

“Stuffed Shirts” or Progressive Reformers:
*Opposition to the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge, the Demolition of Fort Clinton, and Robert Moses’
Vision for New York City*

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Introduction

During the Great Depression, the landscape of New York City underwent an immense transformation, made possible by the availability of vast New Deal funding. The man in charge of allocating much of this newfound federal capital was Robert Moses, Chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority (TBA) and Commissioner of the Parks Department. In this capacity, Moses was able to shape the city and the surrounding metropolitan region in ways that reflected his personal views of modern urban design. Bridges and parks were essential elements of his vision. Moses' desire to build bridges reflected his larger goal of constructing an arterial highway system meant to link the entire metropolitan region into a more traversable unit. For example, using New Deal money, Moses was able to complete the Triborough Bridge in 1936. The toll revenue collected from this bridge gave Moses, as Chairman of the TBA, millions of dollars to construct other public works projects, independently of the state or city governments. As Chairman, Moses determined where new bridges and tunnels were necessary and the design that these structures would take. Similarly, New Deal money enabled Moses to continue building parks, a lifelong mission that he had started in the 1920s under Governor Alfred E. Smith. During the Depression, New York City attracted one-seventh of all Works Progress Administration money, with Moses behind much of this success. With this money, Moses hired tens of thousands of laborers to construct 255 new playgrounds, 17 pools, two zoos, and three beaches. These projects reflected Moses' belief that recreation had the power to uplift the public spirit. As Parks Commissioner, Moses determined where new parks would be located and how existing parks would be refurbished.¹

¹ There are a number of works that discuss Moses' career during the Great Depression and New Deal era. For my paper, I will be drawing upon the arguments made in Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York* (New York, 2007); Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, LA Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York, 2013);

Moses had such confidence in his own abilities, aided by a dotting press, that he often wielded power unquestioningly. Thus, in January 1939, when Moses announced plans to build the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge, the “missing link” in his arterial highway system, he was confident that it would gain approval. He was convinced of the benefits of this plan and the support he received from notable men, such as Mayor Fiorello La Guardia and Brooklyn Borough President Raymond Ingersoll, legitimized his position. Nevertheless, a well-organized and equally prominent group of men quickly voiced their opposition to the proposed bridge. All attempts to discredit the opposition failed, and Moses was eventually denied permission to construct the bridge. Moses’ subsequent involvement in constructing a Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel put him into conflict with many of the same men. This time, the controversy revolved around the proposed demolition of Fort Clinton, a historic structure built in 1808. Moses assured the press that the tunnel construction made the demolition necessary, but the opposition declared that this was a lie. This second debate lasted ten long years. At the end of that period, the determined, oft-triumphant Moses had been defeated once again.

On the surface, these two debates seem rather insignificant. One could argue that the city would not have been drastically altered had the bridge been built or the fort been demolished. However, the issues at stake transcended the existence of the structures themselves. These two debates reflect the much larger questions of the time, namely who controlled the future direction of urban development and what that urban development should look like. While Moses endorsed new construction coupled with demolition of the old as the way to the future, he faced opponents who believed that preservation would most benefit future generations. Similarly, Moses favored

Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York, 1974); Thomas Kessner, *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York* (New York, 1989); August Heckscher with Phyllis Robinson, *When LaGuardia Was Mayor: New York's Legendary Years* (New York, 1978).

functionality in his designs. His opponents did not think function created beauty, and thus favored aesthetics. This essay will explore the political, social, and aesthetic debates over the proposed Brooklyn-Battery Bridge and the proposed demolition of Fort Clinton as a lens into this broader argument regarding the ideal future of New York City. By examining the individuals involved in the debate, and the arguments they put forth, I hope to show that the path of future growth in New York City was still very much unknown in the 1930s and 1940s. That is why, when Moses proposed his bridge plans in early 1939, he created an uproar among certain men of New York's political elite.

Four men led the opposition, all of them former associates of Moses: George McAneny, Stanley Isaacs, Albert Bard, and C. C. Burlingham. Moses had worked with all of them when he began his career in politics. The five men had been involved in progressive reforms to improve the efficiency of the municipal government and save it from the corruption of Tammany Hall. Even at this early stage in his career, in the late-1910s, however, Moses was beginning to define "progress" in a way that differed from his co-workers. That all five men identified as "progressive" says little because there was no set definition of progressivism. Moses and his future opponents felt an equal responsibility to serve their public. Likewise, both sides believed that they were best equipped to interpret, and subsequently champion, the needs of the public. Even more, both sides agreed that the built environment had a powerful effect on the public.

It was not his identity as a progressive then, but rather his vision of an ideal society, that put Moses at odds with his opponents. What Moses envisioned was a truly modern city, one that served the public by providing efficiency and functionality, constructing new structures in order to replace the inefficiencies of the past. In his own words, he was "substituting progress for

obsolescence.”² Moses was also a pragmatic and had little patience for those who were beholden to a set ideology. His opponents, however, were fervent idealists. Furthermore, they did not agree that the past was obsolete. Rather, they feared that Moses’ obsession with “neatness” and functionality would strip the city of its unique character and its rich history. To them, the social good could only be achieved by providing what they defined as aesthetical surroundings. Such an environment provided improvements that went beyond the physical. The benefits of sophisticated design, architecture, and landscaping created a fruitful environment for an education in citizenship. The qualities that created such an environment were manifested in older structures that thus needed to be preserved. These reformers had been influenced by the City Beautiful movement, an effort in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to condition and elevate the public by controlling the physical landscape. They believed that by making the built landscape beautiful, they could affect behavior and create a society that shared similar values, especially an appreciation for the past.³ With equal determination to champion conflicting goals, Moses and his opponents were bound to butt heads. Their debates became personal, and during the 1930s and 1940s the opponents often reverted to name-calling, focusing their attacks on the characters themselves and not only their visions. Both charged the other as out-of-touch with the real needs of the people and thus unable to serve them.

² Robert Moses, *Working for the People: Promise and Performance in Public Service*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 79.

³ The City Beautiful movement did not exclusively tout the benefits of preservation. However, one of the main overarching themes of the movement was the belief in the power of aesthetics to uplift the human spirit. Moses’ opponents adapted the doctrines of City Beautiful to reflect their own valuation of the past, making preservation a component in creating their ideal aesthetical environment. However, New York City at the time was increasingly abandoning preservation for “progress.” In *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism*, Robert Stern argues that it was this unique fascination of New Yorkers with “progress” that inspired a concern for preservation among certain reformers in the city.

As I explore these debates and the differences that they reveal, I will argue that Moses was not simply blinded by an arrogant quest for power, as many have claimed.⁴ Rather he was driven by his vision of what the city could and should be, a vision grounded in his ideals for society. It was because his plans for the bridge and the park were part of this vision that he fought so hard to see them succeed and why the issue so often became personal. The same can be said for his opponents. They proposed an equally “progressive” agenda that reflected their own ideals of societal good. For them, the construction of the bridge and the demolition of the fort threatened their understanding of community values, namely the personal and historical ties of society made possible through existing institutions. That Moses was largely victorious, not in these specific fights, but in the wider debate, makes him a better target for criticism. However, it was less that Moses was a menace than that he had a different idea of what was progressive. Indeed, he had support from other “progressives,” those who agreed that remaking the city would best serve the general population. Furthermore, there were those who argued that the preservationist views of his opponents were detrimental in that they would prevent New York City from embracing a truly modern world. I will expand upon these two visions of the social good, highlighting the different approaches to reaching the same inherent goal, namely serving the public.

The literature on this specific topic tends to focus on the outcome of both debates. In both cases, the federal government intervened to stop Moses. Some historians have thus argued that this debate marks a transformation in municipal government. In *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York*, for example, Mason Williams describes a system

⁴ Three works that I use in this thesis argue that Moses’ power destroyed New York City. They are Robert Caro, *Robert Moses: Single-Minded Genius* (New York, 1974), Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, 1982), and Anthony C. Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City’s Landmarks* (New York, 2008).

of “cooperative federalism” that emerged under the Roosevelt administration, a system that was “characterized by shared national, state, and local responsibility.”⁵ Under this structure, municipal governments were expected to cooperate with the federal government to allow for the efficient functioning of the New Deal public works projects. In “Caro Versus Moses, Round Two,” Jon Teaford suggests a similar interpretation, arguing that the close relationship between the city and the federal government was simply a trend gaining support nationally at the time when Moses was at his greatest power.⁶ Thus, this was not something unique to Moses and New York City. In *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, Robert Caro presents a different interpretation of New York politics during the New Deal. As Caro writes, “in Moses’ chosen spheres of activity, the city no longer had much control over its own destiny.”⁷ Hence, Caro argues that the city was forced to rely increasingly on the federal government because it had lost control of Commissioner Moses. For Caro, the trend was not necessarily national, but was focused squarely on New York City because of the environment created by Moses’ overreach and unquenchable thirst for power.

Despite their different interpretations, these historians would agree that the results of these two particular debates were more significant than the debates themselves. Thus, when the War Department determined that the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge’s existence would be a threat to national security and prohibited its construction or when the federal government eventually signed the necessary documents and provided the necessary funding that allowed Fort Clinton to become a national monument rather than be demolished, it reflected a larger struggle about the role of the federal government in municipal affairs. What these authors largely overlook are the

⁵ Mason Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: Norton, 2013), xiii.

⁶ Jon C. Teaford, “Caro Versus Moses, Round Two,” *Technology and Culture* 49, no. 2 (2008): 445.

⁷ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 688.

local leaders who galvanized the movement against Moses, thereby creating the avenues through which the federal authorities could intervene. In fact, had these leaders not risen up against Moses' plans, the federal government would not have intervened at all. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore their vision in order to shed light on an interpretation of urban planning that was just as viable as the one pushed by Commissioner Moses.

Chapter One - The Early Years

In 1913, Robert Moses, then a student at Oxford, completed his thesis entitled, “The Civil Service of Great Britain.” Arguing that the best governmental employees had been educated at elite universities, he wrote, “where there are few places and many aspirants, there must be discrimination of some kind.”⁸ He then added that sympathizing with those who are “uncultured” by letting them work in the civil service would simply create a defective government, which is harmful to all.⁹ Thus, he argued the state must ensure that those with “the highest intelligence and the soundest education [are] attracted into the civil service.”¹⁰ In this way, the government would function most effectively and would enact necessary reforms. With this thesis, Moses fortified his allegiance with the Progressive movement.

While Moses’ sentiments may seem arrogant, one must understand his thesis as a response to the corrupt nature of municipal government at the time of his writing. This was the era of political machines, organizations controlled by a political boss who rewarded party service with patronage jobs. The organization that ruled New York City, Tammany Hall, was affiliated with the Democratic Party. Tammany was notorious for providing recent immigrant voters with governmental jobs in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the view of progressive reformers, who hoped to create a more meritocratic and efficient municipal government, this patronage system gave power to “an ignorant multitude, largely composed of recent immigrants, untrained in self-government.”¹¹ Aside from the corruption of Tammany politicians, who stole tax dollars for personal use, the nature of patronage was undemocratic in that it essentially paid people to vote for Tammany Hall candidates. Progressives in both parties hoped to end the

⁸ Robert Moses, *The Civil Service of Great Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), 264.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 245

¹¹ James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1919), 647.

system, thereby ensuring that voters evaluated candidates based on their platforms rather than on the basis of *quid pro quo* and party loyalty.

