowers and plants in the garden are mentioned in the works of the Bard. There are bronze plaques scattered throughout with quotations from *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and many more. Shakespeare is also the reason for the presence of starlings in North America.

In 1890, Eugene Schieffelin decided that he wanted to introduce these birds mentioned in the works of Shakespeare to North America. He released 140 starlings total into Central Park. Their descendants number over 200 million in the United States today. Go ahead and go up the stairs to enjoy the garden and enjoy the flowers. Follow the path as it winds through the garden. When you get to the top, take a left. When you see a grassy area to your right, turn and go towards the castle.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: The building that you see looming ahead is Belvedere Castle. Belvedere means beautiful view in Italian, and it was intended to offer majestic views of the reservoir to the north, now the great lawn, while also infusing a bit of whimsy and fantasy into the park. In architectural terms, Belvedere is what is known as a folly or a purely decorative building. When Calvert Vaux created it in 1869, it was also an open-air building.

Doors and windows were later added to this miniature castle as it was prepped to serve in a more functional role. In 1919, the National Weather Bureau moved in deeming Belvedere, the ideal spot for New York City weather readings. For anyone who has heard a weather reading that begins, "The temperature in Central Park is," you are looking at where that happens. Instruments on the tower measure wind speed and direction.

A fenced area just south of the castle gives other weather-related data, such as rainfall. It's recorded and sent to the Weather Service Forecast office on Long Island. By the 1960s, the castle had deteriorated and was frequently vandalized. The Central Park Conservancy restored the castle keeping true to Vaux's original design and reopened it as a Visitor and Nature Information Center in 1983. Visitors climb the castle steps to experience the highest vantage point in the park and a fantastic photo op.

Go ahead and climb the stairs ahead of you to the main castle terrace. Now take your time to enjoy the view from as many angles or heights as you'd like. You can stay on this main terrace or go inside the castle to climb the stairs up to the two different castle terraces. Whichever height you choose, if you look out into the left, you should see a large amphitheater. This is the Delacorte Theater, home of Shakespeare in the park.

The Delacorte opened in 1962 and the first production was *The Merchant of Venice*, starring George C. Scott and James Earl Jones. The public theater produces this amazing summer series annually drawing up to 100,000 people a year. There are two plays produced a summer, at least one of which will be a work by Shakespeare. Tickets are absolutely free. Something of a rarity in New York. Theatergoers gather in the park and wait for that day's tickets to be released on a first come first serve basis at noon.

Over the years, famous faces such as Meryl Streep, Denzel Washington, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Natalie Portman have graced the stage. For star-studded casts, patrons will sometimes claim their place in line at 6:00 AM when the park opens or even earlier in an unofficial line outside of Central Park's gates. If you're visiting in the summer, seeing a play in this 1800-seat theater is a fantastic experience. When you're finished up at the castle, take the stairs heading down behind Belvedere. Take the path to the left, and follow it around until you come to another path to the left. Turn there and there'll be a pond on your left again.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: This is Turtle Pond, the most recent body of water added to Central Park. Like all of the water features in the park, this is manmade and filled with New York City drinking water. The name comes from the five different species of turtles that

live here year-round. The kind you're most likely to see as the red-eared slider turtle. You'll be able to pick them out easily by the little red spots above their ears. On sunny days, these turtles love laying out on the rocks around the pond. Don't come up on them too quickly if you want a picture. If they're startled, they'll very quickly slide back into the pond.

It said that many of the turtles in this pond started off as pets and were brought here to live by their former owners as they outgrew their city apartments. Turtle Pond is actually a tiny reminder of what was a much larger body of water. The receiving reservoir of the Croton Aqueduct was filled in the 1930s to create the Great Lawn. Turtle Pond was left behind as a tiny street-edge pond. The conservancy reconfigured the pond in 1998 to give it a more natural shape a little more in keeping with its surroundings. Now continue down the path you're on heading north. Take the fork to your right, continue down that path until you see a set of stairs leading to the obelisk. Take them up and then press play.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: This obelisk nicknamed Cleopatra's Needle is the oldest manmade object in the park. It is made of a single piece of granite and weighs 244 tons. When you consider the size and weight of the obelisk, it makes its very long journey to this spot all the more impressive. This was originally commissioned by an Egyptian pharaoh in 1450 BCE as part of a pair of obelisks for Heliopolis. Even though the nickname references the famous Egyptian ruler Cleopatra, it was constructed many centuries before she was born.

