

Learning Places Spring 2016

SITE REPORT

Field Visit #2: Vinegar Hill



Jessica Samide

02.29.2016

INTRODUCTION

The second field visit to Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn, was much more focused and specific than the first field visit. The class met at Plymouth Street and Hudson Avenue. From here we broke up into groups of two and three. Each individual was given an 1855 map created by William Perris, which illustrated what each lot of land looked like at the time it was surveyed. Each group walked around their assigned three to six block radius and compared the lots from the 1855 map to the current lots. The purpose was to observe and evaluate how the neighborhood has evolved over the years and what might have been the cause of the changes.

PRE-VISIT REFLECTION

My first visit to Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn, sparked my interest in the mercantile function of the original 19th century corner buildings on Hudson Avenue. I am hoping to be able to find more buildings from

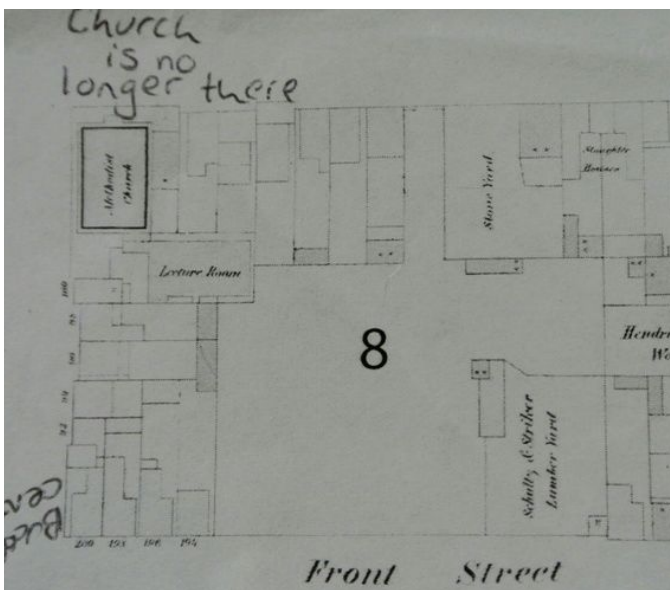
the 19th century that also possess similar architectural details that indicate commercial purposes as I explore more of Vinegar Hill. I look forward to narrowing down my observations to a certain area or subject matter. My goal of the second site visit is to focus on areas of Vinegar Hill that extend past Hudson Avenue, which was the predominant focus of my first visit.

SITE DOCUMENTATION (photos/sketches)



The bright yellow building pictured above is the Dorje Ling Buddhist Center located on Gold Street. This building is eye catching for reasons beyond on the bright yellow and red coloring. Religious centers are often good indicators that point towards the beliefs of the current population. The presence of a Buddhist

center leads to the assumption that there is a Buddhist population living in or nearby Vinegar Hill.



To further illustrate my point that religious centers are dependant on the beliefs of the inhabiting population, the photo on the left is from William Perris' 1855 map of Brooklyn. On the same block that the Dorje Ling Buddhist Center is now situated on was at one time a Methodist Church. When I walked to the corner of York Street and Gold Street, where the Methodist Church had been, the church had been replaced by another building.



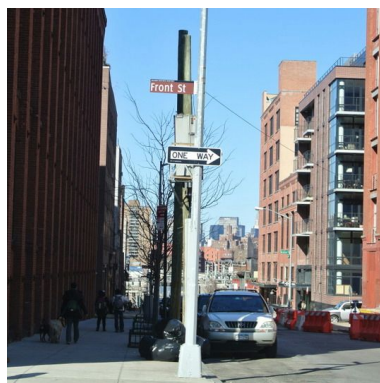
This photo is a series of five houses on Gold Street that are in the same lots that are illustrated on the map from 1855.



The corner building shown is a house on the corner of Water Street and Gold Street. The diagonal door and entrance on the side of the building indicate that at one point in history the building was used for commercial purposes. A distinctive and unusual architectural feature of this building is its narrow width. Most of the residential buildings throughout the neighborhood are three window bays wide whereas this building is only two window bays wide. The windows also shrink in length each story.