The call for enlightened leadership to facilitate municipal reform was simply one variant of the progressive movement. In fact, historians have had difficulty defining the movement because it encompassed so many different factions and ideals, but there were certain overarching themes. The most important ideal that most progressives shared was their desire for change. In *No Third Choice: Progressives in Republican Politics*, James Robertson argues “in the period between 1912 to 1932, a progressive in politics could be characterized as a man committed to change. To him, what existed was not necessarily right because it existed. Things could be improved, and ought to be.”¹² Looking to the future, Progressives believed in the power of progress although they disagreed about the definition and ultimate goals of progress. In the *Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*, Richard Hofstadter further explains that the internal division within the movement was due to, and complicated by, the fact that the progressive leadership was highly educated. The complexities of their arguments and their intellectual capabilities made it difficult for all leaders to agree on one single platform.¹³

For Moses, enlightened leaders had a responsibility to decide what the public needed and then urge the public to embrace these necessary reforms. Robert Caro characterizes such progressivism as a blend of both idealism and arrogance. Immersed in a tradition of *noblesse oblige*, Moses and others like him felt that they had an obligation, as elites, to help the common man.¹⁴ Moses’ arrogance, as Caro explains, did not appear as much in his intended goals, but in

¹² James Oliver Robertson, *No Third Choice: Progressives in Republican Politics* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1983), 5.

¹³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 181.

¹⁴ Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 49.

his beliefs about who should champion those goals.¹⁵ In other words, there was a genuine concern for the public, but this coincided with a belief that the public needed the government to assist them. The emphasis was on governmental intervention to help people escape the corruption of Tammany at a time when laissez-faire policies and patronage ruled the day.

There were, however, factions within Progressivism that opposed such notions. Theodore Roosevelt, who ran on the Progressive ticket in the 1912 presidential election, argued that the great issue of the day was whether the American people were “fit to govern themselves, to rule themselves, to control themselves.”¹⁶ He believed that if a minority in government holds power, it is fundamentally undemocratic.¹⁷ Granted, Roosevelt championed the intervention of government to protect the public from corruption. However, his approach was much less top-down in that the common man was working alongside the government, not at the behest of the government. Hofstadter suggests that Progressives believed that “politics was the business, the responsibility, the duty of all men.”¹⁸ According to men like Moses, the educated elite had to provide guidance before the masses could effectively participate in government, while men like Roosevelt felt that these middlemen were unnecessary.

When Moses returned to New York City, after completing his studies at Oxford, he was hired by the Bureau of Municipal Research. Reflecting the ideals put forth in Moses’ thesis, this progressive organization hired recent graduate students and other experts in an effort to investigate potential governmental abuses. The Bureau was part of the efficiency movement, which hoped to pressure the municipal government to use tax money effectively and become

¹⁵ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 53.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, “Roosevelt Hits at Taft Again,” March 21, 1912.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 181.

more accessible to the public.¹⁹ According to Cleveland Rodgers' biography of Moses, George McAneny, the former Manhattan Borough President, used his influence in governmental circles to get the recent graduate a job with the Bureau, believing that Moses' years as a student had sufficiently prepared him for the position.²⁰ Thus, Moses started out his career indebted to, and on the same side as, McAneny. In 1914, the Bureau was busy working with newly elected Mayor John Purroy Mitchel, a Fusion candidate, who supported reforms such as the standardization of civil service salaries and the creation of worker evaluations.

Moses' successful involvement with the Bureau and with the Mitchel administration captured the attention of Richard Spencer Childs, who had recently founded the New York State Association, a "good government" organization intended to monitor and reform the whole of New York State's government.²¹ Childs named Moses the secretary and executive officer of the Association in 1920. Moses' participation in this organization put him into contact with leading Progressives of the day, since he "dealt on a day-to-day basis with the old giants of the New York City reform movement" including Burlingham and Bard and with "the young lawyers and social workers who were coming up through reform ranks," including Isaacs.²² Thus, from the very beginning of Moses' career in government, he was working alongside the very men who would later attempt to bar his success.

Caro argues that it was during his time with the Association that Moses started to lose the idealism that had first persuaded him to get involved in government. He became increasingly

¹⁹ Mason B. Williams, *City of Ambition: FDR, La Guardia, and the Making of Modern New York* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 30.

²⁰ Cleveland Rodgers, *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy* (New York: Holt & Co., 1952), 16.

²¹ Bernard Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed: Richard Spencer Childs and His Fight for Better Government* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 14-15.

²² Caro, *The Power Broker*, 131.

pragmatic as he embraced a more practical, and partisan, politics.²³ Even Cleveland Rodgers, whose biography of Moses Caro deemed “Moses approved,” argued that Moses went from being an idealist to being a “political realist.”²⁴ Moses himself admitted that these were transformative years in his life. In 1956, he recalled, “It was a period of disillusionment for me... I know of nothing actually accomplished by the sterile Mitchel administration except... the zoning system. Almost all of the rest of the Mitchel proposals were pipe dreams.”²⁵ This abandonment of reform efforts and betrayal of his own idealism put Moses at odds with his fellow Progressives. McAneny, for instance, was critical of partisan politics, arguing that the divisiveness it fostered negatively impacted the public at large.²⁶ Similarly, Albert Bard was known for his “inflexible idealism,” especially in his fight to secure housing reform, rarely succumbing to partisanship.²⁷ While these men remained true to their principles, Moses increasingly abandoned his ideals for partisan gains. As Moses himself revealed, “Crusades to improve municipal government in these United States have had more banners than swords, and have been characterized more by fleeting noble impulses than by stubborn persistence.”²⁸ Thus, Moses increasingly believed that reforms needed to be championed in government, through elected officials who had effective power, and not through the nonpartisan organizations in which he currently held membership.²⁹ Hoping to use his friendship with former Governor Alfred E. Smith to gain governmental employment, Moses utilized his connections in and knowledge of the reform movement to ensure Smith’s 1922 gubernatorial reelection victory.

²³ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 99. Caro mentions Rodgers’ biography of Moses in *The Power Broker*, 687.

²⁴ Rodgers, *Robert Moses: Builder for Democracy*, 18.

²⁵ Robert Moses, *Working for the People: Promise and Performance in Public Service* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 29.

²⁶ *New York Times*, “Cities Wrongly Governed,” April 18, 1914.

²⁷ *New York Times*, “Albert S. Bard at 90,” December 19, 1956.

²⁸ Moses, *Working for the People*, 22.

²⁹ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 133.

Interestingly, Smith was not a member of the educated elite that Moses had so wholeheartedly endorsed for governmental positions. At a young age, Smith was forced to drop out of school so that he could work to support his family. Smith was able to work his way up in the government not through education but through the patronage of Tammany.³⁰ Although Smith was sympathetic to a number of reforms, he supported these efforts because they were practical and advantageous, not because he was following an overarching ideology. Not only was Smith not a Progressive, but he was also a Tammany Democrat, which many progressives considered the antithesis of democratic ideals. While Progressives were fighting against machine politics, Moses was assisting a Tammany man with his campaign. Moses' actions were unacceptable to members of the Association. As historian Bernard Hirschhorn writes, organizations like the Association prided themselves on preventing "a takeover by opportunists seeking favors and rewards."³¹ It became increasingly obvious that Moses was using his position for his own personal, and partisan, gains. He was transforming from a reformer to a politician.

In *Al Smith and his America*, Oscar Handlin argues that "Smith, whose mind operated through the grasp of concrete facts, had no comprehension whatever of the vague, abstract, and ill-defined philosophy of the progressives."³² Similarly, Henry Moskowitz, a prominent civil rights activist, wrote in 1928 "Governor Smith's mind is not content with uttering abstractions. His principles are made explicit and applied to definite situations."³³ As Moses became more attached to Smith, and realized the spoils that would be his if Smith won the election, he found it

³⁰ Oscar Handlin, *Al Smith and His America* (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1987), 4. In 1956, Moses wrote a book called *Working for the People*, in which he admits that his views regarding the civil service had changed. While in his thesis he declared there was a need to attract university graduates to governmental jobs, in 1956 he wrote that "One of our outstanding public officials was Alfred E. Smith, who was almost entirely lacking in formal education" (8).

³¹ Hirschhorn, *Democracy Reformed*, 14.

³² Handlin, *Al Smith and His America*, 36.

³³ Henry Moskowitz, ed. *Progressive Democracy: Addresses and State Papers of Alfred E. Smith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1928), xii.

increasingly difficult to stay loyal to both Smith and the Association. In his Oxford thesis, Moses had written that “we must keep politics out of the civil service.”³⁴ But he quickly learned that in the real world, such an argument would leave him out of a job. Connections with the Governor would allow Moses the opportunity to champion desired reforms in a way that Moses himself preferred.

When Smith won the governorship in 1923, he invited Moses to join him in Albany. Moses had been victorious by abandoning an idealism that his opponents still treasured. His former associates would not forget, nor soon forgive, his betrayal.

³⁴ Moses, *The Civil Service of Great Britain*, 269.

Chapter Two- The Brooklyn-Battery Bridge

Between 1922, when Smith won his reelection, and 1939, when the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge debate began, Moses gained extraordinary power. As one of Smith's most trusted advisors, he received many privileges. Most important was his post as the President of the Long Island State Park Commission. From this and other influential posts, Moses started to wield his power in ruthless ways. As Caro perhaps overemphasizes, Moses abused his power of eminent domain in the 1920s in order to construct a vast system of parks and parkways on Long Island.³⁵ Moses claimed that he was resorting to such action in order to create public escapes from crowded city life, even if he was doing so at the expense of private property. Despite the outrage caused by his high-handed seizure of property, the urban masses appreciated these parks and made their approval known during elections. Thus, politicians were increasingly supportive of Moses' efforts as well.

During the Great Depression, Moses continued to accumulate power as he proved himself capable of attracting New Deal funds for New York City public works projects. After working closely with Mayor Fiorello La Guardia in his 1933 election campaign, Moses became the head of the New York City Parks Commission, Housing Authority, and Triborough Bridge Authority. By 1939, Moses could boast of many accomplishments including Jones Beach, numerous parkways, hundreds of parks, and the completion of the Triborough Bridge. Accustomed to getting his way, Moses typically bulldozed his opposition.

It was in this environment that on January 22, 1939, Moses confidently announced plans for a Brooklyn-Battery Bridge, to replace his previous proposal for a tunnel between the two boroughs. Part of Moses' extensive highway system, a system designed to connect the entire city

³⁵ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 185.

into one traversable unit, the bridge would extend from the Battery in Lower Manhattan to Hamilton Avenue in Brooklyn. On January 23rd, the *New York Herald Tribune* published an article, which listed Moses' specific reasons for preferring a bridge. The cost of building the bridge, an estimated total of \$41,200,000 was less than half of the proposed cost of the tunnel, which had been estimated at \$83,800,000. The six lanes of the bridge would allow for a greater traffic capacity than the four lanes of the tunnel. Furthermore, the tolls that would be collected would ensure that the bridge would eventually pay for itself. Perhaps the most attractive benefit of the new proposal was that the bridge would be funded by municipal bonds, while the tunnel would have been funded by federal government money. Federal funding carried greater stipulations, and so reliance on municipal bonds gave the city, and specifically Moses and the Triborough Bridge Authority, more freedom in the construction process.³⁶



Figure 1: Battery Park as it appeared in 1939, with the Aquarium intact. Originally featured in "Council Due to Back Bridge; Moses in Seven-Hour Clash," *The New York Times*, March 28, 1939.

³⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, "Bridge Is Urged From Brooklyn to the Battery," January 23, 1939.



Figure 2: A drawing of the Battery with the proposed bridge approaches. Notice that with the Bridge proposal, Moses spared the Aquarium. Originally featured in, "Council Due to Back Bridge; Moses in Seven-Hour Clash," *The New York Times*, March 28, 1939.