She did however order the pair of obelisks moved from their original spot to Alexandria. They were brought there to flank the gates of a temple honoring her lover, Julius Caesar. One of the pair was moved to London in 1878. New York received this one just a couple of years later after long negotiations with the Egyptian Government. Moving it here was an incredible task and it was primarily financed by William H. Vanderbilt. He gave over \$100,000 a huge sum of money at the time. The journey took a total of 15 months with the journey from Quarantine Station New York to this very spot taking over 100 days. Thousands of people gathered to watch it hoisted into place.

The supports underneath the obelisk are sea crab claws. These are modern replacements. The originals were of the Roman period and can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A time capsule is just beneath the obelisk's surface. Inside is a census from the 1870s, coins from the 1880s, a Webster's Dictionary, a hydraulic pump, assorted screws and hardware, and a copy of the Declaration of Independence. There's also a small box with a secret object known only to the creator of the time capsule. The obelisk has had a recent restoration in an effort to help preserve this piece of history.

If you're ever in London, you can check out the twin of this obelisk by the Thames River flanked by sphinxes. If you look behind the obelisk, you will see the backside of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is the largest museum in the United States and contains over two million works. Housed inside is European, American, and modern art, a vast collection of armor and weaponry, musical instruments, African, Asian, and Islamic art, an Egyptian temple, and much more. The museum was originally

founded in 1870 by a group of businessmen, financiers, and artists who wanted to bring art and education to the people of this country.

There are 17 different curatorial departments in the museum and over two million square feet of exhibition space. The original site of the Met was further downtown, but the city granted the land between 79th and 85th Streets on Fifth Avenue to the museum in 1871. The original building in this spot was designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould, celebrated architects of Central Park. The original building was done in the Victorian Gothic style, and it was already considered dated by the time it was finished.

Within 20 years, another building was already being planned. The Beaux-Arts structure that you see today actually engulfs the original museum. You can see one of Vaux's and Mould's exterior walls inside the museum today. The current building was designed by Richard Morris Hunt and was completed by his son in 1902. The museum today is 20 times larger than the 1880 building. Now head back down the stairs and cut across to the large green lawn that you should see ahead of you.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: What you see in front of you is one of the most famous lawns in the United States, The Great Lawn. This 55-acre expanse is a popular spot for picnics, sports, sunbathing, and more. When the land for Central Park was purchased, however, this area looked very different. This was the site of the receiving reservoir of the Croton Aqueduct. Water from 40 miles upstate flowed here into a rectangular stone basin. When Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted were designing the park, the reservoir was one of the things they didn't like about the site chosen.

The rectangular reservoir starkly contrasted with their vision for a completely natural-looking landscape. They attempted to camouflage the reservoir with dense foliage. By the 1930s, the reservoir was out of use so it was drained and then filled in. To fill the massive area, the city used land that had been excavated during the building of Rockefeller Center and the Eighth Avenue subway line. Several proposals for this new part of the park were presented. Among them were an airport landing pad, a sports arena, an opera house, underground parking garage, a World War I Memorial, and a vault to store motion pictures.

Ultimately, Vaux and Olmsted's original idea of a retreat for city dwellers worn out and the large green lawn that you see opened in 1937. The baseball diamonds were added later in the 1950s. Several large concerts have been played here including Diana Ross, Simon & Garfunkel, and Bon Jovi. The New York Philharmonic plays a free summer series here every year. Over the years, it was realized that heavy crowd use eroded the lawn leaving it dry and dusty. Today, use of the lawn is regulated and they let it rest every winter in preparation for the busy summer season.

Now head back along the path towards Turtle Pond, you will pass with the pond on your right. Take the left fork in the path and follow it as it curves by Park Drive. Continue following it until you come to the entrance to the ramble.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop. [silence]

Catherine: The ramble you're about to walk through was envisioned by Olmsted to be a wild garden, a place where city dwellers could truly escape and feel they were experiencing nature. It was designed to look like a wild natural forest. That being said, the only thing natural about this place is the bedrock that it sits on. Everything else had to be brought in and carefully placed to achieve this natural effect. Even the streams that run throughout the ramble can be turned on and off like a faucet. Some of the trees you will see date back to 1859 when the ramble was one of the very first parts of the new Central Park to be built.

Over the years, the carefully cultivated ramble has become home to many different kinds of wildlife, most notably, birds. New York City is located on the Atlantic flyway, the route birds use to fly south for the winter. The ramble is very popular with bird watchers. Over 230 different kinds of birds have been spotted here. As you start to walk through the ramble, it is easy to get turned around. Remember, it's supposed to feel like a meandering nature walk. The direction you are now facing is south. You'll continue heading south until you reach the other end of the ramble.