This is a sketch of the entranceway from the corner building that is pictured in the above photos. I chose to sketch this photo to hone in on the unusual angle of the door. This door is on a diagonal angle so that it is situated closer to the corner streets. The position of the doorway is optimal for bringing goods into the store and allows for easy access for the patrons who would frequent the shop.



These three photos were taken with the hope of illustrating how section 8 on William Perris' 1855 map of Vinegar Hill consists mostly of industrial and apartment buildings. From each view, the buildings are larger and more modern than other parts of Vinegar Hill.

This sketch was created on the corner of Bridge Street and Front Street. The buildings shown are apartment buildings and an industrial warehouse.



QUALITATIVE SITE OBSERVATIONS

1. Neighborhood / Street Character
 - a. Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn. Section 8 on William Perris' 1855 map of Brooklyn.
 - b. Very industrial, blue-collar warehouses and newer apartment buildings mixed with older buildings predating the 20th century.
2. Vitality of Neighborhood
 - a. General Description
 - i. The area of Vinegar Hill that was closer to DUMBO, the focus of my observation during my second field visit, was much livelier than the part closer to the Navy Yard.
 - b. Pedestrian Activity
 - i. I saw a lot of people passing by on the sidewalk. Most of the pedestrians I came across were people who worked in the neighborhood. Many of the workers were near their warehouses or working in construction. There were some pedestrians who were passing through the neighborhood. They tended to be walking in the direction of Farragut Houses or DUMBO.
 - c. Vehicular Traffic
 - i. The vehicular traffic was heaviest on Gold Street, York Street, and Bridge Street since they were larger, two-way streets. Even the large streets didn't have a significantly heavy flow of traffic. A few cars passed every minute or so on the large streets. The gaps in vehicular traffic were much greater on the smaller one-way streets.
3. Age of Buildings (provide evidence for prediction)
 - a. The five residential buildings I saw on Gold Street are almost certainly original 19th century structures. The residential lots on Gold Street on the 1855 map match up to the lots of the five houses that are still remaining. The corner building has architectural design elements that are commonly found on commercially used buildings from the 19th century.
 - b. While the 1855 map shows that many lots were used for industrial purposes with its warehouses and industrial yards, most of the present warehouses and industrial yards seem to be more modern. Many of the current warehouses and industrial yards are in spots that were at one time multiple small lots. These lots have since been consolidated to create larger lots for modern industrial purposes. In addition, the brickwork on the buildings are mostly running bond, a brick pattern that became widely used in the 20th century.
 - c. There are some newer buildings that were probably built in the 21st century. These

newer buildings are large apartment buildings. I saw most of these apartment buildings around Bridge Street. The unusually tall height, even brickwork, and copious amounts of large windows suggest that these buildings are very modern.

4. Relationship Between Buildings

- a. Most of the residential buildings are attached to each other as well as the industrial buildings. There is an occasional empty lot that separates two buildings from each other.
- b. The 19th century buildings are mixed with new apartment buildings and industrial yards and warehouses. There is very little segregation between the building types until around John Street when it becomes almost exclusively industrial.

5. Building Details

- a. The group of five residential houses on Gold Street that are thought to date back to the 19th century share similar architectural details. Each building has a decorative cornice at the top of the structure. Above each window are lintels, which serve to provide support in order to prevent the bricks from collapsing around the windows. What is unusual for these buildings is the brickwork. Most 19th century brick buildings showcase the Flemish bond whereas these all have a running bond pattern.
- b. While looking at the older residential buildings I noticed that many of them had brightly colored doors. On closer examination I discovered that most of the doors were a similar shade of blue in a similar style.
- c. The only buildings that showed exterior use of metal were the industrial buildings and some of the new apartments. The industrial buildings were often a combination of brickwork and metal.