Within days, Moses' bridge proposal won the approval of Brooklyn Borough President Raymond Ingersoll and Mayor LaGuardia, among others. Support for the tunnel had been widespread because the idea of a Brooklyn-Battery crossing was popular. Therefore, many simply transferred their support from the old project to the new.³⁷ On January 24th, *The New York Times* published an article quoting Ingersoll saying that this crossing was "badly needed" because there was a "lack of adequate connections between Brooklyn's wharves and factories and the markets of Manhattan" which created "a growing handicap" for Brooklyn.³⁸ The next day, LaGuardia announced his full support for the bridge proposal as well. Interestingly, he admitted that he had initial reservations especially because "one place no angel would have dared

³⁷ *New York Times*, "New Highway Held Industry's Savior," October 16, 1938.

³⁸ *New York Times* "Ingersoll Endorses Moses Bridge Plan," January 24, 1939.

to tread was the approach of this bridge over Battery Park.”³⁹ La Guardia continued, “but that has been eliminated, because the Park Commissioner, who is also chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority, took that objection out himself. So that’s over.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Moses and his supporters, that objection was still alive. So were others.

The Opposition

Those who fought against the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge represented a broad array of interests. Some opponents focused on practical issues, such as the new traffic patterns that it would create or the potential loss in the tax base if the land surrounding the bridge were to be condemned. Others were more concerned about the aesthetics of the bridge and how its construction would compromise the view of the harbor from Lower Manhattan. Still others reiterated concerns that the bridge would necessarily obstruct Battery Park, despite protestations by Moses that such concerns were baseless.

Although reasons for opposing the bridge varied, the opponents themselves were surprisingly similar. Most belonged to New York’s elite, and were well connected both financially and politically. They were able to influence political decisions even if they did not hold an elected position because they had allies in positions of power, who would listen to, and act upon, their concerns. Perhaps most important, these men were Progressives who believed that those at the top had a responsibility to fight the ills of society. Working in and through civic organizations, these men strove to create a New York City that reflected their own progressive ideals, granting themselves the authority to determine the needs of the public. In their eyes, the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge posed a threat to the welfare of the public.

³⁹ *New York Times*, “LaGuardia Backs Battery Bridge; Gets Off to a Quick Start With It,” January 25, 1939.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

In *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks*, Anthony C. Wood explains that opposition to Moses' bridge plans was led by a "fearsome foursome" comprised of Stanley Isaacs, George McAneny, C.C. Burlingham, and Albert S. Bard.⁴¹ All four men, who had worked with Moses in the Association, were politically progressive and engaged in various municipal reform movements. McAneny had been Manhattan Borough President, the position currently held by Isaacs. Bard and Burlingham were prominent attorneys and leaders in numerous civic organizations, which qualified them as civic activists.

Their opposition to Moses' plan was based on long-held ideas about urban planning. Long before the debate about the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge, during the height of the City Beautiful movement, these men were involved in efforts to shape the built environment. By creating an orderly, aesthetically pleasing urban landscape, City Beautiful reformers believed that they had the power to "exercise social control."⁴² In *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City*, author Joel Schwartz argues that this movement proposed "visionary plans" that were "accompanied by aesthetic falderal and commercial boosterism, not calculated need."⁴³ In this view, reformers were working to clear slums, not to help the slum dwellers, but to create a more beautiful, and therefore valuable, city. However, it is wrong to suggest that all reformers involved in the movement were concerned exclusively with aesthetics and the desire to increase land values. In *The City Beautiful Movement*, William H. Wilson explains that more than this, reformers were pushing for social conditioning so that "beauty would reflect in the souls of the city's inhabitants, inducing order,

⁴¹ Anthony C. Wood, *Preserving New York: Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmarks* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 48.

⁴² William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 81.

⁴³ Joel Schwartz, *The New York Approach: Robert Moses, Urban Liberals, and Redevelopment of the Inner City* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 12.

calm, and propriety.”⁴⁴ Therefore, scenic surroundings would be used to uplift the human spirit; an increase in land values was simply a byproduct of this social conditioning.

For instance, McAneny announced in 1914 that the “chief aim of city planning” is to “promote the health, safety, and general welfare of its inhabitants.”⁴⁵ For him, the ultimate goal of beautifying the city was not mere aestheticism. Rather, the aesthetics of the city were a vehicle through which to improve the plight of urban dwellers. It was the “intelligence, breeding, and training” of the reformers that gave them the authority to decide what kind of landscape was beautiful, and thus beneficial in achieving their social goals.⁴⁶ For instance, when Moses was still a student at Oxford, McAneny decided that it would be advantageous to impose limits on the maximum height of city buildings because tall buildings blocked out sunlight, which was necessary for healthy city life.⁴⁷ There were those that found McAneny’s proposal in 1914 to be absurd. However, he remained undeterred in his attempts to protect the public by regulating the built environment. Similarly, in 1928, he stated that the beauty of the city’s architecture was “marred by the juxtaposition of ugly or inappropriate structures.”⁴⁸ His overt concern for beauty only becomes significant when seen in the broader context of his desires to elevate the condition of the public.

Albert Bard shared a similar concern for aesthetics and a similar definition of beauty. In 1938, he argued that “natural beauty, historic associations, sightlines, and physical good order . . . contribute to the general welfare and should be conserved.”⁴⁹ Therefore, Bard was calling for the conservation of the very conditions that men like McAneny had fought for in the early years of

⁴⁴ Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 92.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, “Plans for City’s Growth,” November 1, 1914.

⁴⁶ Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 79.

⁴⁷ *New York Times*, “Plans for City’s Growth,” November 1, 1914.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, “Building Harmony Called City’s Need,” Dec 9, 1928.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, “Esthetic Control of Building Asked,” June 6, 1938.

the twentieth century. It becomes apparent that these men believed that the built environment was linked to the health and welfare of the populace, a belief that carried into the 1930s and 1940s. For them, people were a product of their environment, and therefore physical quality needed to be controlled and protected.

This drive for beauty and tradition manifested itself in a suspicion of, or even a repudiation of, new construction. This was certainly not the consequence of a distrust of progress. As mentioned earlier, a major part of Progressivism was a desire for change. However, this group believed that change did not necessitate new construction, but rather the reuse and preservation of existing structures. As early as 1924, a decade before the large-scale building projects of the New Deal, McAneny suggested that Manhattan did not need to construct new streets but rather required “better development and use of the street plan it [already] has.”⁵⁰ In the same year, Albert S. Bard responded to plans to build roadways through Central Park by urging that the city “turn the park back to what it was in the first place—a refuge.”⁵¹ Even during the Great Depression, when New Deal spending was at its height, this group of Progressives did not always agree that massive spending projects were ideal. Stanley M. Isaacs, after being elected Manhattan Borough President in 1937, assured his constituents that rather than building new structures in outer-boroughs, he would make sure to “restore the attractions of Manhattan.”⁵² By championing reforms through existing institutions and structures, these progressives were challenging others in the movement, like Moses, who hoped to achieve more fundamental changes in society.⁵³

⁵⁰ George McAneny, “McAneny Opposes Any Overhead Traffic Plan,” *New York Times*, February 3, 1924.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, “Foes of Park Grabs Unite for Big Fight,” May 13, 1924.

⁵² *New York Times*, “Isaacs Proposes Changes,” December 8, 1937.

⁵³ Neil A. Wynn, *From Progressivism to Prosperity: World War I and American Society* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 10.

These beliefs regarding construction constituted the most problematic and contentious issue of debate with Moses, who firmly believed in the need for, and benefit of, new construction. Moses' career had matured in a new period for Progressive politics, one in which vast federal funds were available for public works projects. Moses fully embraced the new trend and argued that "cities must go ahead—or go back."⁵⁴ While his opponents touted the superiority of tradition, Moses embraced modernity. As he wrote, "It is not, however, our task to keep our inheritance intact and gilded as if it were an ancient treasure in a modern museum. We must be impressed, not obsessed, with the past."⁵⁵

The Fearsome Foursome

Borough President Isaacs was one of the first to speak out against the bridge proposal. A lifelong Republican, Isaacs described himself as a "conservative fighting for liberal things."⁵⁶ In the 1912 election he had worked for Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive campaign and was a lifelong proponent of housing reform. He is also remembered for cutting the municipal budget during his administration. According to Caro, Isaacs was a man "dedicated to public service" who "remained true to his stock and his principles."⁵⁷ This confidence in his principles furthered the enmity between the idealist Isaacs and the pragmatic Moses, an enmity that had already existed for years.⁵⁸

Isaacs actively opposed any sort of new crossing between Manhattan and Brooklyn. In 1938, Isaacs spoke out against Moses' tunnel project, stressing that the structure would greatly increase traffic in Lower Manhattan and that Moses was not adequately preparing for this

⁵⁴ Robert Moses, *Working for the People: Promise and Performance in Public Service* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 102.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁵⁶ Richard P. Hunt, "Stanley M. Isaacs is Dead at 79; GOP Councilman 20 Years," *New York Times*, July 13, 1962.

⁵⁷ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 654-655.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 655.

reality.⁵⁹ This speaks to the antagonism the two shared, which is palpable in document after document the men left behind. In one letter, for instance, Moses wrote that it is wise to take “no stock whatever in the crackpot suggestions of Isaacs who is certainly one of the most pronounced nuts we have had in public office in these parts in many years.”⁶⁰ Moses attempted to paint Isaacs as a man who was out-of-touch with the needs of a modernizing city, thereby questioning his post in the government and his ability to govern effectively.

While Moses may have felt that Isaacs’ reasons for opposing the bridge were “crackpot suggestions,” the borough president had legitimate concerns about the effects of more traffic in Lower Manhattan. Isaacs believed he had a responsibility to oppose a project that he saw as detrimental to the city and he feared that increased congestion would make the already crowded area entirely inhospitable. Thus, Isaacs’ criticisms of either a tunnel or a bridge were logical and practical, not irrational as Moses proposed. In addition to the increased traffic problems, he feared “the proposed bridge would blight real estate and destroy taxable values.”⁶¹ In this way, Isaacs felt responsible to protect the rights and privileges of his constituents, the people who lived and worked in Lower Manhattan.

Isaacs’ objections were not limited to these more logistical concerns. He also felt that the bridge would be aesthetically unpleasing and would “vandalize one of the most precious heritages ever handed down to the people of our city by our forefathers—Battery Park.”⁶² This quote, in particular, betrays Isaacs’ progressivism in two ways. First, he was concerned that the people would lose access to a park, a valuable asset for an already over-crowded city. Despite

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, “Moses Disputes Isaacs on Tunnel,” September 20, 1938.

⁶⁰ “TBTA 1932-1953 Brooklyn-Battery Bridge Controversy,” July 27, 1939, in *Robert Moses Papers*, Box 72.

⁶¹ “Speech by Borough President Stanley M. Isaacs,” March 29, 1939, in Stanley M. Isaacs Papers, Box 3, “1939 Borough Presidency—Brooklyn Battery Bridge.”

⁶² *Ibid.*

Moses' proven success in building parks, Isaacs feared that Moses' plans for the Battery would sacrifice park space for new construction. Second, Isaacs believed in the power of tradition and heritage for all Americans, regardless of the particular origins of each individual. In this way, Battery Park had been preserved for all New Yorkers, even the most recent immigrant.

Isaacs' efforts, whatever his intentions, were used as evidence that he was trying to put the needs of Manhattan before those of Brooklyn and the other boroughs. The bridge had great popular support in Brooklyn, as evidenced by a "Build This Bridge" rally held in Brooklyn on June 6, 1939. At the rally, which drew over one thousand supporters to Brooklyn's Majestic Theater, Ingersoll declared that the bridge would usher in "a new era of hope and progress" for Brooklyn.⁶³ Brooklyn residents believed the bridge would unify the city and greatly increase commerce opportunities between the two boroughs. These expectations forced Isaacs to make a radio speech on June 7th in which he declared that there was a need to debate the benefits and disadvantages of the bridge "as citizens of one great united City rather than as provincials insisting upon the rights of our individual communities."⁶⁴ Furthermore, he stated "I don't want to put this in terms of votes or taxes."⁶⁵ One could argue that Isaacs was put on the defensive simply because he did his job in fighting for the rights of Manhattan residents. Regardless, he did not feel that Manhattan should have to bear the brunt of the hazards created by the bridge in order to benefit Brooklyn's population.

