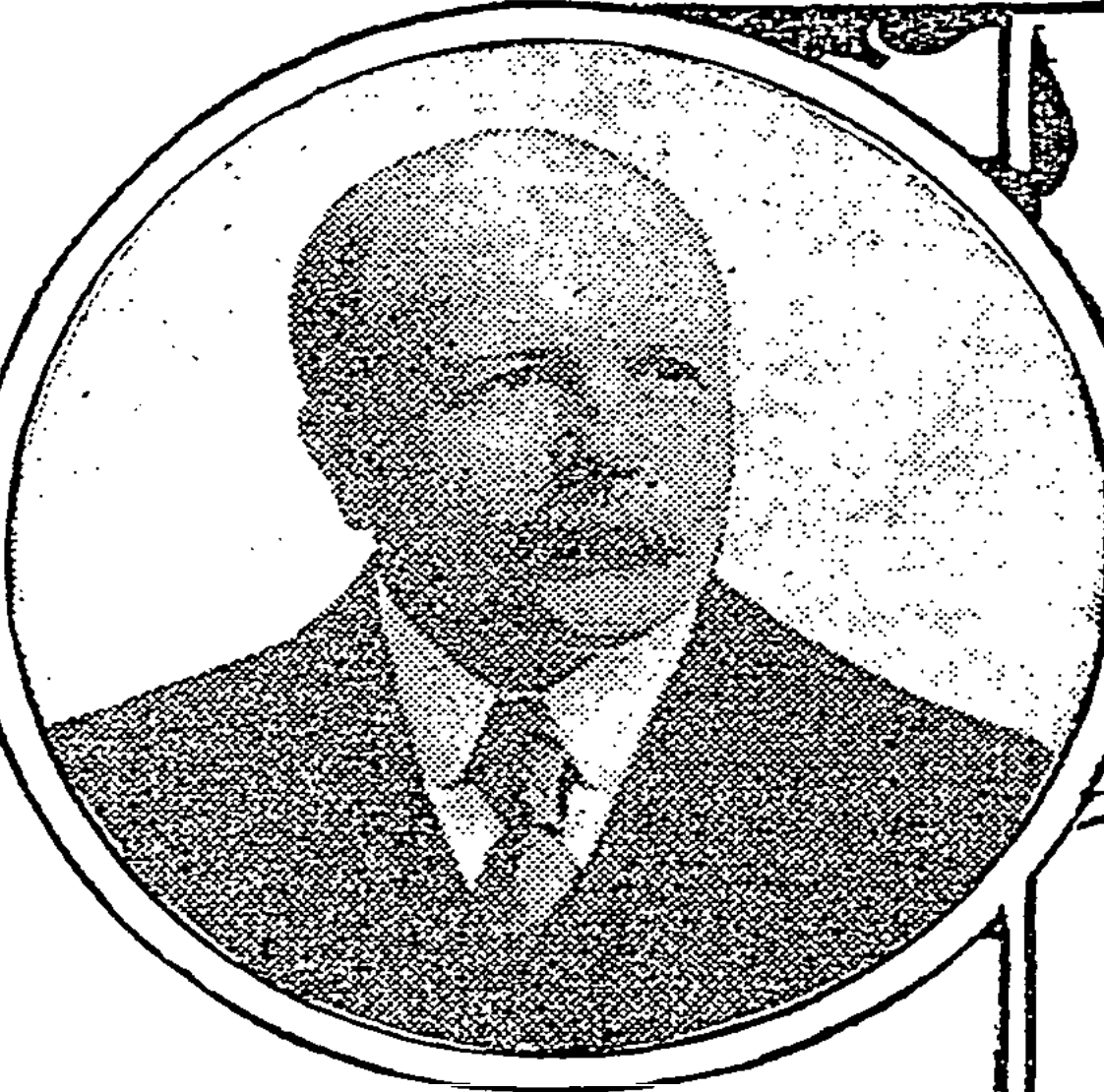


# FIFTY YEARS FIGHT TO KEEP CENTRAL PARK FROM INVASION

## Since Back in 1859 Just After It Was Established Vigilance Has Been Necessary to Keep the Great Playground from Being Used for Special Objects.



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Charles B. Stover, Park Commissioner.

indicated on the plan. We have thought it very desirable to have a cricket ground of this size near the southern boundary of the Park, and not far from the Sixth and Eighth Avenue Railroads, which offer the most rapid means of access from the lower part of the city.

