Doc Chat Episode Thirty-Three Transcript

The 1811 Plan For Manhattan, A Treasure of The New York Public Library (October 7, 2021)

JULIE GOLIA: Welcome to Doc Chat. I am Julie Golia. I'm the curator of history, social sciences and government information here at the New York Public Library, and Doc Chat, for those of you who haven't attended, is a weekly program of the NYPL Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections, and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. So today, this is the first of several episodes this season where we're going to take a deep dive into some of the really remarkable materials featured in our new permanent exhibition, the Polonsky exhibition of the New York Public Library's Treasures, and tickets are now available for this free exhibition, which you can reserve at the link that I am about to pop into the chat. So in our episode today -- me multitasking -- in our episode today, Sarah Spink, curatorial associate for the Polonsky exhibition of the New York Public Library's Treasures, is joined by Ian Fowler, who is our curator of maps and geospatial librarian. Sarah and Ian are going to discuss the 1811 Commissioners' Map and survey of Manhattan Island, and reveal how that map laid the groundwork for the development of the city. Our guests are going to speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, please feel free to use the chat function and share general comments, though make sure you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees, so everybody is included, like I just didn't do when I pop something into the chat, and I will send it again. Once we begin the question and answer segment please use Zoom's question and answer function rather than the chat function to pose a question. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting a question. And we'd also like to know a little bit more about you, so I'm going to ask you to fill out the poll that I am about to launch now, and I am going to pass it over to Sarah and Ian.

SARAH SPINK: Thanks so much, Julie. I'm really excited to kick off this series of treasures episodes. Go to the first slide here, so this is what we'll be speaking about today. It's the Commissioners' Map and survey of Manhattan Island. This is one of about 250 rare and unique items from across the library's research centers that is featured in our new treasures exhibition, which opened on September 24th. It's our first ever permanent exhibition, and it's loosely structured in nine very broad thematic sections. New York City is one of those sections, and this map is really the centerpiece of that section, and so I want to show you a view of it in the gallery. Here it is. Here it's flanked by artwork by Romere Bearden on the left, and Saul Steinberg on the right, and this also gives a sense of scale. This map is actually about nine feet tall, which I know has surprised some of our visitors who have studied it, but not seen it in person, and we consider this to be a treasure because this is really one of the most important documents in New York City's development. It's essentially the master plan of Manhattan. It's the original
design for the streets above Houston Street, and so in the next slide here I'm showing a detail of the southern portion of the map, which is showing the existing grid of streets and how early New York grew very organically and the streets were sort of planned around natural features like hills and creeks and private property lines, so it's very tangled and disorganized, and the population of the city tripled between 1790 and 1810, so there was a real need to sort of regulate the city's anticipated development northward, and the Common Council of New York City wanted to develop a means of orderly development, but they were prevented by local politics and property owners, so the New York State Legislature stepped in to appoint of commission in 1807, but the idea for the grid wasn't new, and this wasn't the first plan, and I think it's going to tell us a little bit about a preceding plan.

IAN FOWLER: Thanks, Sarah. Yeah, so what we're looking at here is the Casimir Goerck and Joseph Mangin plan from 1803. Casimir's life is a little occluded, but he was a surveyor. Mangin, of course, was both a famous surveyor and architect. He was one of the designers of City Hall for New York City, and what you can see here is a plan where, as Sarah was saying, in the dense, formerly Dutch New Amsterdam portion, we have that kind of wild organic seaport kind of feel of the grid, and then above that, we have this rectilinear grid that goes up, and what I love about this is this was rejected by the Common Council as being deranged because what Mangin and Goerck had done is they had placed the grid on top of what already existed as a system of private streets, church property, orchards, farms, and created this out of kind of whole cloth, and so this is rejected wildly, but we'll see how this kind of idea of a grid being over -- traced over on top of natural and existing topography, and property, actually, is what comes to pass in just a few short years.

SPINK: Thanks, Ian. So I think one of the things that you mentioned to me in our conversation the other day is that what distinguishes this plan from the commissioners' plan is that the commissioners' plan was more of a top-down endeavor, rather than an individual's ideas.

FOWLER: Yeah, and so what we see with Commissioners' Map, and here we have the seals of each of the three commissioners, is we have, as you mentioned, this is coming down from Albany, and then to the city of New York, and then getting this larger grant of approval from the government structures and the bureaucracy. Whereas Goerck and Mangin surveyed for themselves that portion of the island of Manhattan, and then kind of came up with this idea of the grid overlaid on top. That was very much from their own imaginations and their own plans for the city, and what its future could be like, and which is very different, in some ways, than what we'll see with the commissioners' plan.