Working alongside Isaacs in the fight against the bridge was George McAneny, who had served as Manhattan Borough President from 1910 to 1913. A dedicated municipal reformer, he had served and continued to serve on the board of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation

⁶³ *New York Herald Tribune*, "Moses Says Brooklyn's Support Will Pave Way for Battery Bridge," June 7, 1939

⁶⁴ "Speech by Borough President Stanley M. Isaacs," June 7, 1939, in Stanley M. Isaacs Papers, Box 3, "1939 Borough Presidency—Brooklyn Battery Bridge."

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Society, which became heavily involved in the fight against the bridge. In 1939, McAneny was also president of the Regional Plan Association (RPA), an organization formed in 1922 to envision the future growth of the city and its surrounding region.⁶⁶ The movement he led championed a specific future for New York City, one that sought to preserve more than construct. For instance, in the 1929 “Regional Plan of New York and its Environs,” the Association proposed that “park use should be regarded as a permanent form of land development.”⁶⁷ Granted, this report was written exactly ten years before the bridge debate. However, the Association wrote about the importance of barring any sort of “encroachments” that threatened to destroy park space, highlighting the potential threat of new constructions. It must be noted that this idea of conservation was not one that Moses prized. In the words of Gilmore Clarke, the consulting landscape architect of the Parks Department and a strong supporter of Moses’ Battery Park plans, “at times park land must be taken for important public improvements.”⁶⁸ This debate illustrates the two groups’ disagreements about the definition of park space and its use to the public.

In an interview conducted in 1949, McAneny remembered his fears that the bridge would “overshadow the Park” and would “utterly destroy the skyline back of it at the entrance to the City.”⁶⁹ For him, the aesthetics of the city and the preservation of parkland were primary. At a City Council hearing on the bridge proposal in 1939 he concluded that the construction of this bridge would be “a violation of sound planning principles.”⁷⁰ As an alternative solution to the need for East River crossings, the RPA, under McAneny’s lead, called for widening the

⁶⁶ Regional Plan Association, Our History, <http://www.rpa.org/about/history>.

⁶⁷ Regional Plan Association, *Regional Plan of New York and its Environs* (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 339.

⁶⁸ Gilmore D. Clarke, “Silly Sentimentality,” *New York Herald Tribune*, June 3, 1939.

⁶⁹ George McAneny, interview by Allan Nevins and Dean Albertson, *Reminiscences of George McAneny*, Columbia University, 1949, 70-71.

⁷⁰ *The New York Times*, “Council Due to Back Bridge,” March 28, 1939.

Brooklyn Bridge. Once again, we see the preference for reforming existing structures in order to avoid the construction of new structures.

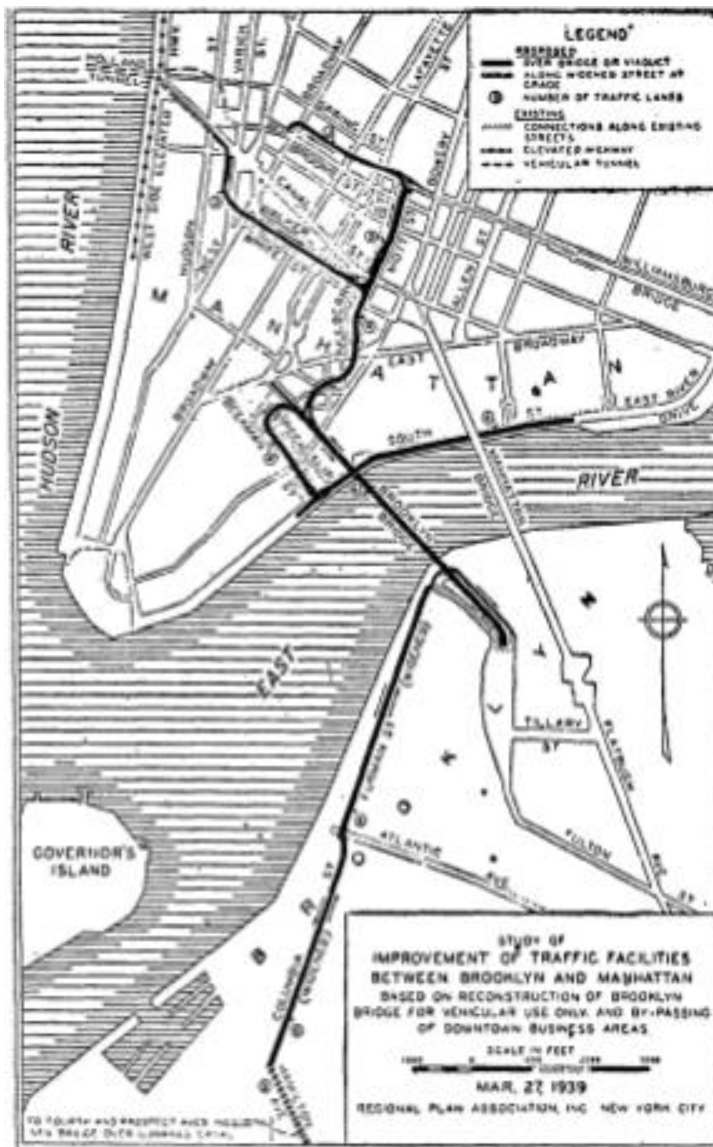


Figure 3: A map created by the RPA, which shows plans to reconstruct the Brooklyn Bridge and thereby reroute traffic away from the Battery. Originally featured in, "Council Due to Back Bridge; Moses in Seven-Hour Clash," *The New York Times*, March 28, 1939.

Unsurprisingly, Moses had choice words for McAneny and the Regional Plan Association. At the City Council hearing Moses called McAneny “an extinct volcano” who could easily be overlooked because he was “not going to run for public office again.”⁷¹ Not only was Moses saying that McAneny himself was out of touch, but he was simultaneously arguing that McAneny’s views on how to govern a city were outdated. He continued by stating that the Regional Plan Association had historically “sided with the ‘fox-hunters and estate owners on the North Shore of Long Island’ in opposing the Northern State Parkway,” one of Moses’ earlier construction projects.⁷² With this Moses dismissed his opponents as elites, assured that those listening would agree that the Northern State Parkway had proven to be a success. Aside from revealing Moses’ self-confidence in his own accomplishments, such words also highlight further attempts to cast his opposition as adherents of aristocratic privilege and tradition, rather than the rights of the common man.

Albert S. Bard, the third leader of the opposition, never served the city in an elected capacity. However, he fought for progressive causes through civic organizations, most notably those that pushed for the preservation of historic structures. With respect to the bridge debate, Bard’s most important memberships were those in the Fine Arts Federation of New York and the Municipal Art Society.⁷³ One of the major beliefs of progressives was the notion that the best way to enact change was through the passage of new legislation. As Wynn argues, “the one thing almost all [Progressives] had in common was the faith in society’s ability to resolve major

⁷¹ *The New York Times*, “Council Due to Back Bridge,” March 28, 1939.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ The Municipal Art Society was the leading organization of the City Beautiful Movement of the early twentieth century. As mentioned before, this Movement was a progressive attempt to influence the public and improve their condition through aesthetics and civic improvements in the city. See Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*.

problems satisfactorily through political action.”⁷⁴ Bard was no different. With support from the Fine Arts Federation, Bard was determined to use the powers granted to the official Art Commission by the New York City Charter in order to stop, or at the very least control, Moses. In June of 1939, the Fine Arts Federation received a letter from John Davis, a lawyer familiar with the Charter, which stated that “the language of the Charter is perfectly clear to the effect that ‘No bridge shall be erected upon land belonging to the city unless the design, and its location in relation to existing or projected developments in the vicinity, shall have been approved in writing by the Art Commission.’”⁷⁵

Bard believed that this ability to disapprove public works projects on the basis of aesthetics was a necessary check against people like Moses. This was not the first time that the Federal Arts Federation came into conflict with Moses. In 1928, when he was New York Secretary of State under Governor Smith, Moses argued that the Art Commission was unnecessary and inefficient and called for its dismissal on the grounds that it hindered progress.⁷⁶ Once again, Moses’ focus was on function, not aesthetics. In contrast, Bard believed that “New York State needs more emphasis on beauty,” thus clearly reflecting the ideals of the City Beautiful movement, and proposed that restoration of existing structures would create more beauty than the construction of new structures.⁷⁷ As he explained, “art and beauty are among the chief needs of ‘human nature’ in New York.”⁷⁸

Ultimately, Bard believed that in order to design a beautified city, one needed to work through civic organizations to influence government. In this way, he called for the formation of a Central Committee of Organizations Opposing the Battery Bridge, of which he was temporary

⁷⁴ Wynn, *From Progressivism to Prosperity*, 10.

⁷⁵ John Davis to Albert S. Bard, June 13, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 54, Folder 3.

⁷⁶ *New York Times*, “Moses Scores Plea for Fine Arts Plan,” February 8, 1928.

⁷⁷ Albert S. Bard, “The Fine Arts Commission,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1927.

⁷⁸ Albert S. Bard, “Public Playgrounds,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1933.

chairman. The Committee's minutes reveal that their ultimate plan to stop Moses was to use the members' influence in the federal government to persuade the War Department to deny Moses authority to build the structure. As was decided at its April 10th meeting, "an attempt should be made to arrange for an orderly presentation of those opposing the bridge before the War Department" with "interference with navigation" and other "military reasons" as items that must be stressed.⁷⁹ They did not mention the aesthetic concerns before the War Department. Perhaps this betrays a certain pragmatism on behalf of the members of this Committee. Nevertheless, this document reveals the attempts by Bard and other civic minded men to use the federal government, and their influential friends, to fight Moses' plans.

Charles C. Burlingham, the fourth member of the "fearsome foursome," was a complicated figure and is more difficult to characterize than the other three. An admiralty lawyer perhaps best known for defending the White Star Line after the sinking of the Titanic, Burlingham was intimately involved in many civic attempts to improve the life of the common man and the city as a whole. He was vice president of the Civil Service Reform Association and he also worked to change the way that judges were selected. It was his belief that "our government, indeed our civilization, rests on the integrity of the courts."⁸⁰ Furthermore, he was staunchly anti-Tammany, working for many Fusion campaigns, including that of Mayor La Guardia, which aimed to oust Tammany men from municipal posts through bipartisan action.

His progressive ambitions were nevertheless betrayed by his behavior in this specific debate. His connections to President Roosevelt made him a perfect candidate for pushing the War Department to prohibit construction of the bridge. However, he appealed to the President in

⁷⁹ "Minutes of Meeting of Organizing Committee of Central Committee of Organizations Opposing the Battery Bridge, April 10, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6, Folder 1.

⁸⁰ *New York Times*, "Charles Burlingham Dies at 100; Lawyer Fought for Civic Reform," June 8, 1959.

a backhanded way, urging Roosevelt to keep their correspondence regarding the matter secret. Granted, Burlingham did write a public letter in the *New York Herald Tribune* in which he reiterated reasons for opposing the bridge, namely that it would obstruct Battery Park and decrease property values in the area. As he wrote, “what justification can there be for men whom we have trusted to preserve the beauty of New York . . . to destroy or risk the destruction of any feature of the beauty which entrances every person of sensibility as they enter our marvelous Upper Bay.”⁸¹ Therefore, Burlingham was just as concerned as his fellow leaders about the aesthetic values that would be sacrificed were the bridge to be constructed. However, the letter that Burlingham wrote to Roosevelt a few days later reveals that, despite their claims to the contrary, Progressives were no less immune to corrupt practices than any other group.

