

Learning Places Spring 2016

# Mid-Semester Report

Due Date: 3/28/16

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## **Introduction:**

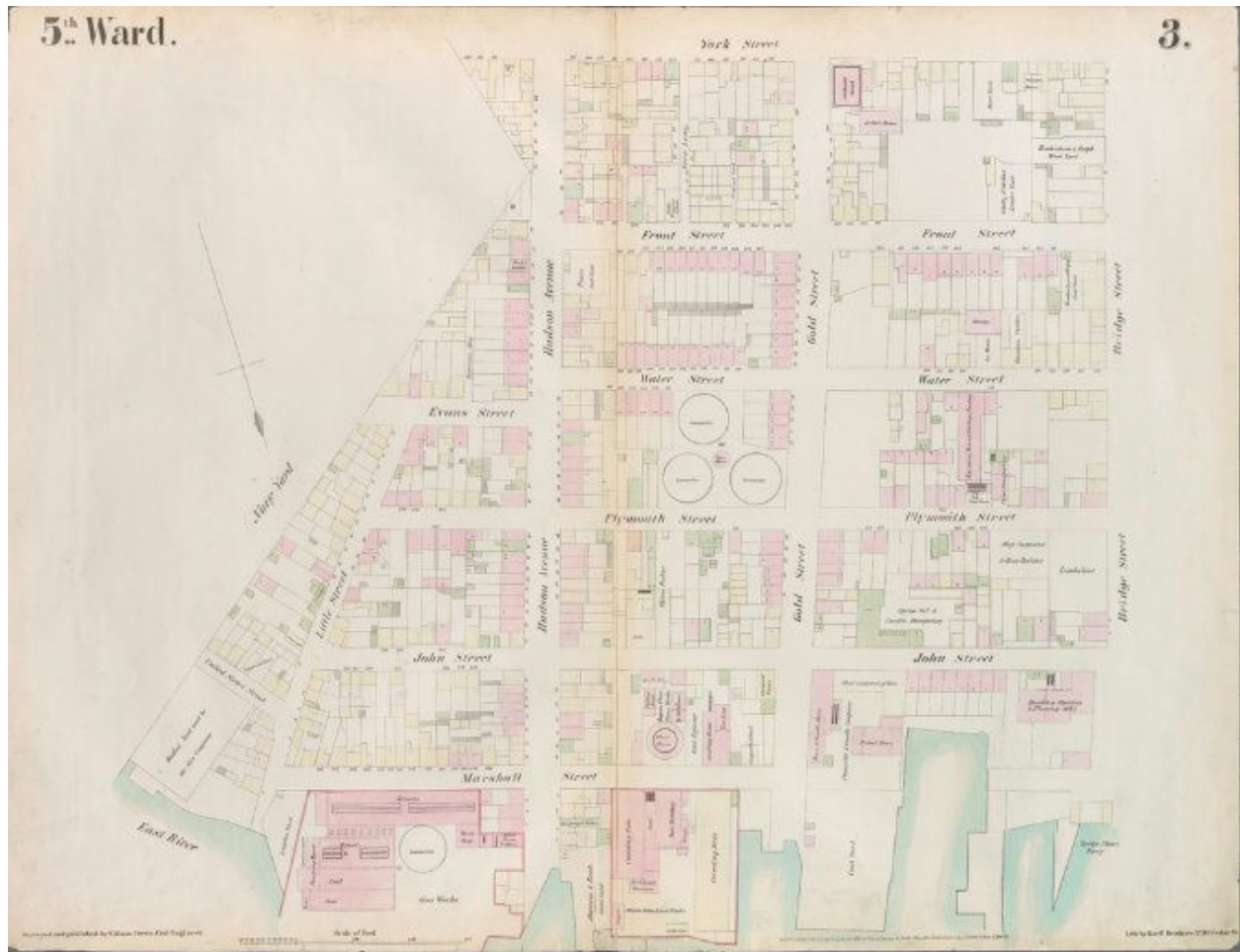
Vinegar Hill is a small, quiet neighborhood of Brooklyn nestled between the Brooklyn Navy Yard and DUMBO. When looked at for longer than a brief glance, this tucked away neighborhood reveals glimpses into its past history. Scattered throughout Vinegar Hill are wooden framed residential buildings that date back to the mid-19th century. Belgian blocks can be found on scattered streets, peeking out of the asphalt paved over them. Old storefronts have been converted into apartments. The two large, stately bridges standing in the distance. These little details that people normally breeze by as they hurry past have posed multiple questions in my mind.