SPINK: Great. So the commissioners' seals and signatures are visible at the bottom of the plan. I just wanted to touch briefly on each of them. I think there's no -- I don't think that we know exactly why these men were chosen to be the commissioners. Other than that they were sort of wealthy individuals who lived in the New York City area, but they were very accomplished, and so Gouverneur Morris served in the Continental Congress and actually wrote the preamble to the Constitution. John Rutherford was a relative of Morris and served as a Senator for New
Jersey and Simeon De Witt was himself an accomplished surveyor who had made maps for George Washington and the American Revolution, which that's interesting, and I did also want to say that our map is one of three original manuscript versions, all of which are still in existence. So one of the things that I think makes this so interesting is that the plan grid, as Ian said, overlays existing topography, and you can see some of the contemporary structures and property owners' names, and I chose these two details because there are some familiar names on them like Livingston, Roosevelt, Astor, and Schermerhorn, and also the Harlem Marsh here is very prominent up around 106th Street, which obviously, is no longer there, so I thought Ian and I could talk a little bit about the implementation of the plan and how drastically that changed the geography of the island. The commissioners appointed John Randall Jr, who was just 20 years old, as their secretary and surveyor and I think he was sort of a protege of Simeon De Witt, and so this plan reflects his first round of surveying. He established the distances between the avenues and the widths for the blocks, but he was -- the whole idea was definitely contested by property owners at the time, including John Jacob Astor, and he was often arrested for trespassing. There's some anecdotes about people throwing vegetables at his team when they came through their land, but it was enforced over the next 60 or so years, and it was incredibly complicated. The city purchased land, subdivided estates, demolished buildings, leveled terrains, opened streets. I think some of the property owners had to sort of foot the bill for some of that and fill in their own land to bring it up to street grade, and there were a lot of elevation changes, as you might imagine, so I think most of them are actually less than 10 feet, but some on the West Side changed by as much as 118. So I'm just showing a little before and after here of 42nd Street and Second Avenue.

FOWLER: Yeah, that's great. I think if you could go back to the slide before this, just so we --

SPINK: Sure.

FOWLER: -- can look at the grid a little bit. I think there are a couple of points about the Commissioners' Map when you come to see it in the treasures exhibit that are good to keep in mind when looking at this gigantic over-nine-foot-tall map is that the grid for New York, it's designed -- and this is in the pamphlet that accompanied the original three manuscript versions of the map -- is designed for economy, and while other cities like what would become Washington DC we're exploring like using roundabouts and circles and more of the European, especially French, model of city design, what the commissioners decided for Manhattan was something that was purely economic. Rectilinear streets and a grid provide the greatest cost efficiency for creating homes and buildings, and what they also wanted was a just purely economic and commercial city, with the East River and the Hudson River providing those kinds of economic engines, and then the system of streets and avenues just being purely used for the movement of people, goods, services, and providing that economic engine. And if you read the manuscript notes that come with the map, the only three things they cared about were the economy, water, and having a parade ground for military exercise, and economy is mentioned twice, and the water, of course, being the reservoir that the New York Public Library is currently situated, so I think when you know, people question the grid, there's lots of sentimentalists at the
time, including Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes later in the 20th century, who, when they had to level the entire island of Manhattan, as you showed in the slide after this, a lot of people were rebelling against that as the taking away of the character, and kind of finding those secluded spots on the island, and just purely turning it into pretty much what we have today, the gridded metropolis.

SPINK: That's so interesting, and I know also the division of land into standardized lots kind of laid the framework for the modern real estate market in a way too. I also wanted to say that the commissioners thought that their boundary of 155th Street -- so that's one of the things that you'll see on this map is that the streets stop at 155 Street. Now, obviously, they also haven't thought of Central Park yet, so those are kind of the two main distinctions or easy-to-spot distinctions between the city that we know today and this map. They thought it would take centuries to reach 155th Street and in fact, development approached by the 1860s, and the whole grid was fully laid out by the end of the 19th century.

