

The Changing Landscape of Vinegar Hill (1780 - 1830)

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The American Revolution Started in 1775 and lasted up until 1783, when a peace treaty with the British was signed. At this time the United States were establishing themselves as an independent power and doing away with British customs. The United States seized land from many people who sided with the British, leading to an opportunity for the Sands brothers. Vinegar Hill has a rich history and has gone through many changes over the years. What is now known as Vinegar Hill today, is situated from Front street to the waterfront and from Bridge street to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Vinegar Hill has experienced the most change in between the time periods of 1780 and 1830, transitioning from farmland to a grid plan. Vinegar Hill and surrounding areas like Dumbo and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, have experienced heavy waterfront development. This leads to questions critical to Vinegar Hills' development. Where is the natural waterline located, in comparison to today? What maps existed in between these time periods and what was their purpose? What are rope walks? Why did the U.S. Navy choose Wallabout Bay?

Revolution

British Headquarters map of New York in 1782



This is a section from the British Headquarters map of New York in 1782. It depicts British fortifications, along with natural and man-made land features. The map has various shading to indicate land elevation. The forts occupy the highest points on the map and some can be seen connected by a defensive wall. The defensive wall is constructed in a zigzag pattern spanning from Fulton street to the waterfront. The shapes vary between each fort; some are rectangular, while others are circular. The larger forts are constructed in odd shapes like star patterns with the outer and inner barriers defined by shading. Within the center of these forts, different sized building formations can be seen.

There are darker objects throughout the Headquarters map that represent trees and forests. Many more trees are located on the Brooklyn Ferry side of the fortification than the area between Wallabout bay and the defensive fort wall. The British have cleared out a large portion of the forests and created an unnatural tree line. The map shows the low water line, streams and salt marshes. This map would have been used to strategize battle formations or to visualize any weaknesses in fortifications. A large part of Brooklyn's population were located around the Brooklyn Ferry and along Fulton Street. There are rectangular shapes drawn near the Brooklyn Ferry waterfront indicating an established dock for merchants and ferries. Farm lines can still be seen, but they have been warped because of heavy fort development. Main roads still exist, but are cut in half by some fort structures. There are four forts shown on this section of the map, with layers of defense. It would be difficult to travel any road without running into a fort wall.



This map has no street names and not many other docks, other than Brooklyn Ferry docks. The largest of the forts is marked with a (k) and the other two circular forts are marked with an (m). Not much emphasis was placed on naming areas, instead more details can be seen on the highs and lows of the geographic area. The higher elevation would have more dark shading along the edges, which is seen on the forts and hills. The lower the land mass, the lighter the shading would become. The marshes are lightly shaded and the low

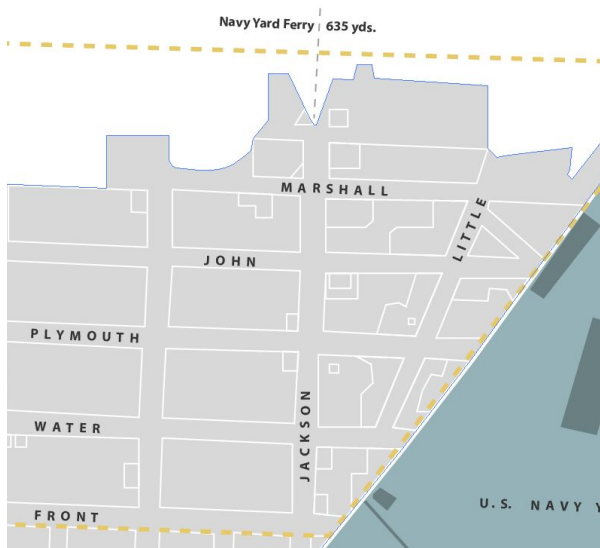
lying waterfront is even lighter, almost unnoticeable. In the Vinegar hill section of this map, the original waterfront line is shown in detail. The waterfront does not have docks and has not been extended yet.