If you're unsure if you're going in the right direction, check a lamp post. Every lamp post in the park has a number plate. The first two numbers coordinate with roughly what street you would be on in the grid of Manhattan. For example, a number beginning with 75 would mean you're even with 75th Street. As you would walk south through the ramble, the number should be getting lower. It is easiest to follow the paths as far south as you can in the ramble and then turn right to walk west. You'll be following the shore of the lake. Walking west, you will come to Bow Bridge on your left.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: This beautiful cast iron bridge is Bow Bridge. Built between 1859 and 1862. This is the second oldest cast iron bridge in the United States, and its name comes from its graceful shape, which is meant to be reminiscent of an archer or violinist's bow. This is also the longest of Central Park's numerous bridges. At 87ft or 26 and a half meters, its beauty and romantic setting draws photographers and couples alike. The bridge features eight large urns normally filled with flowers. These are not original, as the original urns disappeared from the bridge in the 1920s.

The current urns are faithful replicas, and due to extensive recent restoration work, Bow Bridge appears as beautiful today as it did to parkgoers in the 1860s. Cross to the other side of Bow Bridge out of the ramble and then turn left. Follow the path along the lake until you come to Bethesda Terrace.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: This is Bethesda Terrace, considered by the designers to be the heart of the park. One of the first parts to be opened, it is probably one of the most recognizable to visitors today due to its numerous appearances in films and TV shows. The central feature is the Angel of the Waters statue on top of the fountain. This was actually the one and only statue commissioned for the park, and it was the first public art commission for a woman in New York City. It was created by Emma Stebbins and depicts an angel holding a lily and blessing the water.

The name Bethesda is taken from the Gospel of John, where a pool with miraculous healing water is referenced. This fountain was created to celebrate the opening of the Croton Aqueduct in 1842. While water supply may not seem like a big deal today, the opening of the aqueduct was a dramatic turning point in the city's development. It went a long way towards fixing the epidemics and the fires that had plagued New York City for the first half of the 19th century. The lily in the angel's hand represents the purity of the water.

Bethesda Terrace has been seen many times on screen in *Law and Order*, *Sex In The City*, *Gossip Girl*, *Doctor Who*, *Elf*, *Home Alone Two*, *Enchanted*, and many, many more. Now walk across the terrace to look at the lakefront. In the early days of the park, the lake was used year-round. People rode boats on the water in the summer, which you can still do today, and ice skated here in the winter. Ice skating didn't officially stop on the lake until the 1950s.

The lake looks small from where you're standing, but it opens up dramatically to the west of here, beyond Bow Bridge, covering 20 acres total, the largest of the park's naturalistic water bodies. When you are finished admiring the terrace, head to the path opposite the one you use to enter, facing the back of the angel statue from the lake, this is the path to your left. You will be able to follow this, continuing further east along the lake, until you come to the Loeb Boathouse on your left.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: The Loeb Boathouse today is a famous restaurant providing food in a beautiful park setting. It has also been seen many times on screen in *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sex In The City*, *27 Dresses*, and more. The original building on this spot was an actual boathouse designed by Calvert Vaux. Parkgoers flocked here in the summertime to rent rowboats, an activity that remains popular today. This is a great place to take a quick stop if you need a restroom or something to drink. When you are ready, go to the crosswalk with the light just next to the boathouse. Cross over the street and then follow the path in to the left until you come to a small pond.

Speaker 1: Pause here until you get to your next stop.

Catherine: The pond you are looking at is called the Conservatory Waters. This was originally intended to be an ornamental reflecting pool for a large formal flower garden and a glass conservatory for tropical plants. Plans for the construction of the garden and the conservatory fell through, but the name for the pool stuck. It became a popular spot for children, particularly for sailing toy boats. Fans of the children's novel *Stuart Little* will recognize this spot as a site where Stewart won his boat race. Visitors can rent model boats from the Kerbs Memorial Boathouse, the small brick building across the pond.

The area is also famous for its statues of Hans Christian Andersen and Alice in Wonderland. Hans can be found off to your right and Alice is off to your left. If you see people climbing on the statues, feel free to join them. These were designed for children and were meant to be climbed on. If you're visiting on a Saturday morning between June and September, you may catch a storytelling performance right by the Hans Christian Andersen statue. That's the end of our tour. If you want to explore

more of this area, check out our audio tours of the Brooklyn Bridge or Lower Manhattan, or consider signing up for one of our pay-what-you-wish walking tours.

For more information, go to www.freetoursbyfoot.com. Thanks for joining me. We hope to see you again.

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