

A MAP of the COMMON LANDS between the three and six mile stones,
 belonging to the
CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.

Casimir Theodor, City Surveyor.

March, 5th 1796.



REFERENCES

- Red-colored* Red is private property.
- Yellow* to be sold.
- Green* to be leased.
- The Middle Road is in Width 100 feet.
- The rest of the Roads each 60 feet.

5. The Goerck Plan of the Common Lands, 1796

Casimir Goerck, "A Map of the Common Lands between the three and six mile stones belonging to the Corporation of the City of New York," 1796 (as reproduced in 19th century). Museum of the City of New York, The J. Clarence Davies Collection, 29.100.3034

The Common Lands comprised about two square miles of rocky, hilly, and generally undesirable land in central Manhattan extending from today's Madison Square (23rd Street) to the middle of the reservoir in Central Park (90th Street), between approximately Second to Seventh Avenues. (Historically the Common Lands were larger, but portions had been sold by 1796, and no known map depicts the original boundaries.) These vacant lands were first granted by Dutch provincial authority to the government of New Amsterdam in 1658. English charters in 1686 and 1730 confirmed ownership by the city. Through the colonial period,

when the settled city lay far to the south, the Common Lands were mostly ignored, with some long-term farming leases and a few low-priced sales of certain portions.

After the Revolution, the new and cash-strapped American city government looked to profit from its underperforming domain. In 1785, Casimir Goerck, one in a handful of professional local surveyors, was hired to survey "the vacant land belonging to the corporation... into lots as near as may be of five acres each" with a road up the middle. But access to most of what came out as irregularly shaped lots was limited; sales were few.

In 1796, the city hired Goerck to refine his survey, with more uniformly rectangular lots and two additional roads parallel to the middle road. Lots were alternately designated for sale or lease with the rationale that sold lots would raise the value of leased lots which could later be sold at higher prices.

One can see how Goerck's 1796 plan, with its three widely-spaced parallel roads and

hundreds of rectangular five-acre lots, could seduce a state commission charged with the monumental task of laying streets and avenues over an area more than ten times the size of the 1,200-acre Common Lands. In a generation, Goerck's lots would become the Grid Commission's five-acre blocks; Goerck's East, Middle, and West roads would become the commission's Fourth (Park), Fifth, and Sixth Avenues. Goerck's 1796 map can be read as the genesis of Manhattan's geometric order.

Casimir Theodor Goerck was born in Poland (date unknown) and served as an artillery officer for the Americans during the Revolution. In 1783 he married Elizabeth Roosevelt, of the Dutch-descended family already prominent in New York. Goerck quickly established himself as a city surveyor, officially authorized to conduct public and private surveys, but his career was brief: he died in the yellow fever epidemic of 1798. It does not appear that the 1785 map survives, but the 1796 map is known through nineteenth-century copies. GK