FOWLER: Yeah, it was definitely -- and it's interesting, because the commissioners who were on the Commission for the map, a lot of them were also on -- I think all three of them actually were also on the Commission for the Erie Canal, which is one of the reasons that the map is approved and the grid is established so quickly, is because they were much more interested in the lucrative opportunities that they had the Erie Canal than they did with being on this commission that really provided them -- and they're thinking of the time, with not much more than a bureaucratic role, so and then those two obviously combined to have that growth north of what is now Harlem. And I would say just looking at these parts here. Egbert Viele who is credited with the with the view of 42nd Street on the next slide, he creates a cemetery and topographic map of New York City that we also have in the collection that's very famous, and as we're thinking about climate change, it's really interesting to look at the Commissioners' Map and see those places like the Harlem Marsh that we've paved over, but now every time we have something like Superstorm Sandy or the last couple storms that came through, those are the areas of the original topography, the original waterways that we see the biggest impact from, so it's another interesting way to look at the map, both in terms of modernizing the city from the grid, but then also the changes that it made that we're kind of dealing with now, such as the filling of the -- those low-lying areas, and the expansion of the waterfront, obviously into both the Hudson and East rivers. It looks like we have a couple questions. Let's see.

GOLIA: Yeah, we're going to be -- if folks have questions, you should feel free to put them in the question and answer module in Zoom, and we will answer them. We do have one in the chat, and so I'll cheat a little and ask it here. Can you all talk about the decision not to have alleyways between the streets, resulting in the need to deposit garbage on the sidewalks in New York?

FOWLER: Yeah, it's interesting, especially when you look at cities like Philadelphia or New Orleans, which had grids before New York, which have alleyways, or of course, Chicago, which is famous for its alley system, I would say, as a former Chicagoan, but it was never really considered for New York, because what they were thinking was that the island was so narrow
that sanitation wouldn't really be a problem, and again, the -- for this map, which is the original one, and the second one they do a few years later, in which Randall actually goes out and surveys more of the island, they're really just thinking about this in terms of economics, and it's really just like a bureaucratic rubber stamp in a way, so you really don't get into that level of city planning until after the plan has already been approved, as well, so it's very New York I think in its short-sighted foresightedness.

GOLIA: There is so much about this map that is like just quintessentially New York, and one of them is the military parade ground and economy thing that you raised earlier. I wonder if the commissioners had a sense or any kind of acknowledgement at the time of the consequences of a plan like this. I mean, I'm thinking just in terms of the consequences of the way that people move and, you know, traffic moves and the consequences on the built environment. I'm particularly struck, Ian, by your observations about climate change. I mean, so many of, so many aspects of the way that the island was altered in the 19th, and largely in the 20th century have real deleterious environmental impacts. Is there any acknowledgement or thoughts about that at this time?

FOWLER: Really, what you get when you -- especially when you read the report that accompanies the map is they're really just upset that everything in New York costs so much money, so they wanted to have a bigger parade ground that was further south, but they couldn't afford the land because it cost so much so they put it in Pitts Bay [phonetic]. They argue that there's no -- that there's not as much green space as you would find in other cities, because the two rivers provide such a wonderful environment for the human condition that what more could you ask for? And so they're really not thinking about much of anything except economy, and the frustrations of dealing with the nascent early 19th century real estate market in New York, and those are really the driving factors, and then also their complete distraction with the Erie Canal, which, yeah, really takes away from what could have been, and which we deal with later on.

GOLIA: Maybe a future Doc Chat.

FOWLER: Perhaps.

GOLIA: Another question, I think is, you know, I think often when we think about the development of the city upward, if you will, along Manhattan, we think about the displacement of communities. I think one of the like, the most obvious one that comes to mind is the building of Central Park and the displacement of Seneca Village, but can you guys speak a little bit about any communities that might have been sort of affected and displaced by this plan?

FOWLER: There obviously were some communities -- we don't know much about them, unfortunately -- similar to Seneca Village, kind of groups that found themselves either uncomfortable or cast out of the city center, south of Houston Street and really south of Canal Street, but there certainly were. They're referenced in Randall's surveying notes, but unfortunately, there's at least as far as I've been able to see, not a lot of like discrete
information, like we have about Seneca Village or those things, but there definitely were both communities and then isolated groups of what were referred to as squatters, and then a few enterprising individuals that had kind of -- foreseeing the growth of New York and purchased parcels up in the island, but hadn't really, as I think they refer to it, improved the land much.

GOLIA: A couple of really interesting questions coming in from one attendee, when did the city -- interesting term, very -- a large term -- when did the city start to take into account livability, things like trees, open areas, light?