The Committee on Statuary, Fountains, and Architectural Structures, however, found in the following year that it was so inundated with applications for ground from the baseball clubs of the city that it had to decide that no baseball games might be played within the Park. It was found that if any portion of the Park was set aside for such special purposes the ground that could be used by children for their general play would be curtailed, and it was decided that it was more important to provide wide open spaces than special playgrounds.

In the fifth annual report, dated Dec. 31, 1861, the Commissioners say:

"Although the Park is intended to afford ample opportunity for personal relaxation and repose to all the hard-working and energetic representatives of the city, it has another class of individuals to provide for, whose contributions to the prosperity of the metropolis are no less valuable, and whose claim to a loving welcome are equally deserving of illustration in the nomenclature of the entrance gates.

"It aims to provide within the city limits an extensive rural playground and a country experience generally for the whole domestic circle, so that in future 'the boys,' 'the girls,' 'the women,' and 'the children' may all have an opportunity to escape, at intervals, from the close confinement of the city streets, and to spend pure and happy hours in direct communication with the beauties of Nature.

"The Park is already used freely and enjoyed heartily by troops of young children, and the Children's Gate will help to keep in mind the fact that, in the course of the next twenty years, the whole army of industrious workers who are now vigorously laboring for the general welfare must have received large reinforcements from the band of little ones who are to-day so tender and helpless, or its ranks will already be perceptibly thinned and its efficiency seriously impaired.

"The Boys' Gate and the Girls' Gate will convey the idea that ample opportunity for physical development is considered a necessary part of the educational system of the city, and will recognize the fact that it is not thought sufficient for the young students of either sex to be liberally provided with schools, school teachers and school books, but that they must also be induced to study freely the works of Nature and be led to intelligent appreciations of the gems that are to be found in stones, the books that are printed in the running brooks, and the good that exists in everything that comes from the bountiful hand of the Creator.

"Sports, games, and parades, in which comparatively few can take part, will only be supposed to contribute indirectly to the pleasure of a majority of those visiting the Park. The Park is intended to furnish healthful recreation for the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the vicious and the virtuous, so far as each can partake therein without infringing upon the rights of others, and no further.

With this end in view Messrs. Olmstead and Vaux, the great landscape architects, entered on their task. They found a rectangular stretch of rock and coarse grass, 840 acres in extent, differing in nothing from the rugged lots that may still be seen unimproved in that part of the borough.

They studied its topography and canvassed its possibilities. They laid out winding paths and green lawns. Here and there they devised secluded nooks where might be hidden away placid pools and rustic cottages.

They planted groves of trees and formal flower-beds. For the rider they constructed winding, shaded bridle-paths; for those who love to drive, a road bordered by noble trees or gently sloping lawns, and for the workers, who can do nothing but stroll, a maze of footways that meandered through every corner of the Park.