I cannot help but wonder about the liveliness of Vinegar Hill in times past. Was it always a secluded neighborhood with the occasional pedestrian heading in the direction of what is now DUMBO or the Farragut Houses? Or perhaps it was once a bustling hub full of life and prosperity. The purpose of this report is to determine the shifts in vitality of Vinegar Hill between the 1880s, prior to the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, until the 1910s, subsequent to the completion of the Manhattan Bridge. When I address the vitality of Vinegar Hill, I am referring to the following two factors: population and commercial activity. Leading up to this point I have been reading historical sources and evaluating maps ranging from the mid-19th century until the turn of the 20th century. With the aid of these sources I have been able to draw educated, informed conclusions about the history of Vinegar Hill's vitality.

## **Vinegar Hill from 1855 until 1886:**

In this section, I will attempt to illustrate the change in vitality of Vinegar Hill between 1855 and 1886. The first source that will be discussed is a William Perris map of Vinegar Hill from 1855. Following the Perris map, I will later compare it to Robinson's 1886 map of Vinegar Hill. The comparison of the same area with a thirty year time difference will clearly show all the changes that have occurred. The Brooklyn Bridge was completed in 1883, three years prior to the Robinson map. I believe that the Brooklyn Bridge was a major determining factor in the vitality of Vinegar Hill. Because of this, I will be discussing at length a photograph of Downtown Brooklyn from the bird's-eye view of the Brooklyn Bridge Tower. The area in which the bridge's end point is situated tells a great deal about the intention of the bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge is

just one way in which the East River Waterfront was used by the inhabitants of Vinegar Hill and all of Downtown Brooklyn.



William Perris' 1855 map "Plate 3: Map bounded by East River, Brooklyn Navy Yard, York Street, Bridge Street."

The above is William Perris' map of Vinegar Hill in 1855. It is evident that in the mid-19th century the neighborhood is already developed and populous. The map legend, which is found on the first page of the atlas, informs the viewer that the map has a very specific use. It was created for fire insurance purposes. Knowing the purpose of the map is important when looking at the map. Each lot has been drawn and colored in for the purpose of depicting fire risk. Individual lots have been created on each block. Most of the lots have been shaded in either a red, green, or yellow color. This coloring indicates how the lot is being used. The green lots were used solely for commercial and industrial purposes. The labeled white lots are also used for industrial purposes. However, the unlabeled white lots are what I believe to be empty lots. The yellow and red lots are either purely residential or residential with a storefront on the first story. To differentiate the two apart, each lot has either an "x" or a circular symbol. The red and yellow lots with "x's" are purely residential whereas the ones with the circular symbol is both a residential and commercial building.

Looking at the East River Waterfront, one can see that there are parts of Vinegar Hill jutting out into the river. On each of the pieces of land that juts out there existed industrial yards, factories, and warehouses. When I had first observed these land formations it was on a less detailed map and they left me perplexed. Initially I was unable to determine their purpose. It was clear from their rectangular shapes they are man-made land formations, but I was unsure whether they were piers or docks. This map shows clearly that the purpose was for industrial purposes as well as transportation. The factories and warehouses were situated on the waterfront because the East River made water transportation for shipping and receiving goods possible for these industries. The water is also a source of energy. If the machines of these industries were powered on steam it was crucial for them to be as close to the water as possible. The wares produced in these factories were most likely sold to the inhabitants of Brooklyn. It is a reasonable assertion that Vinegar Hill's industry was the crux of its commercial activity and the reason why so many buildings had storefronts.

The East River was not used solely for industrial production. Transportation was another benefit of living adjacent to the river. Shown on the map is a landing for the Bridge Street Ferry, which gave the inhabitants of Vinegar Hill access to Manhattan. The Bridge Street Ferry was able to provide a connection between Brooklyn and Manhattan. This connection would become greater in 1883 upon the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge.



