

New York City's history from the ground up in Steinberg's 'Gotham Unbound'

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After exploring the environmental impact of the American obsession with green lawns in his last book, Case Western Reserve University historian Ted Steinberg now has turns his attention to the environmental footprint of one of the world's most iconic cities: New York.

A native New Yorker, Steinberg titled his new book "Gotham Unbound: The Ecological History of Greater New York." Simon & Schuster released the book June 3.

Steinberg, the Davee Professor of History and Professor of Law at Case Western Reserve, adopted ground-up approach to Greater New York's transformation over the past 400 years, an ecological transformation so vast he characterizes it as "one of the most creative acts of vandalism ever perpetrated on a natural landscape."

"Gotham Unbound" follows the massive changes to land and water that began in the wake of Henry Hudson's adventure to New York Harbor in 1609.

The book examines the ecological consequences for wetlands and water quality of dense, urban life beginning with John Randel's 1811 grid plan, which created the blueprint for high-density living that has only grown more intensely crowded over time.

Today city streets, lined with skyscrapers and high-rises, support an astonishing 69,464 people per square mile. Urban development has

engulfed the area once home to 55 distinct ecological communities where the Hudson River meets the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1609, long before the area became a megacity, birds, bears, wolves, mountain lions, whales and porpoises outnumbered humans. Flourishing marshlands that were a natural buffer against hurricanes and storms evolved into real estate, roads, parks, and of course enormous landfills to bury the detritus created by the metropolis.

After finishing a draft of the book, Steinberg watched from his home in Ohio as Hurricane Sandy barreled across the metropolitan area he knows and loves. The prospect of a further rise in sea level is destined to make life even more perilous for the city.

Steinberg hopes his readers will realize how the past shapes what is possible in the present with respect to the city's dealings with land and sea. He also points out that New York, like the majority of the globe's largest cities, is built in an estuary. Thus his story of New York offers valuable lessons for urbanites across the planet.

"Gotham Unbound" is Steinberg's sixth book. He notes that he could not have written these [books](#) without the help and generosity of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. An NEH fellowship, in particular, proved instrumental in allowing Steinberg to finish his New York book, which has been in the making since 1990.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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