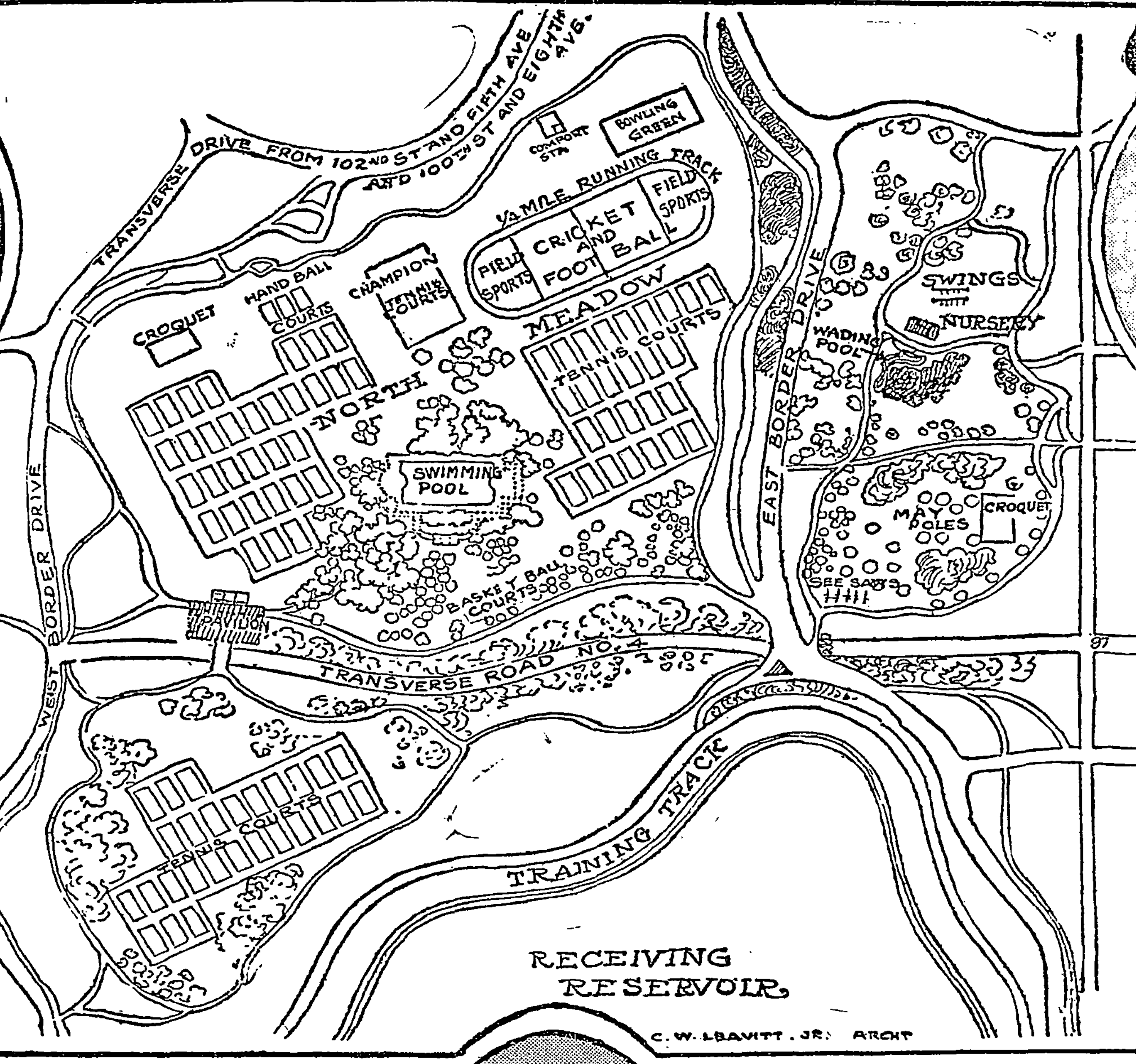
But one thing they had in view—to take the tired city-worker for a brief time away from his surroundings, to plunge him into the country and to give him as much quiet and peace as though he were a hundred miles from Broadway and as fair a prospect as if he were in a king's demesne.

How well they accomplished their purpose New Yorkers for the last half century are witness. Central Park stands pre-eminent among the city parks of the world, and visitors from far and near have reckoned it to be one of the chief glories of the city.

At the same time the designers of the Park kept in view, as far as possible, the idea of affording room for playgrounds and sports. They recognized that children have rights, and they made an effort to accommodate them. It was not long, however, before it was found that if the Park was to be preserved for its special uses some kind of limitation must be placed on its employment for games.

On March 4, 1860, the Board of Commissioners of Central Park thus dealt with the subject in its report to the Senate:

"The natural southern boundary of the tableland, occupied by the parade ground, is a rapid slope that occurs about in the line of Sixty-sixth Street; in this slope it is proposed to sink one of the transverse roads, and on a level plane below it, stretching to the south, a playground, about ten acres in extent, is located, as



The Most Recent Changes Suggested for the "Popularization of the Park."

"There seems, moreover, a particular fitness at the present time in thus publicly recognizing in a pleasure ground like the Central Park that an importance is felt to attach to the youth of both sexes, not as helpless sons and daughters, dependent on their industrious parents, but individually, as American boys and girls springing directly from God, the Father of all, and freely given by the Omnipotent Creator to the whole world; for the sentiment thus conveyed may be looked on as a landmark showing the point to which, in a certain direction, the civilization of the nineteenth century has reached.

As the Park Commissioners went on with their beneficent work of adapting Central Park to the uses of the people they experienced the same difficulties which all their successors have met to some extent. Only at the beginning of things there was no established principle on which they could rely, and the attacks were more open and brazen than those which have since been made.

It is interesting to note, however, how many of these proposals come directly under the head of "popularizing" the Park. It is easy to imagine with what sparkle arguments the promoters of fancy dress carnivals, the champions of gymnasiums and weighing machines, and those who asked special privileges for Aeolian harps, ice-boating, and telescopes declared that all they did was for the direct advantage of the people.

