

The Legacy of the Mangin-Goerck Plan

To all appearances, the demise of the Mangin-Goerck plan issued by Joseph Mangin in November 1803 was fast and final. The Common Council announced that the map "contains many inaccuracies and designates streets which have not been agreed to by the Corporation and which it would be improper to adopt, and which might tend to lead the proprietors of Land adjacent to such streets so laid down into error." The city recalled and destroyed subscription copies of the map (with refunds to subscribers) and ordered a warning about inaccuracy pasted on all copies retained by subscribers. Only a handful of these copies survive; the original six-foot square manuscript map disappeared long ago.

Yet, as it rejected Mangin's map, the Common Council came to embrace the central idea behind it, that New York ought to have a plan for its future development. There is a direct if unacknowledged progression from the rejection of Mangin's map in 1803 to the naming of the grid commission four years later.

A few weeks after dispatching the Mangin plan for New York's future, the Common Council asked the city street commissioner Joseph Browne, Jr., to devise one of his own. Browne, who had been the leading detractor of Mangin's plan, failed to come up with anything before the following summer, when his brother-in-law and close comrade Aaron Burr had his fatal duel with Alexander Hamilton. Browne and Burr fled New York. Early in 1805, the Council asked Browne's successor, John Hunn, to develop a plan, but Hunn seems to have not responded.

Early in 1806, the Council named a committee to explore the subject. The committee quickly proposed a state law for the appointment of commissioners "to regulate and lay out Streets in this City beyond certain limits." A new committee was appointed to study the proposal but soon took a different tack: it proposed hiring Ferdinand Hassler to make "a proper survey of this Island." Hassler, recently emigrated from Switzerland to Philadelphia, was a highly regarded geodesist; he would go on to lead the first United States Coast Survey. In July the city made him a generous offer (five dollars a day) for a three-month survey; in October, Hassler replied that sickness had prevented his travel. The offer was rescinded. One can only imagine what a Swiss scientist might have made of Manhattan.

The Common Council promptly got back on track. In January 1807 a new committee revived the concept of state-appointed commissioners; a month later the city sent its memorial and draft law to Albany for what would become the commission that created Manhattan's iconic grid.

In its memorial, the Common Council stated that its primary goal was "to unite regularity and order with the Public convenience and benefit and in particular to promote the health of the City." This language was not new. The warning pasted on copies of Mangin's 1803 map advised that the proposed streets it depicted should be "considered subject to such future arrangements as the Corporation may deem best calculated to promote the health, introduce regularity, and conduce to the convenience of the City." In prompting New York to begin thinking about these things, Mangin and his fantastic map captured an enduring legacy.