



# The Library Branch

The Parks Library

Room 240, The Arsenal, Central Park

64th Street & Fifth Avenue

Number 4

December 2001

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## DECEMBER LIBRARY EVENTS

**Free screenings of the final two episodes of *New York: A Documentary Film!***

**Friday, December 14: *Episode 6* —and— *Thursday, December 20: Episode 7***

Episode 6 discusses New York in the aftermath of the Crash of '29. The shock of the Great Depression did not stop Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia and master builder Robert Moses from creating new parks, highways, schools, bridges, and tunnels. In America's most dreary hour, they dreamed to make New York into the city of the future.

Episode 7 picks up after World War II and explores the social, economic, and physical forces that swept through the city in the '40s, '50s, and '60s, especially the great African-American migration and Puerto Rican immigration; the beginnings of white flight and suburbanization; and the massive physical changes wrought by highways and urban renewal all of which were directed, to a surprising degree, by one man: Robert Moses.

*The events will begin at 5:30 p.m. Space is limited; please RSVP by calling 212-360-8240 or email [Library@parks.nyc.gov](mailto:Library@parks.nyc.gov)*

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## COMPLETION OF THE HISTORICAL SIGNS PROJECT:

### *2001 Historical Signs Installed by the End of 2001*

During Commissioner Stern's administration more than 30 writers and researchers worked in the Parks Library creating hundreds of historical and natural history sign texts. More than 2001 signs have been written. All will be installed in parks throughout the five boroughs by the end of this month. To view them you can visit [www.nyc.gov/parks](http://www.nyc.gov/parks). The following is one of the last natural history signs written.

### HOUSE SPARROWS IN NEW YORK CITY PARKS

#### Greenwood Playground

If you look around Greenwood Playground, you will probably see house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) near the benches. This small brown bird has a black bib (throat). Only 200 years ago, there were no house sparrows on the entire continent of North America. Today, it is estimated that there are over 150,000,000. The dramatic rise of the house sparrow in New York City and throughout North America can be attributed to 19th century industrialization and to the introduction of the species to this playground's namesake Green-Wood Cemetery.

Green-Wood Cemetery serves as not only the resting-place for such famous New Yorkers as Samuel F. B. Morse, Boss Tweed, and Horace Greeley, but also contains hills and ponds with abundant wildlife. Opened in 1840, Green-Wood's 478 acres were the city's first large-scale parklands, inspiring the creation of Central Park, which opened 33 years later.

There are conflicting rumors about why the sparrow was first brought to the United States. Some attribute its arrival to a group of well-read people who tried to introduce the birds mentioned in William Shakespeare's plays into the United States. Others believe that a single man imported the sparrow from England because he wanted to be reminded of home. Most people, however, agree that the house sparrow was brought to the United States because it was an attractive bird that could also control the growing insect populations of the time.

To accommodate the burgeoning human population of the city during the first half of the 19th century, much of the natural landscape was cleared away to make room for new housing and commercial developments. This extensive industrialization drove out many of New York City's native species, disturbing the natural balance of predator and prey. Insect infestations of trees and other plants became a major problem. Having heard that the house sparrows of European cities helped to control insect infestations, a group of New Yorkers imported eight pairs from England in 1850 and released them into the city. They survived for a time, but died before they were able to breed.

Soon afterward, Nicholas Pike, the director of the Brooklyn Institute, traveled to Liverpool, England to collect more sparrows. This time, 100 house sparrows were shipped back to the city. Half of them were released on arrival in 1851, while the other half were bred in nearby Green-Wood Cemetery. These 50 birds were originally kept in the tower of the cemetery, but when they seemed unhappy, a leading citizen brought

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Rudolph W. Giuliani, Mayor

Henry J. Stern, Commissioner

Katherine O. Clark, Librarian

[www.nyc.gov/parks](http://www.nyc.gov/parks)

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them to his house for the winter. The following year, these birds were released into Green-Wood, where a man was employed to take care of them.

This second wave succeeded where the first had failed. Due to the success of the introduction into Green-Wood Cemetery, several more shipments of sparrows arrived and were released in the cemetery and also Central Park, Union Square Park, and Madison Square Park. Other cities also imported sparrows from England or even from New York City, including Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco. While some considered the sparrows to be a loud nuisance, others were pleased that the birds were feeding on insects. In Boston, some citizens placed such a high value on their sparrows that a man was hired to shoot other birds that threatened them.

The house sparrow population grew so large because it was one of the first species to successfully populate urban areas. If there had been other dominant urban bird species, the house sparrow might not have survived. While the house sparrow population experienced a surge in one century, it has suffered a more recent decline due to the technological advances of the 20th century. As automobiles replaced horses for transportation and steel replaced wood for construction, the house sparrow could no longer nest in its usual areas and could not feed on oats scattered by horses. As the house sparrow population decreased, other species' populations, such as the pigeon (*Columbia livia*), have grown. Despite declines in population, the house sparrow remains ubiquitous, having spread widely after its introduction to Green-Wood Cemetery. Today, Parks discourages the feeding of birds or squirrels in playgrounds because the leftover food can attract rats.

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## ***BOOKS OF THE MONTH***

### **The Power of Place – Urban Landscapes as Public History**

*By Dolores Hayden*

*"The Power of Place is a well-timed, well-reasoned call for fusing history and the environment to create a more democratic and inclusive interpretation of the places in which most of us live and work."*

—Joseph Giovannini, The New York Times Review

### **City-Building in America**

*By Anthony M. Orum*

*"A thorough and penetrating analysis of the rise and decline of the industrial urban heartland which, thanks both to its historicals and comparative dimensions, illuminates the contemporary urban dilemma."*

—John Mollenkopf, CUNY Graduate Center

### **Cash, Tokens, and Transfers – A History of Urban Mass Transit in North America**

*By Brian J. Cudahy*

*"Cudahy's well-documented, exhaustive history covers nearly two centuries...For transportation historians and ferryboat bluffs, here is a treasure trove."*

—Publishers Weekly

### **The Economy of Cities**

*By Jane Jacobs*

*"This book is radiant with ideas about what makes cities rich or poor, how cities grow, and how city growth affects national economies."*

—The New Yorker

### **Walking the Hudson, Batt to Bear: From the Battery to Bear Mountain**

*By Cy A. Adler*

*"Cy is the acknowledged expert of what's on the ground. He's been there. He's done it, and he has shown the rest of us the way."*

—Dave Lutz, New York Neighborhood Open Space Coalition

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## ***ABOUT THE LIBRARY***

The Parks Library is open to the public Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. If you have any questions, please feel free to call 212-360-8240, or you can write us at our new, easy to remember e-mail address: [Library@parks.nyc.gov](mailto:Library@parks.nyc.gov).