Yet this is how the Commissioners characterized all such schemes in their annual report on Dec. 31, 1863:

"Having become the resort of large assemblages of people, the Park is consid-



President J. P. Mitchel of the Board of Aldermen.

ered too advantageous a field for advertising to be neglected by those who would force their wares upon the public attention at every turn. The regulations on this subject have been enforced thoroughly, and these practices are thus far kept in abeyance.

"If all the applications for the erection and maintenance of towers, houses, drinking fountains, telescopes, mineral water fountains, cottages, aeolian harps, gymnasiums, observatories, weighing scales,

for the sale of eatables, velocipedes, perambulators, Indian work, tobacco, cigars, for the privilege of using steam engines, snow shoes, ice boats, and for the use of the ice for fancy dress carnivals, were granted they would occupy a large portion of the surface of the Park, establish a very extensive and very various business, and give it the appearance of the grounds of a country fair, or of a militia training field.

"A catalogue of applications to use the lawns, the trees, the roads, the walks, and the waters for purposes entirely foreign to the objects of the Park, and utterly incompatible with its preservation, would give some idea of the ease with which the Park could be overrun if these applications met with favor.

"The absurdity of the uses proposed does not always appear to the applicants, and their persistence seems sometimes to increase with the inappropriateness of the objects they desire to attain.

"The Park is an inclosed ground devoted to such popular amusements as can, with proper regard to the convenience and pleasure of the general public, be enjoyed in the open air.

"This area is situated in the centre of the city, having a population not altogether homogeneous, reared in different climates, and bringing to the society of the metropolis views of labor and ideas of social enjoyment differing as widely as the temperature of the various countries of their origin. A day's work in the large cities of Europe and a day's work in New York are not the same; the amusements and routines of the daily life of the Sicilian and Scotchman are dissimilar.

"Each brings with him the traditions and the habits of his own country. The work of fusing the people of differing



Borough President McAneny.

nationalities into a homogeneous body can be accomplished only during the life of two or three generations, and it would be difficult to prescribe the rules that would satisfy these dissimilar tastes and habits.

"The most that can be attained at the Park is to afford an opportunity for those recreations or entertainments that are generally acceptable, and to exclude such a considerable number, in practice impair the attractions of a common place of recreation to much larger numbers."

Even the attempt to utilize some of Central Park for organized sports and games brought grave difficulties, and there is surely something very appropriate in view of the latest plans for exploiting the Park in the bitterness of the experience betrayed by the following passage from the report for 1865. It is evident that the Commissioners found that once any games were permitted in Central Park the pressure on them was tremendous, and they were driven to make fervent appeals for the revival of the true park ideal. They say:

"In furtherance of an intention expressed in a previous report the board has afforded opportunities to the students of the Free Academy and to boys of the public schools to play at cricket and baseball upon the playground. The St. George Cricket Club have kindly volunteered the services of their professional players to give to these students instructions in the art of playing cricket, and many of them have availed themselves of the offer.

"It will be obviously impracticable to furnish grounds for the numerous ball clubs that are desirous of playing on the Park.

"It seems difficult for them to realize that the large open surface of turf that to the cultivated taste is among the most attractive features of the Park can have any other use than that of a playground.

"Nothing is more certain than that the beauty of these lawns would soon be lost, and that they would be rendered disagreeable objects if these games were to be constantly played upon them.

"If the play of one club is allowed others will demand the same privilege; and these clubs are so numerous that if space were provided for the ordinary practice of their games it would tend to depreciate the attractions of the Park to the far greater number who visit it for the refined pleasures that its landscape affords to those who are sensitive to natural beauties.

"These spacious open glades will, with the growth of each successive year, present a more marked and grateful contrast with the planted parts of the grounds.

"It is not to be inferred that they are wastes without use because they are not walked upon; both the plantations and the wide sweep of the lawn are essential to the completeness and variety of the scene; their largest use is in the gratification they afford to those fitted for enjoyment of this nature; and this use is not to be diminished to accommodate sports of themselves innocent and worthy of en-

couragement, but participated in by comparatively few persons."

At this period the population within the hall of Central Park was small enough to make it possible to make arrangements for the use of its lawns for the play of the public school children of the neighborhood with some kind of success, and this system was continued for some years till the growth of numbers made it impracticable.