FOWLER: That really does not begin to happen, until not too much later, about the 1850s and 1860s, and that is reflected in what Sarah was talking about earlier, is the rapid, rapid expansion of the population and the economy of the city, the clogging of the ports on both the Hudson and East Rivers, and then you get this pushback that the city is just unlivable without open space, and that's also a reflection of movements in urban design that are happening in the United Kingdom and in France and in other parts of Europe, and so the idea of having a livable city and not just an economic engine where people happen to reside, really takes over and that's really when you get the beginnings of the nascent park system, especially Central Park, Prospect Park, the larger parks in Queens coming together, and then that's developed further throughout the entire history of city planning in New York through to today.

GOLIA: This is making me think that we should do a parks movement episode of Doc Chat. I'm adding that to my notes. Gail asks, some east-west streets are wider than the norm. Do the adjacent blocks adjust to this by becoming narrower north-south or do they remain normal while the grid increases slightly north-south?

FOWLER: Oh, this is like a math question.

GOLIA: I know. I'm thinking the same thing, and I wonder if I can even -- forgive me, Gail -- broaden it out a little bit and say like, it is interesting that some streets are wider and narrower than others. Was there a logic or a consideration about the way this would work and why?

FOWLER: There was, and it kind of gets, like everything -- so there was originally a plan for the streets and avenues to be a uniform width, and then that kind of got modified and adjusted time and again, as two things happened, one, the relation of the east and west streets to different parts of the ports and the usage of the ports on the Hudson and East River, and then also the different topographies that happened to be in place when they were leveling the island, and a third, which is less, but it's still existent was just some surveying errors that happened when they were measuring width of avenues and streets. The other thing that's of important consideration is there's a very big difference between the number of avenues that are on the original plan, and the number of avenues on the revised plan of 1814, and the number of avenues that are on the actual implementation of the plan, and so that does change the width, so the original avenues tend to be wider, and the newer avenues tend to be a little bit less wide in some cases.
GOLIA: Sarah, I'm struck by this map. You know, we're looking at this on a computer screen right now. We're looking at some close ups, but I'm struck by, you know, the idea of a map as a document, as a source of research, but then, of course, in the exhibition, it is an artifact, right? It's -- so it's kind of a different experience. How do you sort of recommend people navigate it in this space? And in what ways is it in dialogue with some of the other things around in Treasures?

SPINK: Sure. In the current iteration of the exhibition, and I will say the exhibition is going to change over time, it's going to be on view for 75 years, so we're going to have a lot of opportunity to switch things out and bring new things in and sort of create new dialogues between the objects. Right now, this is one of just a handful, actually, that's sort of pointing to the early development in the history of Manhattan. We have some of the earliest money in New York City history, which is circa 1708, obviously, predating this by quite a bit. We have another map in the New York City section, which I do think creates sort of an interesting conversation. I might ask Ian to jump in a little bit about this, too, but he mentioned Stokes earlier in our conversation, and that is a really fascinating document. That's an early 20th century recreation through survey data, and very meticulous research to sort of document the exact buildings, public spaces, like everything precisely as it was in, in early Manhattan history, because if I'm remembering correctly, there wasn't really an accurate document up until that time.

FOWLER: Yes, so when Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes was doing his research here in the fabulous New York Public Library for his iconography of Manhattan Island, one of the greatest and most thorough histories of the city ever produced, there's a map that we have in the Wallach Division of Prints that shows New Amsterdam when it was Dutch, but it showed the city largely empty. It had the canals, it had the streets, but had very few buildings, just really the fort, a few churches, and a few buildings, and Stokes found that this was completely incomprehensible, and also this map had influenced the way that the Dutch history of Manhattan in New York City, New Amsterdam had been viewed, and so he found in our collections, a census of all the residences, buildings, and people, kind of a city directory, from the 17th century and him and his team of researchers went through it page by page and building by building and put them all in on the map, and so that's what's reflected in treasures is this recreation of what Stokes felt was actual New Amsterdam, which is truer to what it was, which was a bustling commercial port city, kind of the emblem in the western hemisphere of the Dutch West India Company, and so yeah, that's an important -- extremely important map that's in the treasures exhibit, and which puts into kind of interesting contrast, something that's recreated from a map that's empty, versus the Commissioners' Map, which makes something that's very kind of filled in and full from a place that was entirely pretty much natural vegetation and topography.

GOLIA: So a couple of really interesting -- oh, Sarah, go ahead.

