

Learning Places Spring 2016

LIBRARY / ARCHIVE REPORT

Brooklyn Public Library: Brooklyn Collection



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INTRODUCTION

The class met at the Central Library of the Brooklyn Public Library in front of the Brooklyn Collection. We were brought into the collection by a librarian who had provided us with computer access to newspaper databases and laid out books and maps specific to Vinegar Hill and Downtown Brooklyn. For over an hour the class had access to many sources that could potentially aid us in our future research endeavors.

PRE-VISIT REFLECTION

The visit to the Brooklyn Public Library will be the first site visit that has not been to Vinegar Hill. Instead of examining and photographing architecture, street layouts, and other features that stand out, I will be looking at Vinegar Hill through the examination of already documented sources. I anticipate learning more about Vinegar Hill's history through books and maps. I look forward to using

maps that date back to the mid to late 19th century. Hopefully they will provide minute details of lot use and store names.

SOURCES found

1. E. Robinson, "Robinson's atlas of the city of Brooklyn, New York: embracing all territory within its corporate limits; from official records..." *Brooklyn Public Library*, Plate 1, 1886.
2. K.R.G., "Sand Street's History. Its Early Grandeur and Later Decay." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Page 2, 1886.
3. Donald G. Presa, "Vinegar Hill Historic District Designation Report," *Brooklyn Public Library*, Page 10-11, 1997.

DOCUMENTATION of site & resources (maps/archival documents/photos)

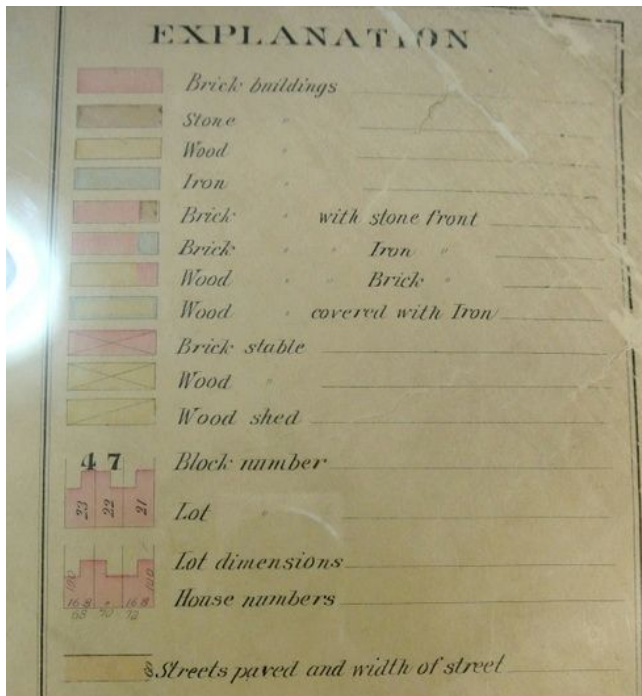


The map in the above photograph is a small portion of Plate 1. from *Robinson's Atlas of the City of Brooklyn*, 1886. This map segment depicts lot use in the year 1886 from the East River Waterfront until Water Street. Each lot is colored and numbered. The large lots are labeled by use. The Atlas provides the user with a map legend to aid in reading the map. The large numbers that range from 1A- 14 are the block numbers. Each block contains a series of lots, which contain smaller numbers. The numbers on each individual lot represent the following: lot number, lot dimensions, and house numbers. Each individual lot is colored in. The lots that are red in color contain brick structures; the

yellow lots contain wooden structures; and the lots that are red with brown edging contain brick buildings with a store front. This map illustrates how many lots per block and their size, the material used for the buildings, and the occupational use for some of the lots.



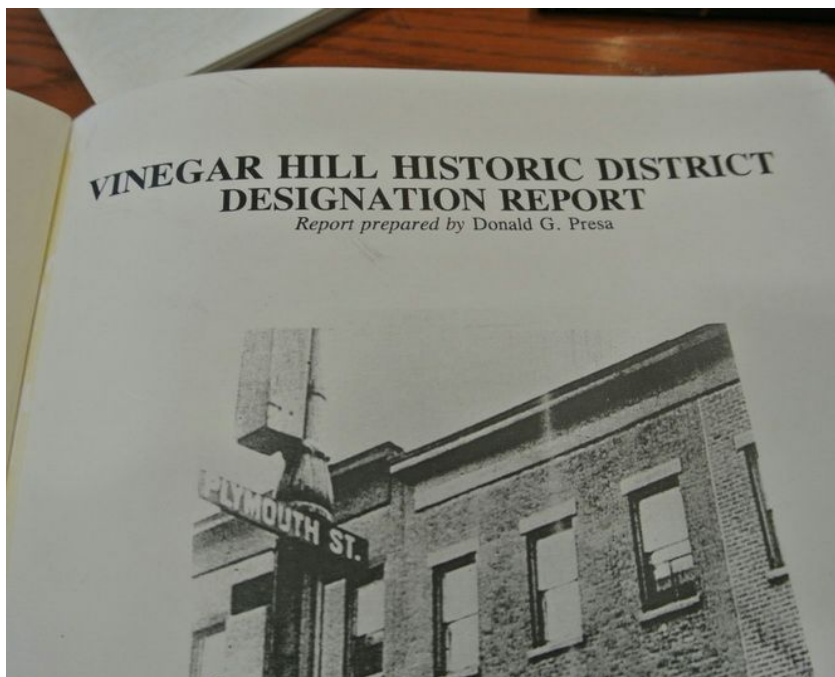
This is the same segment of the map aforementioned in the page prior to this one, but this photograph focuses on the area of land directly adjacent to the Waterfront. There are numerous prominent pieces of land that jut out into the East River. While the map does not say what these pieces of land are used for, they seem to be man-made shapes thus indicating that they exist to serve a purpose. One hypothesis is that they may be docks.