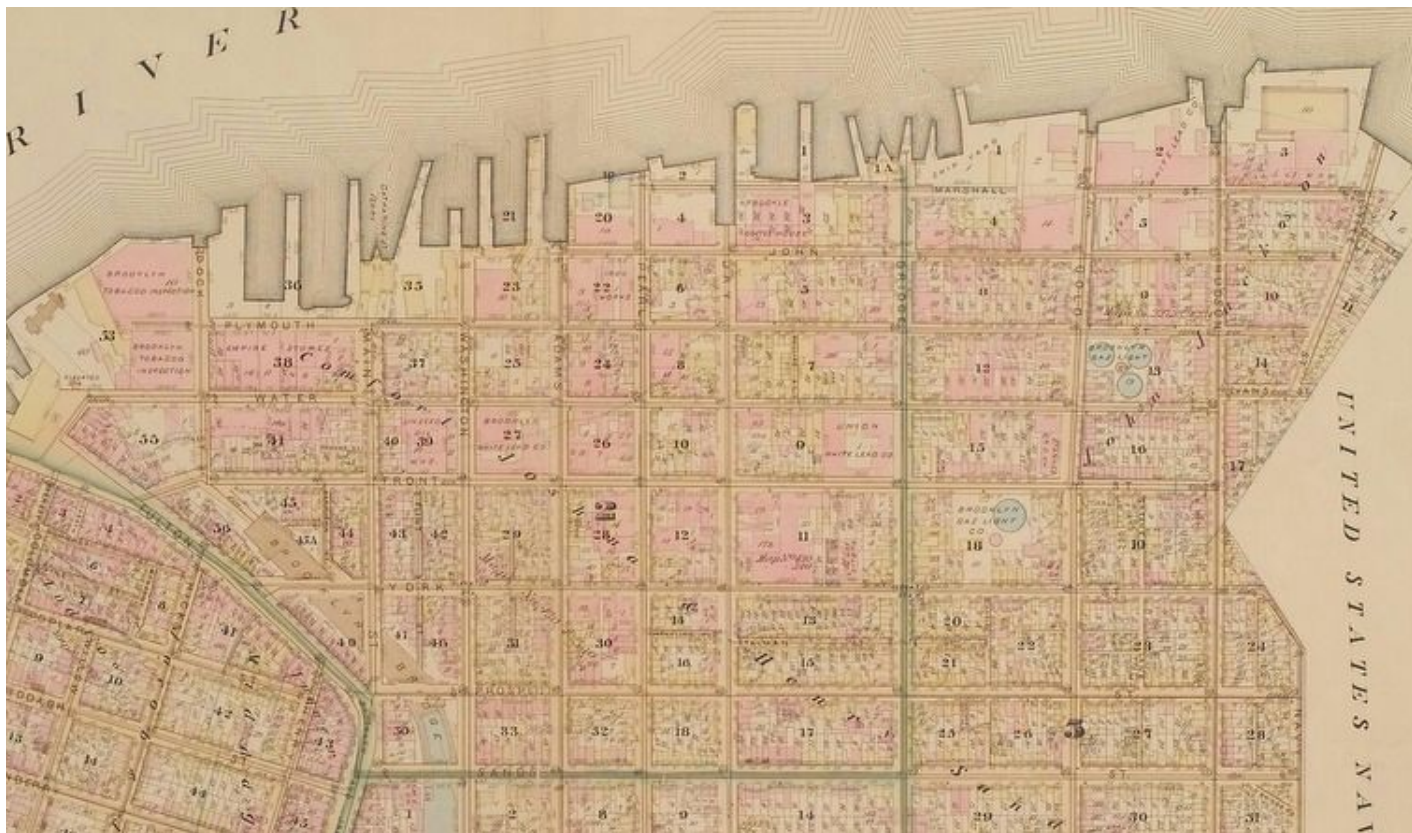
Photograph of Downtown Brooklyn from the Brooklyn Bridge Tower in 1875. Photographer Unknown.

The above photograph is a bird's-eye view from the the Brooklyn Bridge Tower during the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. From this view, we can see that this neighborhood of



Brooklyn was already built up by 1875. Buildings have already reached heights of four to five stories and there were few, if any, empty lots remaining. To the right of the bridge is a large avenue called Fulton Street. When observing the photo closely, people can be seen walking down the street. There are storefronts in most of the buildings. It appears that there are more buildings on the blocks surrounding Fulton Street than the blocks further away. At the time, Fulton Street was the Main Street of Brooklyn. Because Fulton Street was the most bustling street, the bridge was intended to end as closely to Fulton Street as possible. This was to ensure that the bridge would be accessible to the largest amount of pedestrians. In the background of the photo stands St. Ann's Church to the left of the turn in Fulton Street. The church was later demolished for the completion of the bridge due its proximity to Fulton Street.

Even though the the image is of what is now called Downtown Brooklyn, it imperative to understand that the neighborhood boundaries have changed over the past century or two. Back in the 19th century, Vinegar Hill extended from the Brooklyn Navy Yard up to the Brooklyn Bridge. When Vinegar Hill was larger in size, it had greater access to the East River Waterfront and more opportunities for business, residences, and industry. A decrease in size would negatively impact the diversity the neighborhood would have to offer. As businesses and family homes are lost, the face of the neighborhood changes.



Elisha Robinson's 1886 map "Robinson's atlas of the city of Brooklyn, New York: embracing all territory within its corporate limits; from official records..."

This map was created by Robinson in 1886, three years following the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge. Comparing the blocks to those in William Perris' 1855 map the number of lots per block as increased during the thirty-one year difference. Many of the large lots that could be seen in the Perris map have been broken up into multiple narrow fully attached lots. This was done so that more structures could be built in order to sustain the rising amount of people migrating to Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn. The narrow width was ideal for being able to fit as many residential houses on a block as possible. When looking at some of the original 19th century houses that still remain in Vinegar Hill, their width is narrower compared to buildings that were built in the 20th century. While they were narrow, most of the residential buildings ranged from between three to four stories high.