In *CCB: The Life and Century of Charles C. Burlingham*, George Martin traces the correspondence between Burlingham and Roosevelt during the spring and summer of 1939. While Burlingham was no different than the other opposition leaders in his attempt to stop Moses by wielding influence with men in power, it was his insistence on maintaining a level of secrecy in the matter that can be interpreted as dishonesty.⁸² In his first letter, he simply informed Roosevelt about the situation, telling the President that if he were to become involved, the War Department would most likely decide against Moses. Burlingham advised Roosevelt to maintain a level of secrecy when dealing with the issue.⁸³ When Roosevelt replied that he “know[s] little about the bridge” but that he will “look into it and keep your name out of it,” Burlingham wrote to Roosevelt that “it was *your* name, not *mine*, I wished kept out. I merely thought that if you

⁸¹ Charles C. Burlingham, “The Case Against a Battery Bridge,” *New York Herald Tribune*, April 6, 1939.

⁸² George Martin, *CCB: The Life and Century of Charles C. Burlingham* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 429.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 426.

agreed that the *PONS* was *Asinorum* you might kill it.”⁸⁴ This correspondence implies that the President had very little stake in the bridge’s construction, but the situation provided him with another excuse to deter Moses, since the two men were long-time enemies. Roosevelt was determined to limit Moses’ powers, once even threatening to cut off federal funding for New York projects if Moses was not removed from his post.⁸⁵ Burlingham took advantage of this feud, hoping that Roosevelt would work to prohibit construction of the bridge, even if only to inhibit Moses’ plans.

Roosevelt subsequently sent Burlingham’s letter to Secretary of War Harry Woodring and by July 1939 the War Department had issued a decision against the bridge. Upon hearing the news, Burlingham wrote to Paul Windels, the city’s corporation counsel, stating that he “thought Woodring’s reasons asinine.”⁸⁶ Thus, Burlingham did not care how the President and War Department were able to stop Moses so long as he was stopped. He too, like Moses, had abandoned his idealism for pragmatic politics.

Of course, Burlingham was not the only member of the opposition who wanted to use the War Department to stop Moses’ encroachment into Lower Manhattan. As was mentioned, Bard and his Committee were busy discussing how best to present their case to the War Department. The difference is that Bard and the Committee were using their influence to ensure that they had speaking slots at a public hearing scheduled for April 25th, while Burlingham was simultaneously

⁸⁴ C.C. Burlingham to Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 13, 1939 in *Franklin D. Roosevelt Library*, quoted in Martin, *CCB*, 427. Note that *Pons Asinorum* is Latin for “bridge of fools.”

⁸⁵ In *Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York*, Thomas Kessner explains that in 1934 Roosevelt urged Mayor La Guardia to remove Moses from his post as Chairman of the Triborough Bridge Authority. When La Guardia refused, in large part due to Moses’ popularity, Roosevelt introduced Administrative Order 129, which stated that “no funds were to be advanced to any authority, board, or commission constituting an independent corporation or entity.” This order would have prevented millions of dollars from reaching New York City. Moses subsequently leaked the story to the press, and many sided with Moses, astonished that the President would threaten development of the city out of personal spite. Now in the public eye, Roosevelt dropped the issue and Moses was allowed to retain his post.

⁸⁶ C.C. Burlingham to Paul Windels, July 19, 1939, quoted in Martin, *CCB*, 428.

using his influence out of the public eye. Although the opposition was strengthened by Burlingham's connections and influence, many might have been disillusioned by the fact that this important municipal decision was made "in secret, on specious reasons by a vengeful president of the United States."⁸⁷ Within a movement that was attempting to make government more accountable to the public, Burlingham used his influence and connections to push for policies that he deemed best, without first consulting the public.

Public Support

Burlingham's decision to act out of the public eye seemed to confirm Moses' charge that these progressive leaders were privileged New Yorkers who lacked popular support. To some extent, this estimation was true. The wealth and prestige of Moses' opponents, at least in this specific debate, is difficult to deny. Nevertheless, this does not imply that their motivations were purely selfish, or selfish at all. As civically-minded individuals engaged in progressive causes, these men felt that they were doing what was best for a largely uninformed populace. Thus, their words and actions stemmed from a desire to assist the public, even attract public involvement, but in a way decided and controlled by the leaders themselves. The leaders justified their attitude toward the public by characterizing them as helpless beings. As Captain deKay wrote in a memo entitled "In re: Battery Park Bridge," the structure would obstruct "the only breathing space available to the poor people residing south of Chambers Street on the west side."⁸⁸ The words "poor people" betray deKay's belief in the dependency of the populace and speak to his desires to assist them in a top-down approach. These leaders were sincere in their attempts to save the park for the population's use, seeing the protection of the park as something the people could not manage alone.

⁸⁷ Marin, *CCB*, 429.

⁸⁸ Captain Eckford C. de Kay, "In re: Battery Park Bridge," April 19, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6 Folder 3.

These men did have more practical reasons for seizing on the issue of the park. They expected that the public would be most committed to the fight if they felt that their parks were in danger of being obstructed. Thus, they overemphasized the issue to attract public support. With this objective, James W. Danahy, the Vice President of the West Side Association of Commerce, one of the organizations opposed to the construction, wrote an open letter to Parks Commissioner Moses purposely distinguishing him from Triborough Authority Chairman Moses. In the letter, Danahy writes “as Parks Commissioner, are you not amazed at the presumption of Chairman Moses of the Triborough Bridge Authority in suggesting the operation of vehicular traffic through an area dedicated as a public park?”⁸⁹

Similarly, Bard’s Central Committee of Organizations Opposing the Battery Bridge saw park space, as “a non-controversial issue with emotional and visual quality” that would attract popular support.⁹⁰ Thus, the Committee adopted the slogan ‘Save Battery Park,’ the simplicity of which reveals a certain disdain for ordinary citizens. Rather than appealing to reason by explaining why the park should be saved, members of the Committee decided to appeal to emotion. A letter Bard received from William E. Hicks makes the point even clearer. Hicks wrote, “it seems to me that the people are without an intelligent understanding of the iniquitous effects of the proposed bridge on the Battery Park.”⁹¹ Seeing themselves as moral arbiters, the leaders hoped to protect the uneducated public from Moses.

The opposition expected to garner public support through guarantees to uphold what was best for the public. Despite these promises, they never witnessed the growth of a popular movement to oppose Moses. Rather, Moses’ plan gained popular support. Unwilling to

⁸⁹ James W. Danahy, “Letter to Park Commissioner,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 30, 1939.

⁹⁰ “Minutes of Meeting of Organizing Committee of Central Committee of Organizations Opposing the Battery Bridge,” June 23, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6, Folder 1.

⁹¹ William E. Hicks to Albert S. Bard, June 19, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6, Folder 4.

acknowledge this, the opposition said that the public was being kept from the truth and still did not realize the repercussions of the proposed construction. For instance, in response to a letter from Harriet T. Righter, a wealthy businesswoman, about the disconcerting lack of popular support, Isaacs wrote that Moses had seen success because he was again “rushing something through while people are still uninformed.”⁹² The opposition exposed their uniquely progressive elitism by blaming their lack of popular support on the alleged ignorance of the people regarding the facts of the construction. Unable to interpret the needs of their constituents, the opposition could not garner enough popular support to organize protests and rallies. It was through legal cases and influencing politicians that these leaders were successful. They were able to speak for the public but proved unsuccessful in speaking to the public.

Outcome

Despite Moses’ self-confidence and the abundant support he received, on July 17, 1939 the War Department determined that the bridge would represent a threat to national defense and thus denied construction permits. Moses tried to appeal the decision, but President Roosevelt himself told Moses in a telegram that the bridge proposal was killed. Within two years, Moses had approval to construct the original Brooklyn Battery Tunnel and, quickly recovering from his defeat, he moved ahead with construction. However, this decision did not mark the end of the debates over the future of Battery Park. A new plan put forth by Commissioner Moses’ would attract the attention of some of the very same individuals and civic organizations that had been involved in the previous debate. Only, instead of lasting a few months, the next fight dragged on for over ten long years.

⁹² Stanley M. Isaacs to Harriet T. Righter, June 5, 1939, in *Stanley M. Isaacs Papers*, Box 3, “1939 Borough Presidency—Brooklyn-Battery Bridge.”

Chapter Three- The Aquarium, Battery Park, and Fort Clinton

When it became clear that the bridge was not going to be built in Lower Manhattan, many reformers assumed that Battery Park had been saved. To that effect, Isaacs wrote a letter to Iphigene Sulzberger, the President of the Parks Association and a supporter of the bridge, on July 18th, one day after the War Department's announcement denying the building permits for the bridge. In the letter, Isaacs assured Sulzberger that even "if the tunnel is authorized I am confident that its approaches can be constructed in such a way that there will be no invasion of park territory and no injury to the park."⁹³ His assurance was supported by the pronouncements of such knowledgeable people as Chairman A. B. Jones of the New York City Tunnel Authority, who on July 27, 1939 wrote to Isaacs that "the revised plan of the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel prepared in cooperation by our and your engineers calls for no surface occupancy whatsoever in Battery Park."⁹⁴ It seemed that they had been able to bar Moses from, what in their estimation would have been, the destruction of this public space.

However, Moses was quick to assure the public and officials alike that the tunnel construction would in fact deface Battery Park as much as, if not more so than, the bridge construction. He announced that because of the failure to build the bridge, the future of the park was in jeopardy because a proposal for the redevelopment of Battery Park had been attached to the original plan. In fact, in August of 1939, Moses wrote that his opponents "did a great

⁹³ Stanley M. Isaacs to Iphigene Sulzberger, July 18, 1939, in *Stanley M. Isaacs Papers*, Box 3, "1939 Borough Presidency—Brooklyn-Battery Bridge." It is interesting to note that in the same letter Isaacs wrote that because of Sulzberger's support for construction he "felt that you had been misled."⁹³ Once again, the opposition believed that those who did not agree with them must have been uninformed about the true effects that the bridge would have on the city.

⁹⁴ A. B. Jones to Stanley M. Isaacs, July 27, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6, Folder 12.

disservice in opposing the Brooklyn-Battery Bridge” because the improvement of the park now seemed unlikely.⁹⁵ He was unsure that there would be a chance to redevelop the park at all.

When in 1941 Moses won permission to build a tunnel, he attached a new plan for the redesign of the Park. However, as an apparent result of the tunnel construction, Moses announced that Battery Park would be closed “indefinitely” and that the Aquarium, one of the Park’s main attractions since 1890, would have to be relocated. Furthermore, he proposed the demolition of the structure that housed the Aquarium, the historic Fort Clinton, which had been built in 1808.⁹⁶ Moses acknowledged that these were unfortunate decisions, but he declared that there was no other choice considering how much construction would take place within the Park over the next few years.⁹⁷ This announcement caused an uproar within the same circles that had just won the fight against the bridge proposal. Opponents were convinced that the Commissioner was exaggerating the effects of construction and that he was lying about the need to close the park and relocate the Aquarium. They were most alarmed about the decision to demolish Fort Clinton. The leaders geared up for a new fight.

Revenge?

Moses’ reputation for dishonesty has survived until today. Numerous authors, perhaps following Caro’s lead, have accused the power broker of calling for the removal of the Aquarium and the demolition of the Fort out of a desire for revenge.⁹⁸ As these authors have argued, Moses’ bitterness about losing the fight over the Brooklyn Battery Bridge fed his attempts to demolish Fort Clinton. As Anthony Wood argues in his book *Preserving New York*, “ultimately it is only

⁹⁵ Robert Moses to John D. Wright, August 4, 1939, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 6, Folder 12.