Post-Revolution

Hooker's Map of the Village of Brooklyn in the year of 1827



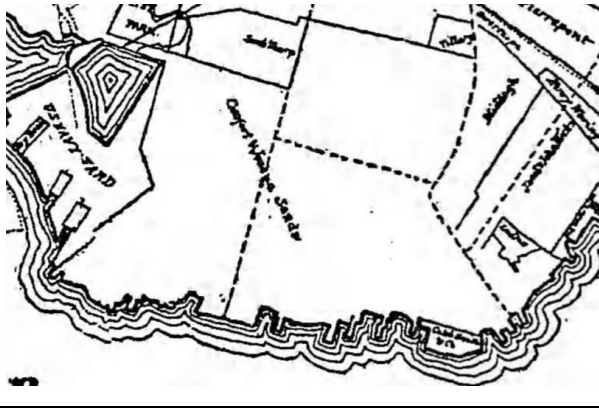
When viewing the Hooker's map of 1827, the first thing that stands out are the borderlines in different colors. We can see there is an effort to organize Brooklyn into different wards. The numerical districts could also serve to find your way in a growing village. Only five wards are numbered on the map with more wards in development lower on the map. More non-shaded land is shown on the map than shaded, which means the shaded area is occupied or purchased land. The wards seem to be numbered by the population density and level of activity. More land is occupied around the Brooklyn Ferry because it was one of the main transportation hubs and first established docks in Brooklyn, as seen in the 1782 map of the British Headquarters. It connects Manhattan to Fulton Street and Fulton Street run along all the wards except ward five. The Blocks that are not filled have not been sold yet or the land is still in planning and being subdivided. Property owners would sell land with houses already constructed on them or in large plots for buyers to develop on. Many blocks can be seen with only part of the land being purchased. The map maker has drawn small darkened rectangular structures on the map in the plots of land to depict buildings.



There is now a developed grid, divided into rectangles and squares. In some areas blocks are divided further to form alleyways. Some blocks have a different grid patterns and block sizes than others. Many of the odd block shapes can be attributed to the curvy Fulton street Road or the Navy Yard land division. The ward boundaries were largely influenced by the shape of Fulton Street. On the Hookers map, major landmarks are labeled along with important industries. We can see the U.S. Navy Yard,

New Ferry, Navy Yard Ferry, Rope Walks, Mills, Wallabout Bridge and other emerging industries. Many of the street names are a reminder of the original landowners. One example is Sands Street named after Comfort and Joshua Sands, another is Jackson Street named after John Jackson. The U.S. Navy Yard is established in the Wallabout Bay and parts of the bay have been filled in to create a channel. Where the U. S. Navy Yard is resting, was actually water in the 1782 British Headquarters map. The salt marshes below the Navy Yard are no longer in existence and the Wallabout Bridge spans across this area. Along the waterfront, many new docks have been constructed. Vinegar Hill has the Navy Yard Ferry connecting to Jackson Street, which shuttles people to the City of New York. Labeled on the ferry line routes there are measurements in yards showing the distance from one dock to another. The Fulton Ferry has a label on the route reading day and night travel.

The Navy Yard cuts into the fifth ward at an odd angle, causing the grid to be restructured in various shapes along its border. The Navy Yard Ferry is connected to Jackson Street, which has many building constructed along its path. We can see the rope walks spanning four large blocks, located by Concord and gold with one building structure marked on the land. More block planning can be seen lower on the map without any street names. The original water line was located at Marshall street, but was extended about 400 feet. This map is significant because not only does it show the Village as it is in 1827, but also what it will become in the future.



July 19 1896, Sun The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, p. 20
Old Brooklyn Farm Lands

This is a section of the Old Brooklyn Farm Lands map provided in the Brooklyn Eagle newspaper, that was redrawn from the Butt's map of 1846. It shows the vast lands Comfort and Joshua Sands acquired.

