

The Lincoln Statue and Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza

The Lincoln statue will return to Grand Army Plaza. It is to stand on the North Berm facing south to look across Flatbush Avenue at its rightful home. This plan ignores the statue's history and trivializes the plans of Olmsted and Vaux. And to make matters worse, there exists an ideal spot within the Plaza which respects history, conforms to the architects' vision and has the potential to revitalize Brooklyn's Civil War Memorial.

In 1869, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted positioned the first statue dedicated to Abraham Lincoln at the north end of the Plaza's axis.



Facing North, the statue holds the Emancipation Proclamation.

Behind the statue, in 1873, the Vaux Fountain was unveiled.

The Arch was dedicated at the south end of the Plaza's axis in 1892.

The Lincoln statue stood here until 1895 when Olmsted retired from public life.

The statue was turned around, marched deep into Prospect Park and abandoned in the Concert Grove. In November, Vaux was found drowned in Gravesend Bay.

Six months later the Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation was Constitutional. The Emancipation Proclamation was compromised and Lincoln had been banished.

This is the twenty-six year history of the Lincoln statue in Prospect Park Plaza.

And for the past 116 years, it has faced Gravesend Bay from the Grove.

The Lincoln statue should stand between Defenders Arch and Bailey Fountain, facing north along the Plaza's axis, overlooking the large public gathering area surrounding the fountain basin. The backdrop of the Lincoln statue silhouetted against the Arch, beautiful and historically correct, would provide a perfect venue for school field trips, political speakers, touring historians and local after-dinner strollers to reconnect to Brooklyn's long forgotten historic Civil War Memorial.

33-0: CB6 Votes to Foreclose on the History of the Lincoln Statue in Grand Army Plaza

The Lincoln statue is to be returned to its historic home in Grand Army Plaza, almost, after 116 years of exile in the Concert Grove.

The Lincoln statue is obstructing the lakefront renovation abutting the Concert Grove and therefore the statue must be moved. Voting 33-0 to approve an expeditious plan, Community Board 6 (representing those who benefit most from Prospect Park) has unknowingly sided with the enemies of Abraham Lincoln, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted. The 1869 statue (the first dedicated to Lincoln) will face south to gaze across Flatbush Avenue at HIS Plaza. All historic photographic documentation shows Lincoln facing north in the Plaza.

We are to remain ignorant of the motives of Lincoln supporters Vaux, Olmsted and Parks Commissioner James Stranahan in their design of the elliptical Plaza in 1865. We are not to wonder why they positioned the statue to face north along the Plaza's axis. We are not to be aware of this highly symbolic message. We are to attach no significance to the self-imposed exile of the statue in 1895.

We are not to understand that the Plaza was aligned with 350 Fifth Avenue, the Manhattan club house of those strongly opposed the Civil War and Lincoln. They intended to amend our Constitution to protect slavery. Facing north, the statue confronted those enemies. Today, the Empire State Building stands at 350 Fifth Avenue. Its construction was financed by opponents of FDR and the 'New Deal.' Most were members of the American Liberty League, grandfather of our Tea Party. When air quality and foliage permit, the alignment is clearly visible from the roadway median leading into Prospect Park. So beautiful at night, you must have wondered about this view on your many walks in the park.

In 1895, as the Supreme Court was on the cusp of sanctioning Jim Crow as the law of the land ('separate, but equal') Olmsted retired. Following Decoration Day ceremonies, the Lincoln statue was moved to the Concert Grove. There it was aligned with the eight-pointed star skylight of the Oriental Pavilion and the single-spouted fountain. The statue faced the Gravesend Bay pier where Vaux drowned four months later. Use Google Earth to confirm this alignment.

Those responsible for Bailey Fountain in 1932, the JFK bust in 1965, and redesigning the entrance to our park in 1970 understood this and tried to make the Plaza alignment known. In 2011, it is now up to us.

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The Mirador (1970)



The Empire State Building (1931) and the Arch (1892)



The Lincoln Statue (1869)

Forty years ago, a simple lamppost was built on the grassy median of the principal roadway leading into Prospect Park.

Lean back against the lamppost and look through Defender's Arch. The tower of the Empire State Building is perfectly framed within and precisely bisects the Arch. This lamppost serves as a mirador (a watchtower, a balcony or a window with a significant view).

The Mirador, the Arch, Bailey Fountain, the JFK Memorial and the Tower are all aligned along the axis of Grand Army Plaza.

In 1869, 100 years before the Mirador, 60 years before the Tower, and 20 years before the Arch, the nation's first statue dedicated to Abraham Lincoln was unveiled. Facing north along the axis of the elliptical Plaza, he looks towards the 350 Fifth Avenue Manhattan mansion of William Astor, sole heir to America's largest fortune. By 1897, his mansion, and that of his brother, became the original Waldorf-Astoria, replaced in 1931 by the Empire State Building.

This original alignment along the Plaza's axis, the Lincoln statue and the mansion, reflected America's dedication to the proposition that all men are created equal. As a continuing work-in-progress, its evolvment documents the relentless challenges to this resolve.

Planners Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, and Brooklyn Parks Commissioner James Stranahan, devoted Lincoln men, aimed the axis of the Plaza at the heart of the most influential group of Northern Democrats and merchants. This group had been openly opposed to Lincoln and the Civil War, and was intent on amending the Constitution to protect slavery.

The Lincoln statue holds the Emancipation Proclamation, pointing to the words “shall be forever free.” From the grave, he confronts his enemies.
The North has won the war, slavery in America is abolished.

Twenty years later, Duncan’s plain Arch was to frame in stone Lincoln’s words and the invisible corridor to the unseen mansion five miles away.

But, political tides had already turned, and in 1895, three years after the Arch, Olmsted retired. The Lincoln statue was picked up, turned around, marched into Prospect Park and abandoned in the Concert Grove.

In November, Vaux drowned in Gravesend Bay. Six months later,
the 1896 Supreme Court ruled racial segregation Constitutional.

The Emancipation Proclamation was compromised. “All men are created equal,” yes, but separate. In the country, as in the Plaza, Lincoln’s legacy was officially terminated. Astor’s mansion became the Waldorf Astoria. The Arch was draped in statuary. Brooklyn was absorbed into New York.

In 1931, the Empire State Building, financed by opponents of FDR and the ‘New Deal,’ replaced the Waldorf-Astoria, exposing and enhancing the original alignment planned by Vaux and Olmsted.

The 1954 Supreme Court ruled racial segregation Unconstitutional.

Lyndon Johnson signed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1965, the Plaza’s JFK Memorial was unveiled where Lincoln stood, facing north.

The Lincoln statue should stand between the Arch and Bailey Fountain, overlooking the great public gathering area which surrounds the fountain basin. The backdrop of Lincoln silhouetted before the Arch, facing north, beautiful and historically correct, would draw political speakers, school field trips, touring historians and provide a local after-dinner family destination.

The Mirador provides the unique vantage point which evokes the memory of America’s continuing commitment. This alignment and its history have remained unknown and undocumented for 145 years. This view is at risk.
The view should be named a ‘historic visual corridor’ before it vanishes.