⁹⁶ *New York Herald Tribune*, “Moses Wins in Board of Estimate on Plan to Shut Aquarium Oct. 1,” September 12, 1941.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Caro, *The Power Broker*, 678-688. The chapter is entitled “Revenge.” Also see Anthony Wood, *Preserving New York*; Anthony Flint, *Wrestling With Moses*.

revenge, Moses' desire to punish those who blocked his bridge by destroying something dear to them" that Moses pushed for the Fort's demolition.⁹⁹

Such an estimation of Moses' actions fails to give him sufficient credit as an urban planner. In 1942, after construction on the tunnel had already started, Moses released two versions of his plans for Battery Park, one of which still contained the Fort. This demonstrates that he was not adamant about destroying the historic structure although he did have a preference for demolition. Furthermore, he also announced that he was willing to incorporate the Fort into his plans so long as the city put forth the money for restoration. Indeed, in a 1946 letter to the newly elected Mayor William O'Dwyer Moses declared that if the funding for restoration was provided, he was "ready to cooperate in every way" and would "make the necessary revisions in our plans for Battery Park."¹⁰⁰ Despite his preferences, he was never so obstinate that he did not allow for alternatives.

Moreover, by saying that Moses was hoping to demolish the Fort out of sheer revenge seems to imply that Moses was hoping to destroy Battery Park and that it was only through the action of his opponents that the Park was saved. This cannot be right. As the great builder of parks, Moses wanted Battery Park to remain public open space. He did have a different view than his opponents about what constituted the ideal park. In his designs, which were released publicly, Moses ensured that if the demolition of the Fort were approved, it would provide new views of the Statue of Liberty along a broad axis lined by granite pylons and trees. The pylons were both decorative and functional, as they were part of the proposed tunnel's ventilation

⁹⁹ Wood, *Preserving New York*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Robert Moses to William O'Dwyer, February 21, 1946, in *Mayor William O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16 Folder 151.

system. There would also be a plaque commemorating the former site of the Fort.¹⁰¹ Moses' planned Battery Park, despite its failures in the eyes of his opponents, would still have served its function as a valuable public space.

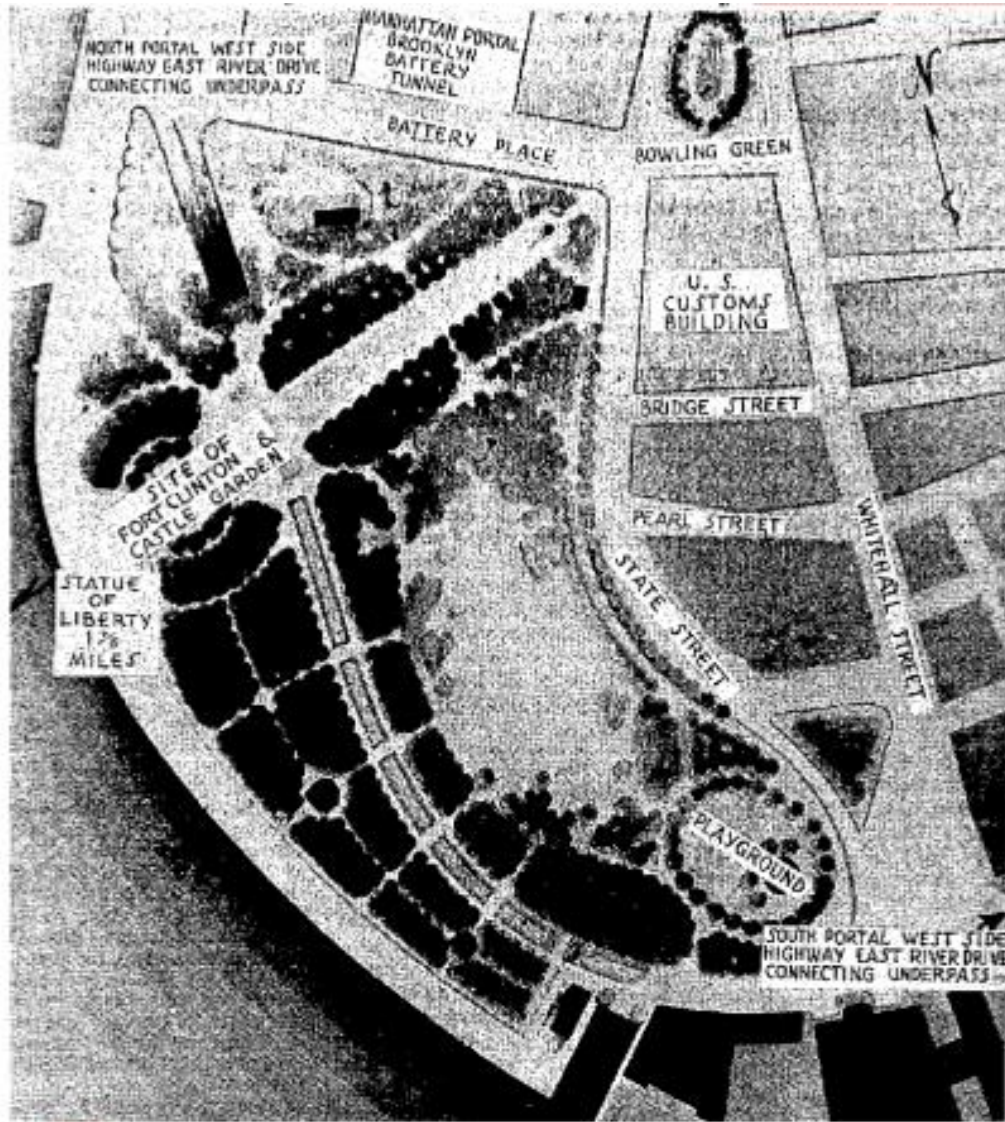


Figure 4: Plans for Battery Park with Fort Clinton demolished. Originally featured in “Moses Wins in Board of Estimate On Plan to Shut Aquarium Oct. 1,” *New York Herald Tribune*, September 12, 1941.

¹⁰¹ *New York Herald Tribune*, “Moses Wins in Board of Estimate on Plan to Shut Aquarium Oct. 1,” September 12, 1941.

In *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, authors Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar explain that Moses “was a progressive who believed that a healthful environment could influence social behavior.”¹⁰² The authors say that Moses was not a “preservationist” who sought to highlight the natural characteristics of the city’s parks, but rather focused on recreation, and so he saw parks as “places for active, wholesome play.”¹⁰³ As mentioned, Moses’ opponents believed that aesthetics influenced social behavior, and thus the presence of a historic fort in the park was beneficial in their estimation. For Moses, a historic structure, serving either as an Aquarium or as a monument, had no place in a park designed for recreation. His ideal included wide-open spaces, where people could actively enjoy the park space.

It must also be noted that Moses had the support of the Parks Association for his plans to demolish the Fort. McAneny recalled that President Iphigene Sulzberger was a personal friend of Moses, and so this may have given her a biased view of his park proposal.¹⁰⁴ Robert W. Dowling’s also accused Moses of influencing Sulzberger, writing, “the protest of the Park Association regarding Fort Clinton is obviously Moses inspired and dictated.”¹⁰⁵ Even Sulzberger recalled in her memoirs, “Bob Moses was a good friend; and even if he wasn’t, he was the best parks commissioner we ever had.”¹⁰⁶ Regardless, the fact remains that Moses had the support of the entire Association, not simply Sulzberger. Moreover, though Sulzberger and Moses were friends, they did not always agree about the ideal park design, having argued about

¹⁰² Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 448.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ George McAneny, interview by Allan Nevins and Dean Albertson, *Reminiscences of George McAneny*, Columbia University, 1949, 81.

¹⁰⁵ Robert W. Dowling to William O’Dwyer, July 31, 1946, in *Mayor O’Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 151.

¹⁰⁶ Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, *Iphigene: Memoirs of Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger of the New York Times Family* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981), 165.

Central Park in the past, for example.¹⁰⁷ Thus, it is quite possible that she did not approve of Moses' plans simply out of loyalty. In the case of Battery Park, Sulzberger gave her full support to Moses for the benefits of the plan itself.¹⁰⁸

The Opposition

Despite the support that Moses received for his efforts to rehabilitate Battery Park, his opponents were not impressed and saw his plans as an attack on three treasured city institutions—the Aquarium, the Park itself, and Fort Clinton. They believed that the public needed such institutions for self-betterment and educational purposes. Since their focus was on restoration, they saw this potential loss as disastrous. One of the earliest tactics the opposition decided to employ in their hopes of defeating him was one they had learned from Moses himself—they attacked him personally.

McAneny, in his correspondence with Mayor O'Dwyer, placed the entire blame for the demolition on Moses exclusively. In one letter, he urged O'Dwyer that he must “not permit this misuse of City funds to gratify the ambitions of one man.”¹⁰⁹ To McAneny, the demolition would not serve the public, but simply waste taxpayer money in Moses' blind attempt to get his own way. Framing the debate in such a way that Moses was portrayed as opposing the public, Bard even compared Moses' methods to those of Hitler. While speaking at a Board of Estimate meeting in 1941, he explained that Moses' efforts to increase control over Battery Park were akin to Hitler's actions in Europe because both men gradually amassed power until it was too late to

¹⁰⁷ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 455. Moses and Sulzberger had previously had an argument about the location of playgrounds within Central Park. Sulzberger mentioned this very debate in her memoirs, writing “I was against his plan to lay out yet another play area.” See *Iphigene: Memoirs of Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger*, 157.

¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times*, “5 Groups Condemn Moses' Bridge Plan,” March 27, 1939.

¹⁰⁹ George McAneny to Mayor William O'Dwyer, April 29, 1948, in *Mayor O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 153.

do anything to stop them.¹¹⁰ During the same meeting, Isaacs argued that Moses did not have the power to refuse to act “just because he says, ‘I don’t want to.’”¹¹¹ Focusing on Moses’ tendency to have things done his way, or not at all, the opposition stripped the Commissioner of rationality, treating his actions as the result of selfish impulse. Reflecting on such impulses, Bard, in a moment of frustration, said that in order to counter Moses’ argument that the historic Fort never even fired a shot during a war, he wished that he could fire a shot from the Fort “and put Mr. Moses on the other side of the canon.”¹¹² In their attempts to characterize Moses as irrational, members of the opposition often succumbed to irrationality themselves.

During the course of the new debate, Isaacs’ term as Manhattan Borough President ended, curtailing his role in this fight. Edgar J. Nathan, who was also opposed to the demolition of Fort Clinton, succeeded him. However, Nathan did not figure as prominently in the second debate as Isaacs had in the previous one.¹¹³ Likewise, C.C. Burlingham, having already celebrated his eightieth birthday, did not take an active role in this second debate. That said, Bard and McAneny remained prominent leaders in the fight to save the Fort, with this second debate reflecting the same progressive sentiments and elitist nature of the previous one.

The Aquarium

Before announcing his desire to demolish Fort Clinton, Moses determined to relocate the city Aquarium. In February of 1941, he wrote a public letter to the *New York Times* in which he explained his reasons for supporting the relocation. He wrote, “the building is wholly unsuited to a modern aquarium” and the structure is “dark, clingy, and badly ventilated.”¹¹⁴ Explaining the

¹¹⁰ *New York Herald Tribune*, “Moses Wins in Board of Estimate,” September 12, 1941.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *New York Herald Tribune*, “City Again Votes to Raze Aquarium,” May 28, 1948.

¹¹³ *The New York Times*, “Pay for an Expert Upsets City Board,” April 24, 1942.