SPINK: Sorry. I just wanted to go back actually to the in-gallery shot because I do think that the juxtaposition of this map with the Saul Steinberg cartoon is a really great sort of moment to
compare, and it's a humorous comparison, the Steinberg cartoon, you can't see it here, but it's --
he wrote at the bottom that this is Bleecker and MacDougal in February of 1523, so there's this
sort of opportunity to think about the development of the land. The other things in the exhibition,
we speak a little bit to, you know, social reform, tenement development, and also other civic
projects, like the building of the Statue of Liberty, and then get more into like, you know, cultural
accomplishments like the In the Heights, that model that we have.

GOLIA: They're so --

SPINK: You know, broadly, they sort of all tie into a narrative. But --

GOLIA: There's nothing like standing in front of a map like this and just looking at it for a while,
so everybody should come and see it in person. We have a couple really great questions sort of
moving past this map. Can you talk about later decisions to do things like extending Seventh
Avenue through The Village? This was a question of mine, too, what happens below Houston.

FOWLER: Yeah, so a lot of that is the inadequacies of the grid, so as, especially as the island
expands, as we fill in all the way around the island, we create The Battery, you know, we fill in at
least two to three avenues, depending on which river you're talking about. We've obviously gone
well past what the grid was intended to, both just in terms of actual landmass, and then also the
dramatic changes in technology that happened between the early 19th century and the 20th
century, so that kind of happens, as a response to that. The original plan, the town of Greenwich
was really intractable in kind of adopting the grid and were left alone, so it is kind of a victory for
the commissioners many decades later, to put the avenue through.

GOLIA: And a great example of sort of the deleterious impact of development. If you look at
pictures of them building the Seventh Avenue subway in the ’20s, for example, it's just a
remarkable amount of destruction, and you can see the evidence of that in the shapes of the
buildings in the village today. Here's another interesting question. Moses ripped out part of the
grid to make super blocks that have their own issues, and this is the part of the question I think,
is fantastic. Is there an urban area in the U.S. or elsewhere that you guys think has a better
balance between order, economy, and livability? Wonderful question.

FOWLER: I will say that Skopje, the capital of Macedonia is one of those places. It's a rare gem
in urban planning in that it was an idealized, utopian city whose development had to be
abandoned at the height of its construction due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and so to
this day, it stands as kind of this frozen-in-time idealized place, and if you ever get a chance to
visit, it is a kind of depressing, but wonderful idea of what we all could have done.

GOLIA: How cool. Sarah, thoughts?

SPINK: I'm not sure I have anything else [inaudible]
GOLIA: How do you [inaudible]. Then we'll get to Macedonia.


GOLIA: And here, we're going to have time for one last question. The grid is known for shaping housing for the poor, mental dependents, in a distinct way, as well as row houses for middle class and upper classes. Does it shape businesses in the same way?

FOWLER: 100,000%, yes. If you just do a quick survey of zoning regulations in the City of New York, beginning with the first skyscrapers, the shape of the grid distinctly impacted businesses. It's the reason that we have air rights now. It's the reason that in this part of Midtown and upper Midtown, we have the super skinny super towers, so pretty much, yeah, the grid, businesses, the growth of the city, the recognized inability to expand anywhere else because of the narrowness of the island, and the shape and demographics of the other boroughs at the time and the need to go vertical. Those are all direct responses to the grid, and the focus on Manhattan as the economic and cultural engine of the city, so yeah. It's impacted everything.

GOLIA: I think this is a great place to wrap up. Thank you to both of you. This is fascinating and actually has raised so many interesting questions. So I'm going to post a bunch of things into the chat for you all, links to the collection items that we looked at today, and other resources along with the video and transcript of this episode will be published shortly on the NYPL blog. We'll send that out to all registrants via e-mail, and all previous episodes can be found there as well. The easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the research at NYPL channel of New York Public Library's blog and you'll find a link in the chat I just put there. So Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. On our next episode which honors indigenous peoples day, New York Public Library's Emily Walz and Elizabeth Cronin are joined by historian Lisa Blee to examine the life and image of the Inuit performer, Nancy Columbia, discussing how she appealed to and defied stereotypes as an indigenous woman in modern American society. You can register at the link I just put in the chat and look for future Doc Chat event pages on New York Public Library's calendar, research newsletter, and social media. Thank you, Sarah. Thank you, Ian. Thank you everybody, for coming, and have a great week. We'll see you next week.