The photograph shown on the left is the map legend for plate 1 of *Robinson's Atlas of the City of Brooklyn, 1886*. This is the tool I used to make observations on the two prior photos. This legend played an imperative role in leading me to make accurate, informed examinations. Part of the legend got cut off in the photograph. The cut off portion explained the symbols for fire hydrants, sewers, water pipes, and railroad lines.

Sands street did not really enter upon its career until the Brooklyn Ferry road was a bustling line of business houses. Prior to that time it had been a short cut to Flushing for those who knew how to navigate around the Wallabout marshes. A plank causeway was made across the Wallabout to the great convenience of everybody, and the two brothers Joshua and Comfort Sands sold the water front to the United States Government for a naval station. Then the front part of Vinegar Hill was scarped to give dock facilities, and residents of Brooklyn began to see their way to affluence by commercial pursuits. They could afford themselves fine mansions and they began to build them. Front street was at first the scene of operations, but Sands street followed so closely after that the palmy time of one was also the grand time of the other. Sands street, if not the elder, was certainly the more fashionable of the two, and it owed this pre-eminence to the Episcopal church St. Ann's, which was torn down to make way for the bridge. It was roughly built of lime stone, and had small, narrow windows and was unsightly and awkward in the extreme, from an architectural point of view.

Here is a small excerpt of a newspaper article titled "Sand Street's History. It's Early Grandeur and Its Later Decay." from *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 24 of October, 1886 edition. In this excerpt the author, K.R.G., writes about how Vinegar Hill was scarped with the intent of building dock facilities on the East River Waterfront. These dock facilities brought industry and commerce to Vinegar Hill as well as Brooklyn as a whole. This article, while brief, is a valuable secondary source. It was written during the time period that I want to focus my research on. The article gives mention to the docks and the Waterfront, which are two very important factors that affect commerce and industry.



This photograph is of the inside cover of the author Donald G. Presa's *Vinegar Hill Historic District Designation Report*. This book is a tertiary source. It provides the reader with a historical background of Vinegar Hill from its earliest history up until the twentieth century. The book includes photographs of buildings and streets as well as maps from different eras. A section of the book that particularly stood out to me was the division dedicated to the historic district. In this part of the book, the author lists addresses of buildings that are now part of the historic district. For each address

the following information is given: the date of the building, the owner/developer, original use of the

building, style and facade of the building, and a brief summary on the history.

DISCOVERIES

1. Neighborhood History
 - a. During the mid to late 19th century, Vinegar Hill was a bustling neighborhood. It was thriving commercially, which led to an increase in population. Many of the inhabitants were of Irish descent, but the neighborhood became more diversified closer to the turn of the 20th century. The people of Vinegar Hill tended to be of the working-class. They worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, at the shipyard, for the National White Lead Company, as well as many other industrial occupations.
 - b. 1909 marks the completion of the Manhattan Bridge. The Manhattan Bridge played a large role in the decline of Vinegar Hill. Many homes, streets, and factories were demolished in order to provide space for the bridge. Commercial activity in Vinegar Hill suffered because of the bridge. The people of Vinegar Hill and Downtown Brooklyn now had easy access to Manhattan, thus removing the dependency on the shops of Vinegar Hill.
2. Key Events / Historical Dates
 - a. The completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883.
 - b. Brooklyn became a part of New York City in 1898.
 - c. The completion of the Manhattan Bridge in 1909.
3. Key Players
 - a. Frederick Morris. Morris was a physician and a resident of Vinegar Hill. He was a major landlord who owned several buildings in Vinegar Hill.
 - b. Valentine G. Hall. Hall was a wool merchant who came from Manhattan. In the mid-19th century he invested in property in Vinegar Hill.
 - c. P.C. Kelley. Kelley was a church architect. He was originally from Ireland, but when he immigrated to America he resided permanently in Vinegar Hill. Kelley acted as the supervising architect while St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church was being built.
4. Public Perception of Key Events
 - a. Throughout the 19th century there was an influx of Irish immigrants. While the Irish have been inhabiting Vinegar Hill before the 19th century, there was a second large wave of Irish Immigrants in the 1840s due to a potato famine. The predominantly Irish presence earned Vinegar Hill the nickname of "Irishtown."
5. Important Changes to Neighborhood
 - a. The increase in alternative ways to reach Manhattan lead to drastic changes in Vinegar Hill. From the use of the Lexington Avenue elevated railroad line to the

construction of the Manhattan Bridge, the vitality of Vinegar Hill shifted significantly. These were two key factors in the decrease of activity in Vinegar Hill.