¹¹⁴ *New York Herald Tribune*, “Moses Writes to ‘Stuffed Shirts’ Who Weep for the Aquarium,” February 25, 1941.

plans of the New York Zoological Society to build a modern facility at the Bronx Zoo to serve as a new Aquarium, Moses explained that “every progressive citizen should welcome this program” because it would make for a more enjoyable visit for an increased number of visitors. On September 11, 1941, the Board of Estimate granted him the funds to close the Aquarium in Battery Park. However, at this same meeting, Stanley Isaacs, still serving as Borough President, said that the closing of the Aquarium was a “major civic crime” because of the resulting loss of a “magnificent institution.”¹¹⁵ Once again, those calling for restoration were faced with the prospect of new construction in the city. Moses argued that the old building lacked functionality, but his opponents considered the tradition of the institution superior to issues of functionality.

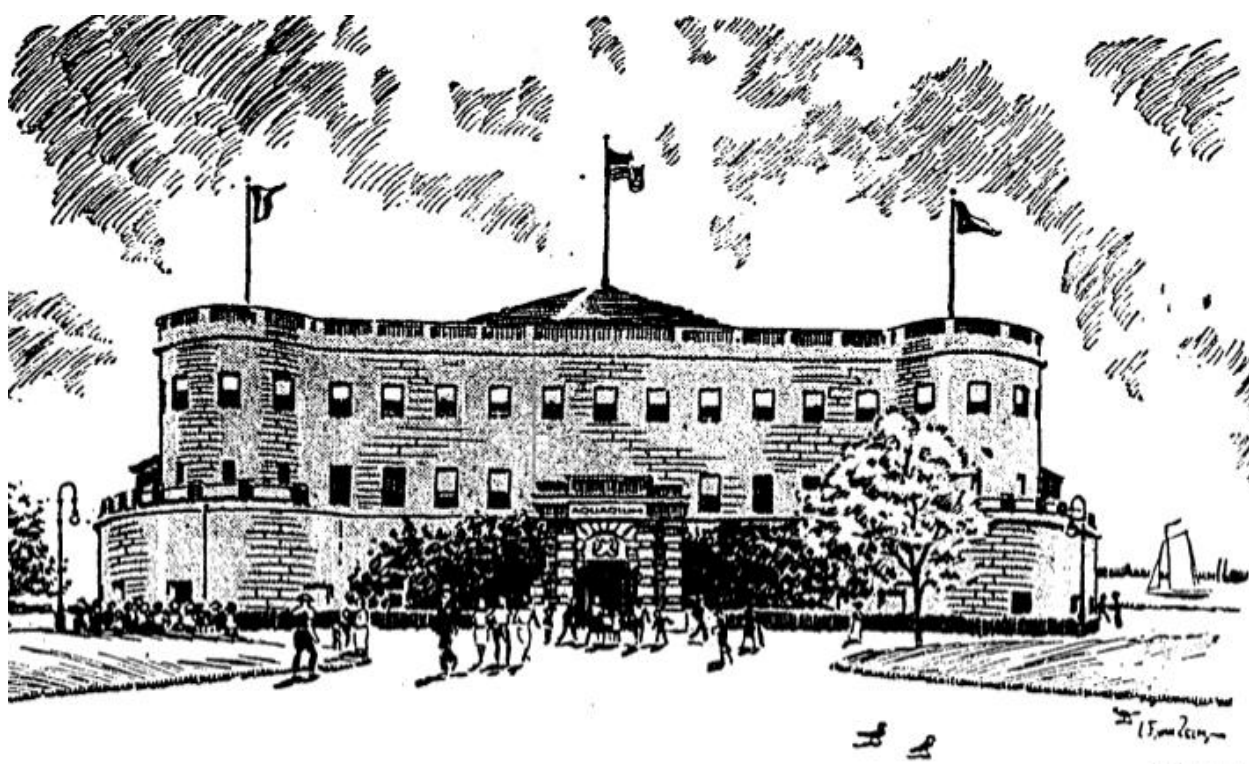


Figure 5: The New York City Aquarium as it appeared in 1941. Originally featured in “The Fish Will Have to Move,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 24, 1941.

¹¹⁵ *New York Herald Tribune*, “Moses Wins in Board of Estimate,” September 12, 1941.

Battery Park Redevelopment

The opposition feared losing the Park itself as much as they feared losing the Aquarium. A June 1942 *New York Times* editorial accused Moses of having an “uncontrollable passion for neatness,” which had warped his understanding of park design.¹¹⁶ The opposition disagreed with Moses’ plans to include active play facilities in city parks. More important than active play areas was the preservation of natural effects, and in the case of Battery Park, historic structures. To them, the character and uniqueness of Battery Park was embodied in the presence of the fort. However, for Moses, the fort was an example of blight, and it stood in the way of creating a usable, attractive public space. Though each side argued about the specific benefits of a park, both sides agreed that such a space had the power to influence the public. For instance, Sulzberger, the President of the Parks Department, said that Moses’ design for Battery Park “rather than destroy the park, greatly increases its usefulness and beauty”¹¹⁷ Note Sulzberger’s use of the word “usefulness.” In her estimation, the Park was important because it gave the public a place to be active. Likewise, Moses wrote “there may be nothing more beautiful than sweeping, well-clipped laws and handsome background planting, but people today more and more require and demand active recreation areas.”¹¹⁸ Thus, the benefits were physical. However, in a letter to Ely J. Kahn, the President of the Municipal Art Society, Bard professed that the plans for Battery Park would have a negative “effect on civic spirit.”¹¹⁹ He extolled the benefits of tradition and beauty on the individual, which transcended the physical benefits of playground space. In his view, it was the more passive benefits of education, in subjects like American

¹¹⁶ *The New York Times*, “Topic of the Times,” June 27, 1942.

¹¹⁷ *The New York Times*, “5 Groups Condemn Moses’ Bridge Plan,” March 27, 1939.

¹¹⁸ Moses, *Working for the People*, 147.

¹¹⁹ Albert S. Bard to Ely Jacques Kahn, November 4, 1942, in *Albert S. Bard Papers*, Box 54, Folder 10.

history and natural science, that made the Aquarium, the Fort, and the Park itself all assets to the public.

Fort Clinton

Most damaging to the city, his opponents argued, was the proposed destruction of the Fort. For them, this historic structure reflected the very traditions and humble beginnings of America itself. As Rosenzweig and Blackmar explain, there was a movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to “preserve the landscapes and buildings of a ‘simpler’ American past.”¹²⁰ The authors argue that this effort to “enshrine the artifacts of an Anglo-Saxon ‘heritage’” may have been the result of a growing fear that American traditions were being threatened by new immigrants.¹²¹ Moses’ opponents did not see recent immigrants as a threat, but they still wished to Americanize and educate them in the ways of the past. As Hofstadter explains, such progressives felt “a sense of some obligation to the immigrant and recognition that his Americanization was a practical problem that must be met with a humane and constructive program.”¹²² It was their belief that through education they would be able to perfect the immigrant and transform him into an American.

The history of Fort Clinton was closely linked to the history of the United States in general and of New York City in particular. In 1808, construction began on a fortification at the southern tip of Manhattan Island, named for then-Mayor DeWitt Clinton. Together with its sister citadel on Governor’s Island, Fort Clinton was built to protect New York City from foreign invasion. Although it never saw military action during the War of 1812, it served as a military headquarters for the duration of the war. Many in fact credit its presence in the Battery with staving off a British attack on Manhattan. Subsequently, the structure was turned first into a

¹²⁰ Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 432.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 134.

concert venue named Castle Garden and then into an immigration station in the 1850s. Eight million immigrants would enter the country through this gateway. In 1890, it became the home of the city Aquarium, which Moses closed in 1941.

Moses sought to downplay the historical significance of Fort Clinton. For instance, in February of 1941, Moses wrote to the *Times* explaining that, “Castle Clinton...has no history worth writing about.”¹²³ Starting with the War of 1812, Moses pointed out that during the entire conflict, the “guns never fired a shot against the enemy,” interpreting this inactivity as a sign of insignificance.¹²⁴ In his description of the building’s years as a theater, Moses used words like “hideous” and “monstrosity” to describe the architectural changes that the Fort underwent at the time. Moses proceeded to write about its years as an immigration station as “a foul, crowded, unsanitary, disgraceful pen through which our perspective citizens were herded like cattle.”¹²⁵ With this, Moses argued that because the immigration station provided such an awful experience to future citizens, its preservation would be a stain on the city’s history.

In this document, Moses was clearly relying on history when it suited his own needs and dismissing it when it obstructed his aims. For instance, Moses quoted an article that appeared in 1823 in *The New York Evening Post* in which the Fort was described as “that large, red wart.” Similarly, the Commissioner discussed in depth an 1883 investigation launched by then-Governor Grover Cleveland into the conditions at Castle Garden because of complaints that immigrants being held there were treated inhumanely. Thus, Moses quoted these historical actors as a way of gaining legitimacy for his own position. He nonetheless ridiculed those who valued

¹²³ *The New York Times*, “Moses Writes to ‘Stuffed Shirts’ Who Weep for the Aquarium,” February 25, 1941.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

history, writing that the only people who would care to preserve this building are those for whom “the past is the very breath of life.”¹²⁶

While his progressive opposition may not have been as obsessed with the past as Moses wanted the public to believe, they did have a strong appreciation and respect for history, tradition, and restoration. John Higham explains in *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* that some Progressives believed that there were specific and uniquely American ideals and traditions that needed to be passed down to the less fortunate.¹²⁷ Therefore, the opposition saw it as their duty to preserve this historical building for posterity’s sake so that future generations of Americans would understand the lives and traditions of their “ancestors.” The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society was one organization that made bold attempts to combat Moses’ dismissal of the Fort’s significance, believing that historical structures were useful for the city’s future.¹²⁸ McAneny was a member of this organization. Moses, having already personally ridiculed McAneny in the last debate, now ridiculed the organization itself, saying that its members issued “heart-rendering sobs” whenever demolition was spoken about because of their fixation on the things of the past.¹²⁹ In this way, Moses associated their sentimentality with emotional irrationality.¹³⁰ In response, McAneny organized a luncheon in 1947 hosted by the Society at Fraunces Tavern to which many prominent historians were invited. In an effort to disprove Moses’ accusations of irrational sentimentality, the Society encouraged a more cerebral discussion of the Fort significance, rather than a mere nostalgic one.

¹²⁶ *The New York Times*, “Moses Writes to ‘Stuffed Shirts’ Who Weep for the Aquarium,” February 25, 1941.

¹²⁷ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 239.

¹²⁸ Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 116.

¹²⁹ *New York Times*, “Moses Writes to ‘Stuffed Shirts’ Who Weep for the Aquarium,” February 25, 1941.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

Unable to attend the luncheon, the Pulitzer Prize winning author Carl Van Doren wrote a letter offering his support for the preservation of the structure. In his opinion, the destruction of the Fort would be “an act of civilized vandalism” akin to the destruction of Plymouth Rock, stating, “both will be ancient and honorable, and equally so.”¹³¹ With this, Van Doren compared the immigration station at Castle Clinton to the point of entry of the Pilgrims, and thereby associated the Fort with the very founding of the nation. This comparison, like the physical setting of the luncheon at a pre-Revolutionary site, elevated the historical significance of Fort Clinton. By associating the Fort with other objects and buildings from the nation’s founding, historians like Van Doren attempted to make the Fort a part of the shared national story and thus something too valuable to tear down. The comparison between Castle Clinton and Plymouth Rock also challenged Moses’ proposed image of a subpar, barbaric immigration station. Instead, the public was invited to reflect on Castle Clinton as a Plymouth Rock for a later generation, the landing place of a newer, but equally important, generation of Americans.