This article from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle dates back to 1896 and maps the history of Brooklyn from farmland to city blocks. The original land owner of the farmland was John Rapalje and was sold to Comfort and Joshua Sands in 1784. The Sands brothers had a vision for the 160 acre property they purchased and they called it Olympia. They believed that their land would be next place to experience the most growth and was the most suitable for people coming from New York. Downtown Brooklyn had naturally high landforms and removing them would prove to be too difficult, so from the Fulton Ferry the next area to progress would be Olympia. It was surrounded by the East River and occupied a large part of the waterfront, they had plenty of land to produce crops, and excellent spring water. Most of the building materials already existed in abundance, such as timber. This area was seen as a vacation destination for the New Yorkers in the hot summer days.

The Sands brothers were working towards increasing the value of their lands. The article mentions eight grist mills powered by the waterfront that would grind grain. This grain would then be exported, while some being distributed to local farmers.¹ Around this time more docks were developing along the waterfront, with more docks came more ships and new opportunities. Plots of land by the waterfront were being sold primarily to artisans like craftsmen and smiths. John Jackson was a ship builder who bought waterfront land near the wallabout Bay for \$17,000. This Remsen estate included about thirty acres of land and thirty five acres of pond. Who then sold forty acres of land through a third party to the U.S. government in 1801.² We can see how

¹ Good crops were grown by their thrifty proprietors where residences, shops and Factories now exits, The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, p. 20, July 19 1896

² A History of the City of Brooklyn, Henry Stiles, p.82, 363, Dec 16, 2009

the U.S. Navy restructured this land in the 1827 Hookers map, which in the span of twenty-six years has transformed from a pond to a fully functioning yard. The property is also expanding towards the U.S. Naval Hospital, adding more landfill to create the Wallabout channel.

Joshua and Comfort Sands took advantage of this increase of naval activity starting a business building cordage and rigging equipment. The Sands brothers started this businesses by constructing rope walks in various areas on their land. According to the Hookers map of 1827, one location was in ward five by concord and Gold street. This ropewalk stretch across four blocks from concord to Nassau street and some storage structures can be seen on the property. In order to build these rope walks, large stretches of land or alleys were required. The rope walks were usually built in pairs and as large as the rope you wanted to build. Multiple cylinders of yarn are located at the head of the machine and those stands extending to a plate with angled holes punched through it in a pattern for the right amount of compression. A carriage with this plate attached to it is walked along the length of the rope leaving behind a twisted strand.³

The Wallabout bay was the most logical location for building the U.S. Navy Yard because it had exposure to the East River and the land could be extended as they needed it. By having exposure to the river they could easily build and launch ships. The waterfront could be formed in any shape they wished. This can be seen when comparing the 1782 Headquarters map to the 1827 Hooker's map, where the pond is filled in to form the Navy Yard. The Navy also formed the wallabout channel, which turns into a cobb dock in the future. In later maps we see the Yard extent to the U.S. Naval Hospital and stretches down to Flushing Ave.

The most important factor in the development of the Navy Yard was the people. The Village of Brooklyn provided the much needed manpower to build these massive ships. Many of the workers were of Irish descent and settled down into Vinegar Hill because of its close proximity to the Navy Yard. John Jackson owned the land at the waterfront, where the irish settled down. The directory of Brooklyn in 1834 gives names, addresses and occupation information or residents in this area.⁴ When looking at the

³ The Story of Rope: The History and the Modern Development of Rope-making, Plymouth Cordage Company, Plymouth, Mass. 1916, p. 79

⁴ Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York, Sunday, April 8, 1934, Brooklyn Directory of 1833-34 Reprinted Complete in original form

directory many names of Irish descent appear in the area of Little, Marshall, John and Jackson street. They also hold job titles as laborer.



References

British Headquarters map of New York in 1782, New York Public Library Maps Division

Hooker's Map of the Village of Brooklyn in the year of 182, New York Public Library Maps Division

1. Good crops were grown by their thrifty proprietors where residences, shops and Factories now exits, The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, p. 20, July 19 1896
2. A History of the City of Brooklyn, Henry Stiles, p.82, 363, Dec 16, 2009
3. The Story of Rope: The History and the Modern Development of Rope-making, Plymouth Cordage Company, Plymouth, Mass. 1916, p. 79
4. Brooklyn Daily Eagle, New York, Sunday, April 8, 1934, Brooklyn Directory of 1833-34 Reprinted Complete in original form