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Vinegar Hill and it's Beginning

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Learning Places

Mid - Term Report

Professor Montgomery and Professor Almeida

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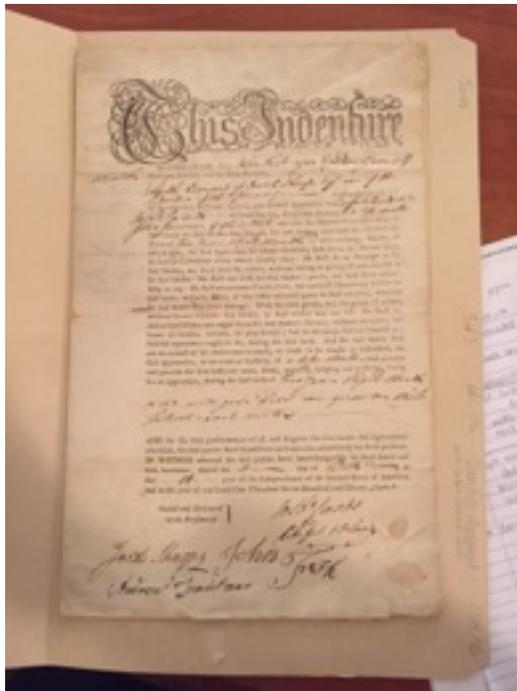
Vinegar Hill and It's Beginning

The research that I engulfed myself in was mainly focused on the change from farm to urban living in Brooklyn, NY. This information was not the most easy information to find. Roughly between the times of 1780 and 1830 the most was occurring in said area. There were multiple different land owners throughout the history of Brooklyn, but two big names always stuck with. Joshua and Comfort Sands were the two most important land owners of their time. Who were Joshua and Comfort Sands? How did their contributions influence how Vinegar Hill/ Downtown Brooklyn function today? What influenced the decision to sell the land?

Joshua and Comfort Sands were brothers born of John and Elizabeth Sands in Cow Neck, Long Island. Comfort was born on February 26th, 1748 and Joshua on October 12th, 1757. Both brothers moved to Manhattan around the same time. Comfort worked as a clerk and in 1776 opened his own store and became a very wealthy merchant. He became a member of the New York Provincial Congress and was appointed as the first New York state Auditor General. He had two wives, Sarah Dodge who had 18 children and Cornelia Lott who had 3 children. Joshua Sands also held many public office positions both national and local. He married Ann Ayscough in 1761 and had 12 children. His wife Ann was known as being a founding member of St. Ann's Church, also referred to as the Episcopal Church of Brooklyn which is the oldest Episcopal parish in Brooklyn (Guide). Along side Alexander Hamilton, Comfort Sands was one of the founders and directions of the Bank of New York (Presa). Comfort was not the only well versed one. Joshua was privileged enough to become an army captain for the revolutionary war and after moving to Brooklyn, he became a very well known citizen building a huge mansion

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that was later torn down. The two brothers dabbled in the real estate ventures and even opened a rope-making manufacturing company in Brooklyn. They formed a business partnership dealing with foreign trade and land speculation. They had purchased 160 acres of land along the Brooklyn waterfront for roughly \$12,000 in 1784 (Vinegar Hill). The land was originally owned by the Rapelje family but was sold under the 1779 New York State Act for the “Forfeiture and Sale of the Estates of Persons who have Adhered to the Enemies of this State.” They owned the 5th and half of fourth wards. The perimeters of the land was the Brooklyn Navy Yard, DUMBO and Vinegar Hill bordering east river in Brooklyn. More specifically the East River, Fulton Street, the Navy Yard, and Concord Street (1846). Joshua and Comfort Sands were known as the



two most important landowners of their time. Not only did they have a very important land ownership, they also dabbled in the rope making business. In 1791 there was an official document signed by an 18 year old named John Fisk. This document was solidifying John as an apprentice in rope making to the Sands brothers. His apprenticeship was broken up into two terms, October 11, 1791 to Jun 11, 1794 and June 1, 1794 to October 11, 1795. The official document was

incredibly explicit about what is expected of John and what he can and cannot do in both his work and personal life (1791). This waterfront area was originally constructed to become a neighborhood called Olympia. Ideas for this neighborhood included both commercial and residential properties that would be connected to Manhattan

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through a ferry system. Unfortunately Olympia was never completed and the property of Joshua and Comfort Sands was broken up in 1802. Comfort Sands passed on in Hoboken in 1784 where he had moved. Joshua Sands passed in Brooklyn in 1852 (Guide).

While the reasons to sell the land may be not as articulated as one would like, the reasons that were found apply well. The brothers, Joshua and Comfort, had put a lot of time and effort into their properties and weren't about to just hand it over to anyone. Olympia, the area that the Sands brothers had dreamt of filled with stores and things to do, fell through. This plan was to bring more money into the picture and provide a nice atmosphere. Because of this, the federal government saw an opportunity to invest in land. There was a dispute about just how valuable the land was. The location was beneficial for a ferry system to and from Manhattan and the land was fashionable and exclusive, being too steep and inaccessible for residential purposes. The Sands brothers sold the majority of their land to the federal government for \$40,000, almost four times the original price (1846 Old Brooklyn). The rest of the land was purchased by Irish refugees who came to the United States after the rebellion in 1798. Because of this, John Jackson,



who was also as local land owner, named the site “Vinegar Hill” after the difficult battle fought in the rebellion in Ireland. He did this to try and attract more Irish immigrants. In 1801, John Jackson sold part of his land to the federal government for construction of the Navy Yard.

The image to the left is of Vinegar Hill in 1855 found in the New York Public Library. What is shown in this map is the break up of farm land and also how the

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land was drawn out after the change from farm to urban living. This map is incredibly useful for my research due to its focus on where farm land laid before the land that we now know of began. As you can see the area of Vinegar Hill was predominately Joshua and Comfort Sands's land. This included wards 2, 4 and 5 which was surrounded by Fulton Street, Tillary and Hudson street. Even though my main focus is on the Sands brothers it was interesting to see which farm owners surrounded their land like John Jackson, Jacob and John Hicks and the Middagh family farm. You can also see that their farm was surrounded by the East River. This brings up the question of how the brothers took advantage of this resource. Possibly a transfer of goods and services, a source of water for cooking, cleaning, bathing etc. It is incredibly interesting see where each farm was in proximity to today's maps.

In 1812, New York saw the shift to becoming one of the leading ports. The easy access of the Navy Yard quickly hiked up production and instantly caused growth in the area both commercial and residential. Not only was this area highly prized after the shift from farm to residential/industrial, it has had a lasting impact on how we view this site today. After visiting at the beginning of the semester we were able to see and learn more about the different buildings that were built during the time. These included themes of Greek Revival and Italian characteristics. It was extremely exciting to see what Vinegar Hill looks like today and compare and contrast what it was. Joshua and Comfort Sands had a huge impact on how Vinegar Hill and Downtown Brooklyn function today. Owning the majority of the land around these areas, they had the first word on what life would be like for the days to come.