In the report dated April 30, 1872, the Commissioners, however, once more give vent to their indignation at the uses to which it has been proposed to put the Park. They say:

"The new Court House has been a great deal discussed during the last few years, but, in all that has been written, a demand has probably not been made that certain of its rooms should be fitted up with billiard tables or suitably for religious services, or public demonstrations in anatomy; the lack of a convenient carriage way to the roof or to the lunch-counter has not been complained of, for it has been proposed to remedy the present cramped, inconvenient, and unattractive arrangements for refreshments by devoting the more spacious of the court rooms to this purpose.

"The fact that such changes of the plan would, in some limited view, be improvements does not hide the larger fact that the acceptance of but a few portions of the same character would soon completely ruin the building for the purposes which it has been built expressly to serve, and in reference to which, whatever value it may have, is presumed to lie.

"But propositions quite as fantastic are not infrequently made with earnestness in regard to the Park. It has, for example, been seriously proposed that it should be used as a place of burial for the more distinguished dead of the city; that all religious sects should be invited to build places of worship upon it, and offer to the city a more central feature should be introduced corresponding in obvious importance to the dwelling in private grounds; that this should be a grand people's cathedral in which all sects, might unite in a common litany; that it should be an exhibition and advertisement of the goods for sale in the city; that it should be many other things as diverse in character as the worship of God and of Mammon.

"It has been urged that the plan of the Park should be so contrived that an illustration would be presented on a large though miniature scale of the geography of the continent; an illustration of the geological structure of the earth; a living cabinet of botany; a living museum of zoology.

"Provided the principal constructions in roads, bridges, arches and buildings are not required to be destroyed, no structure which in itself promises to be in any way valuable to the public would seem to be thought by many intelligent citizens out of place anywhere on the site of the Park. Thus the location of great buildings in positions where they would utterly destroy the scale of the growing landscape, where they would, indeed, obliterate the most important Park features, is frequently urged.

"The right has been often claimed to use any part of the Park for any purpose which is lawful to be pursued in the streets of the city; to go upon it upon it, either on foot or in any vehicle.

"A street railway through the midst of the Park has been called for; steamboats and even a full-rigged ship have been proposed to be placed in its waters.

"New roads have been called for, crossing and severally destroying, for their original purpose, the most important features of the design. It has been proposed to widen every principal walk not laid directly alongside of a drive, and throw it open to carriages.

"A demand has more than once been made for a change in important features to the plan, for no other reason than that particular business speculations would be thereby rendered more promising.

"The use of various parts of the ground, assume to be at present unoccupied, has been asked for horse races, for steeplechases, for experiments with sundry new machines, for various kinds of advertising, for the sale of various wares, for popular meetings, for transient preaching, for distributing controversial tracts.

"Room on which to erect tents and make inclosures within the Park for circuses, concerts, trials of strength and skill, and all manner of popular exhibitions has been frequently applied for with confidence.

"As the city grows larger projects for the public benefit multiply, and become more valuable, and the Park more and more really central, applications for the use of ground in it for various more or less plausible purposes, are likely to become increasingly frequent and increasingly urgent, and there will thus be a strong tendency to its conversion into a great, perpetual, metropolitan fair ground, in the plan and administration of which no general purpose need be recognized other than to offer, for the recreation of those who may visit it, a desultory collocation of miscellaneous entertainments, tangled together by a series of crooked roads and walks and richly decorated with flowers and trees, fountains and statuary.

"The only solid ground of resistance to dangers of this class will be found to rest in the conviction that the Park throughout is a single work of art, and as such subject to the primary law of art—namely, that it shall be framed upon a single noble motive, to which the design of all its parts, in some more or less subtle way, shall be confluent and helpful."

Since these days in quite recent years, when Central Park has attained to its full beauty and it would seem that a certain tradition should have grown up about its uses, schemes hardly less reprehensible than those mentioned above have been put forward for its exploitation. Worst of all was the Speedway, which was to have run up the west side of the Park. Besides it has been proposed to turn all the southern area into a bare parade ground, to construct a stadium at the north end, to find a site for the National Academy of Design, at one time in a gate at the top of Seventh Avenue, at another on the ground occupied by the old Arsenal.

Every now and then some one has come along with projects for the conversion of Central Park into something different from what it is. It has been suggested that it might be cut up into building lots for cottaged homes for the favored few. It has been proposed that it should be refashioned after the manner of the Champs Elysees in Paris or the Ringstrasse in Vienna. It has even been said that it might be sold to pay the debts of the city. Only by the public-spirited action of private citizens, who have come forward again and again when Central Park has been attacked, and have spent freely their time and money, has the Park been preserved as it is, and truly it may be said of it that the price of its conservation is eternal vigilance.