6. Other Observations

- a. Many of the houses in Vinegar Hill were built between the 1820s and the 1840s. At the time they were built, the Greek Revival style was very popular. The few original 19th century residences that still exist contain elements of the Greek Revival style.
- b. In order to build the Manhattan Bridge, land that is clear of buildings and obstructions is a necessity. In the late 19th century Vinegar Hill, there were homes, shops, and industries that were in the way of the Manhattan Bridge. The government must have given permission for the removal of these buildings.
- c. The lots on the map that were used for residential purposes are very narrow. The narrow width, the typical 3-4 story height, and lack of empty space in between buildings indicates that the builders were trying to fit as many houses on a block as possible. This may be because at one time Vinegar Hill was a populous neighborhood with a steady intake of immigrants.

TOPICS & KEYWORDS

“Vinegar Hill”, “Irishtown”, “Manhattan Bridge”, “Eminent Domain”, “Lexington Line Elevated Railroad”, “Valentine G. Hall”, “Frederick Morris”, “P.C. Kelley”, “Mercantile”, “Commercial”, “Industrial”, “Waterfront”, “East River”, “St. Ann’s Roman Catholic Church”, “National White Lead Company”, “Navy Yard”, “Storefronts”, “Hudson Avenue”, “Gold Street”.

QUANTITATIVE DATA for Area of Study

Subject	Data
Land Ownership	Frederick Morris, Valentine G. Hall, P.C. Kelley, and Michael O’Connor.
Number of Blocks	Approximately 26 blocks in Vinegar Hill.
# of Buildings on a Typical Block	Approximately 25-30 buildings on a typical block.
Materials	Brick, stone, wood, and iron. Combinations of brick and iron, stone and iron, wood and brick, and wood covered in iron were popular.

# of Stories of Buildings	Residential buildings: 2-4 stories. Industrial buildings: 1-2 stories.
Residential Bldgs	Over 600 residential buildings.
Empty Lots	Several empty lots.
Commercial Uses	Arbuckle Coffee House and many unspecified storefronts.
Industrial Uses	Iron Works, Shipyard, Atlantic White Lead Company, National White Lead Company, Brooklyn Gas Light Company, Brooklyn Navy Yard.
Wards	Wards 1, 2, 4 & 5.
Elevated Railroads	Lexington Avenue Line.
Churches	St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church.
Population Makeup	Irish, English, African, German, Polish, Italian, Norwegian, Swedish, and Eastern European Jews.

QUESTIONS to Research Further

QUESTIONS:

1. Were the pieces of land extending into the East River shown in Plate 1. from *Robinson's Atlas of the City of Brooklyn*, 1886 man-made features relating to commercial activity?
2. Was the Vinegar Hill property that was destroyed in order to make space for the Manhattan Bridge taken through the process of eminent domain?
3. Did the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 have any effect on commercial activity in Vinegar Hill?

RESEARCH METHOD/ ADDITIONAL SOURCES NEEDED TO ANSWER EACH QUESTION ABOVE:

1. Question 1
 - a. Examine maps that predate 1886 to see if the pieces of land extending into the East River have changed in shape.
 - b. Use maps that contain known docks and piers and compare their shapes to the shapes

of the land extending into the East River in Vinegar Hill.

- c. Research historical sources to determine if there were docks or piers on the East River Waterfront of Vinegar Hill.
2. Question 2
 - a. Research the law on eminent domain as it was in the late 19th century to determine what justified the government to take land from private owners.
 - b. Use legal databases to research what legal procedures, if any, were taken to grant the demolition of private property.
 - c. Research historical sources for information on the creation of the Manhattan Bridge.
 3. Question 3
 - a. Research for any remaining commercial records from Vinegar Hill shops and compare the records from before 1883 to after 1883 to see if any changes have occurred.
 - b. Compare maps that were created before 1883 to maps that include the Brooklyn Bridge and see if there are more or less storefronts in the lots.
 - c. Use Donald G. Presa's *Vinegar Hill Historic District Designation Report* to examine what the original use of each building was and determine whether usage had changed after 1883.

SUMMARY / POST VISIT REFLECTION

I found the the visit to the Central Library of the Brooklyn Public Library to be very informative and aided me significantly in researching Vinegar Hill. The librarian introduced me to new research tools such as using the library's computers to access the Brooklyn Daily Eagle and the Brooklyn Visual Heritage website. There were a few books that discussed commercial activity in Vinegar Hill and contained lists of citations that will help me further my research. The research that I did during this site visit has left me with new questions to investigate. The inquiry that left the greatest impression on me revolves around the pieces of land that appear to be docks or piers. I would like to find more information on them and see if their purpose was for commercial use.