Due to the rise in Vinegar Hill's population, places of employment were in high demand. Many of the residents were blue-collar workers. They worked in the factories, warehouses, and storefronts located throughout the neighborhood. Looking at the map, the labeled lots inform us that industrial work was prevalent throughout Vinegar Hill. As seen in the William Perris map, the industrial warehouses and stockyards tend to be grouped together along the East River Waterfront with the occasional industrial building towards the center of Vinegar Hill. Daniel G. Presa, writer of the *Vinegar Hill Historic District Designation Report*, states that in 1885 there was at least six hundred and sixty-six retail outlets ranging from groceries to cigar shops to shoe stores in Vinegar Hill. There was even a hotel. In addition to the retail outlets, there were around one hundred and forty factories, warehouses, and supply yards.

The Brooklyn Bridge attributed to the increase in population and commercial activity in Vinegar Hill as it provided the people of Brooklyn with easier, more convenient access to Manhattan. Prior to the bridge's construction, there were ferries, but they did not provide the constant connection that the Brooklyn Bridge afforded the people. The attachment to Manhattan made Brooklyn more appealing to the people who wanted to be close to the city but could not afford to live there. While the Brooklyn Bridge provided its inhabitants with a sense of connectivity to Manhattan, the people of Vinegar Hill were still self-sufficient. They did not develop a dependency on Manhattan.

### **Vinegar Hill post Manhattan Bridge:**

Construction of the Manhattan Bridge began subsequently to Brooklyn becoming a borough of the City of New York in 1898. The Manhattan Bridge is a part of DUMBO according to the contemporary neighborhood boundaries. However, when it was constructed it was a part of Vinegar Hill. The construction of the Manhattan Bridge needed flat, cleared land, which called for large amounts of demolition. The demolition of buildings and roads for the Manhattan Bridge was much more significant than when done to the Brooklyn Bridge. As seen in the 1886 Robinson map, the area of modern day DUMBO where the Manhattan Bridge was eventually built was highly developed. There were homes and businesses on the blocks that

were demolished. The demolitions forced people out of their homes and others lost their businesses and employment.

The Manhattan Bridge differed from the Brooklyn Bridge in the sense that it did not just serve as a means of connection. The Brooklyn Bridge was built with the purpose of providing the inhabitants of Brooklyn with a means of accessing Manhattan. The Manhattan Bridge provided an additional form of connection but with that connectivity came a sense of dependency. Being that the Manhattan Bridge's opened to traffic in 1909, by that time the means of transportation had increased. The New York City Subway line opened in 1904. More people began driving to and from their destination. Traveling further distances became more feasible and the Manhattan Bridge acted as a means to make travel possible. Because travel to Manhattan increased, the people of Vinegar Hill were less dependant on the local storefronts and commercial wares that had sufficed in the past.

I had wanted to find a map similar to the Perris and Robinson map that ranged between 1910-1915 to illustrate the changes that stemmed from the completion of the Manhattan Bridge. Unfortunately, I was unable to acquire a map created in that time range that depicted the lots of Vinegar Hill. Even though I was unable to provide visual comparisons of Vinegar Hill in 1886 with Vinegar Hill in the early 20th century, I used historical secondary sources to draw similar conclusions. As I do further research on this topic, I would like to continue looking for a 20th century map that shows lot use.

### **Conclusion:**

There is no doubt that Vinegar Hill has undergone many changes within the short period of its existence. Each change had a direct impact on the neighborhood's vitality. As a neighborhood that is now so often overlooked and passed by, it has had a significant impact on the borough of Brooklyn. Vinegar Hill was at one point the commercial and industrial hub of Downtown Brooklyn. It was an enclave that was independent from the rest of Brooklyn and New York for many years. The two most notable catalysts that brought forth the most change in Vinegar Hill were the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and the Manhattan Bridge in 1909. The bridges had opposite effects on Vinegar Hill. The Brooklyn Bridge acted as a means of connectivity. It allowed the inhabitants of Brooklyn to have continual access to Manhattan. Many people utilized the Brooklyn Bridge, but they still were dependent on the local community for the majority of their needs. In contrast, when the Manhattan Bridge was opened to the public, there had been great strides taken in transportation. Driving was becoming more commonplace, subways were opening up, and people were willing to travel further distances outside of their neighborhood. The vitality of Vinegar Hill has never been able to reach the height it was in the 1880s.

**Note:** The photos of the maps were not taken by me. They were found on the New York Public Library website.