Within a progressive vein, the comparison between Plymouth Rock and Castle Clinton was not elitist, but rather part of an attempt to locate recent immigration within the context of deeper American traditions. In this way, newer immigrants were encouraged to consider themselves equal actors in the history of the country. Similarly, a 1942 editorial in the *New York Times* appealed to images of the nation’s founding in an attempt to equalize all immigrants. While acknowledging that the conditions of the Fort were subpar, the author wrote that “the overcrowding on board the Mayflower was a disgrace” just as “the dietary standards that first Winter at Plymouth showed a vitamin deficiency nothing short of criminal.”¹³² In other words, the author argued that it is a uniquely American experience for the immigrant to suffer. In this

¹³¹ Carl Van Doren to Gardener Osborn, April 1, 1947, in *Mayor O’Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 152.

¹³² *The New York Times*, “Topic of the Times,” June 27, 1942.

explicitly egalitarian approach, the historians elevated the Fort as a monument worthy of the nation's heritage. This was a progressive attempt to associate later immigrants with the traditions of the past, making them equally American.

What historians witnessed was not simply an attempt by Moses to overlook history, but a blatant attempt to rewrite it in his favor. The Commissioner declared the Fort to be historically insignificant as if he was an authority in the field. In one letter to Mayor O'Dwyer, Robert Dowling, a real estate developer, questioned the authority of the Parks Commissioner to declare a structure historically insignificant when "highly thought of opinion of National Historical site experts" already decided that the structure had historical worth.¹³³ Faced with Moses' own view of history, it became the job of the professional historian to disprove it.

Some of the efforts to do this were more humorous than others. In an article that appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune*, the editors labeled Moses a hypocrite, because he was so adamant about demolishing a Fort that had seen no military involvement and yet ignored the fact that his offices were headquartered in the Central Park Arsenal, a military structure that had also never seen military action. The editors conceded, however, that it could not be said that the Arsenal never fired a shot because "the Commissioner is practically a thirty-gun battery himself."¹³⁴ Humor aside, this critique once again accused Moses of ignoring facts when it was convenient and altering the truth when it served his purposes.

Even in this second debate, little evidence exists to suggest that these progressive leaders received much popular support in their fight against Moses. Whether or not this is true, Moses worked hard to characterize his opposition as out-of-touch elites. To Moses, the overvaluing of history by his opponents was not the only example of their disconnect from the reality of city life

¹³³ Robert Dowling to William O'Dwyer, July 31, 1946, in *Mayor O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 151.

¹³⁴ *New York Herald Tribune*, "Arsenal vs. Castle," February 25, 1941.

and their disassociation from the needs of the people. He described his opponents as “stuffed shirts,” eliciting an image of sentimentalist elites with their eyes focused squarely on the past and unable to plan for the future.¹³⁵ For Moses, this overvaluation of history highlighted their belief that the past was superior to the present or the future. Thus, Moses accused them of having a view of the city that focused on the past more than the future, and was in many ways antithetical to Moses’ goal of urban planning, which desired a truly modern city. However, Moses failed to grasp that these men wanted to use the past in their creation of the city’s future. To him, the city needed to cut its link with the past in order to make the future worthwhile. In *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Marshall Berman writes that Moses’ “identification with progress, with renewal and reform, with the perpetual transformation of [his] world” was something that many associated with New York City itself.¹³⁶ Therefore, by describing his opponents as anti-progress, Moses was in essence saying that they were anti-New York. In other words, their focus on the past would, in Moses’ eyes, deny them authority to partake in creating the city’s future.

Outcome

As before, the Progressives involved in this debate ultimately used the powers of the federal government to rally their cause. In the years between 1941 and 1948, the Board of Estimate voted numerous times to approve and finance the demolition of the Fort, but each time the opposition was able to convince the city to reconsider. By 1945, the reformers had persuaded Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes that the Fort was worth preserving. On November 26th of that year, Ickes wrote to Mayor La Guardia explaining that he was prepared to introduce

¹³⁵ *The New York Times*, “Moses Writes to ‘Stuffed Shirts’ Who Weep for the Aquarium,” February 25, 1941.

¹³⁶ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982) 295.

legislation in Congress, authorizing the National Park Service to turn the Fort into a national monument.¹³⁷ La Guardia, in obvious support of Moses' position, answered a few days later arguing that the city was not required to cede this property to the federal government.¹³⁸ Despite his objections, Ickes did in fact introduce a bill in the House of Representatives calling for the designation of the Fort as a national monument. Fortunately for the reformers, Mayor La Guardia's term ended in 1946, and his successor, Mayor William O'Dwyer, was much more willing to work with the Department of the Interior. Thus, in April 1946, O'Dwyer wrote that he was willing to cede the property over to the federal government if he could be assured of continued funding for restoration and maintenance.¹³⁹ By August of 1946, Congress and President Harry Truman enacted legislation that would provide the funding for the monument. However, this legislation still did not require the city to cede the property and so Moses continued to work through the city government to ensure demolition.

Having already approved federal support for their restoration plans, the reformers now attempted to convince the city to cede the property to the federal government before Moses' demolition was approved. The most significant attempt by the opposition took place in 1947 when Alexander Hamilton, then President of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, brought Moses to court on the grounds that a Commissioner could not demolish a monument without approval of the art commission of the City of New York.¹⁴⁰ This was the culmination of the aforementioned progressive strategy of working through the government to protect the population from those that tried to abuse power. All along, the opposition argued that

¹³⁷ Harold L. Ickes to Fiorello La Guardia, November 26, 1945, in *Mayor O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 151.

¹³⁸ Fiorello La Guardia to Harold L. Ickes, November 29, 1945, in *Mayor O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 151.

¹³⁹ William O'Dwyer to J. A. Krug, April 24, 1946, in *Mayor O'Dwyer Papers*, Box 16, Folder 151.

¹⁴⁰ Supreme Court of New York, *In the Matter of Alexander Hamilton, Petitioner, v. Robert Moses, as Commissioner of Park of the City of New York, Respondent*, December 19, 1948.

Moses was taking action despite the disapproval of elected officials. Now they felt that he needed to be held accountable.

During the trial, Moses countered Hamilton's claim that the structure had "great historical, cultural, and sentimental significance," by stating that the Fort was not a monument "because it was not erected to commemorate some subject or event."¹⁴¹ Judge Null, the presiding judge of the case, dismissed Moses' claim by saying that "a concept so narrow would exclude most national monuments as well as the treasured relics and remains of the past."¹⁴² The Court did not question Moses' motives in wanting to demolish the Fort. Rather, the issue of contention was whether Moses had the right to declare something to have historical significance or not. What becomes even more interesting is the Court's defense of Moses' opponents. Judge Null wrote that the efforts at preservation were "no mere fad or whimsy of the misguided or sentimental" but rather "the deep concern of many distinguished citizens and organizations."¹⁴³ Thus the Court delegitimized Moses' accusations that his opponents were irrational and overly sentimental. The Court saw Moses' attacks as unqualified personal insults that could not be upheld by the law. In essence, Moses' attempts to rewrite history would not be recognized and so his decisions regarding the future of Battery Park were silenced.

In December of 1948, the Court determined that the Art Commission of New York City did in fact need to approve the demolition, and thus the Fort was saved. The federal government now had the opportunity to designate the fort a national monument. This final desperate act of the reformers to stall Moses highlights the main issue at stake in this fight. As Walter D. Binger wrote in the *Times*, "the great point at present is whether Mr. Moses may tear down a national

¹⁴¹ Supreme Court of New York, *In the Matter of Alexander Hamilton, Petitioner, v. Robert Moses, as Commissioner of Park of the City of New York, Respondent*, December 19, 1948.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

monument when he alone believes that it is not one.”¹⁴⁴ Unlike Moses, the opposition felt that the historic Fort added character to the park. They did not want to afford him the opportunity to decide what was significant to include in park design and what was not. Similarly, they did not want Moses to decide what was valuable, aesthetically or historically, and what deserved to be demolished. The opposition did not want these decisions to be left in the hands of one man.

¹⁴⁴ Walter D. Binger, “Judging National Monuments,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1949.

Conclusion

Despite these setbacks, Moses was ultimately victorious in the wider fight to shape the future development of New York City. In 2014, New Yorkers still interact daily with his legacy, especially in the form of roads and parks. Thus, one may ask why it is important to study Moses' failed attempts if they were so infrequent. I argue that they are important because such an exploration brings to the forefront Moses' opponents, who proposed a vision that was radically different from the one put forth by Moses. Furthermore, it is through studying specific cases in which Moses failed, rare as they might be, that one catches a glimpse of the way the city was before Moses transformed it. Whether or not one thinks Moses' impact on the city was beneficial, it is impossible to deny that Moses' impact was drastic. Yet, his influence cannot be understood in full if one is unaware of the way the city looked and operated before his reign of power. Whether Moses was following national trends that were beyond his power, such as the influence of automobile culture and suburbanization, or was independent of such trends, his brand of urban planning forever changed the physical landscape of New York City.

Although the reformers often faced defeat, they won a few battles—like those described here—and contributed to the discourse about the relationship between urban planning and a specific view of the public good. This discourse remains powerful today. Their vision of New York City, which cherished preservation and aesthetics, was a view that would remain prominent in future debates, which were often aimed against Moses. These debates still focused on the definition and purpose of beauty in urban life. For example, in 1958, Lewis Mumford, the prominent urban historian, challenged Moses' plans to extend Fifth Avenue through Washington Square Park with these words: "The attack on Washington Square by the Park Department is a piece of unqualified vandalism. Washington Square . . . has a claim to our historic respect: a

respect that Mr. Moses seems chronically unable to accord any human handiwork except his own.”¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Norman Vincent Peale, a pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church, argued that “little parks and squares, especially those possessing a holdover of the flavor and charm of the past, are good for the nerves, and perhaps for the soul.”¹⁴⁶ These arguments, made one decade after the debates regarding the Battery, reflected the same ideals of the “Fearsome Foursome.” There were fears that Moses’ proposed road would take park space away from the public, and that this park space was important because it had the power to uplift the human spirit. Similarly, there was an appeal to historic tradition and the need for preservation.

The pioneering spirit of the early reformers was carried into the 1960s and 1970s, and was channeled in the efforts to pass the Landmarks Preservation Law in 1965 and later strengthen the law in 1978. More and more, local activists were emerging to preserve buildings, structures, and even entire neighborhoods. What this highlights is that the “Fearsome Foursome” had successfully challenged Moses’ association of progress exclusively with new construction. It was no longer taken for granted that preservation stifled progress. Rather, many were calling for preservation as a way to enhance community ties and to promote the character of neighborhoods. In 1963, for instance, when Penn Station was slotted for destruction, Ada Louise Huxtable, the architecture critic, declared “And we will probably be judged not by the monuments we build but by those we have destroyed.”¹⁴⁷ This legitimized preservation as something viable for a city’s future development. Indeed, this preservationist trend continues into the twenty-first century, with increased calls for adaptive reuse and other plans to preserve the unique character of the city.

¹⁴⁵ Lewis Mumford as quoted in Anthony Flint, *Wrestling With Moses: How Jane Jacobs Took On New York’s Master Builder and Transformed the American City* (New York: Random House, 2011), 80.

¹⁴⁶ Norman Vincent Peale as quoted in Anthony Flint, *Wrestling With Moses*, 81.

¹⁴⁷ Ada Louise Huxtable, “Farewell to Penn Station,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 1963.

Thus, the reformers who stood up to Moses in the 1930s and 1940s were certainly courageous visionaries. It would be both unfair and inaccurate to say that their focus on preservation and aesthetics was reactionary. Rather, they felt that by preserving the beauty of the past, they were preparing New York City for a successful future. By challenging Moses, they did not propose a vision that was any better or any worse than Moses' own vision. Yet, the persistence of their ideals into the twenty-first century highlights the value of their insight.

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