6. Relationship to the Waterfront

- a. The residential buildings are not close to the water. The residential buildings that are closest to waterfront are apartments on Plymouth Street.
- b. Pedestrians can not access the waterfront of the East River in Vinegar Hill because it is blocked off for industrial use by the Con Edison plant.

7. Other Observations

- a. Most of the houses did not have front yards. Instead, in front of each residential home was an area of sidewalk secluded by a gate within the parameters of the property in which the inhabitants would fill with potted plants or store their trash cans.
- b. There were very few commercial shops and restaurants in the four block radius that was the focus of my visit.
- c. There were very few brown historical district street signs in this part of Vinegar Hill. The only ones I saw were on blocks that were predominantly residential.

QUANTITATIVE DATA for Area of Study

| Subject | Data |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Street Names | York Street, Front Street, Water Street, Plymouth Street, John Street, Gold Street, and Bridge Street. |
| Street Width | Two-way streets: ~28' One-way streets: ~15' |
| Street Pavement | A combination of cobblestones and paved asphalt. |
| Building Heights | Older residential homes: 3-4 stories. Industrial: 1-3 stories. Newer apartments: 5-8 stories. |
| Building Widths (Window Bays) | Older residential homes: 2-3 bays wide. Industrial: undeterminable. Newer apartments: 4-6 bays wide. |
| Building Types/Uses | Mixed use: residential, industrial, and small commercial businesses. |
| Empty Lots / Gardens | Two lots devoid of any buildings, but with a few cars stored within. |
| Shops / Restaurants | York Grocery, Annie's First Wok Restaurant, Food Corp., Checks Cashed, Fine Food Supermarket, Bridge Coffee Shop. |
| Industrial Shops | A lot. Most did not have names or clear boundaries, so it was difficult to get an accurate numbers. Examples: Damascus Bakeries, Inc. and Sunny (use unknown). |
| Religious Centers | Dorje Ling Buddhist Center. |
| Historical District Signs | 3: Front Street, Gold Street, Bridge Street. |

QUESTIONS to Research Further

QUESTIONS:

1. Due to its industrial nature, was Gold Street a less commercial area in the 19th century than Hudson Avenue?
2. Are the current industrial warehouses the same as the ones depicted on William Perris' 1855 map? If not, when were they built?
3. What was the cause for the shift in religious establishments from Methodist to Buddhist?

RESEARCH METHOD/SOURCE FOR EACH QUESTION ABOVE:

1. Question 1
 - a. Look for sources that discuss 19th century commercial activity at the Brooklyn Historical Society and the Brooklyn Public Library.
 - b. Examine maps from of 19th century Vinegar Hill for features that indicate commercial activity.
 - c. Examine Vinegar Hill more closely for more architectural features that suggest 19th century commercial activity.
2. Question 2
 - a. Research the history on individual warehouses that are on William Perris' 1855 map as well as the ones that I saw during my site visit.
 - b. Look for detailed maps that were created in intervals of five-ten years to compare how the size and use of the lots have changed over time.
 - c. Utilize websites such as NYC Department of Buildings for information on the existing buildings.
3. Question 3
 - a. Research information that illustrates the shift in demographics from the 19th century until recent years.
 - b. Look for maps that were created in intervals of five-ten years that show the religious establishments in each lot.
 - c. Observe the United States Census Bureau datasets that are specific to Vinegar Hill at different periods in history.

SUMMARY / POST VISIT REFLECTION

I'm happy that I was able to focus my second site visit on a small specific area that I had not spent much time observing during my first site visit. I had the opportunity to see a more industrial, bustling side of Vinegar Hill. The map that I had was a helpful tool that lead me to have a greater insight to how the neighborhood was in the 19th century. It was interesting to see the purpose of this area has not changed too drastically over the many years. It was industrial in 1855 and continues to be a heavily industrial area today. I think the large industrial influence during the 19th century will play a factor in my research when I look for historical indicators that point towards whether or not Vinegar Hill was a commercial center.