

Learning Places Spring 2016

SITE REPORT

Vinegar Hill



An old message board located on Water St.

Gerard Jitechian

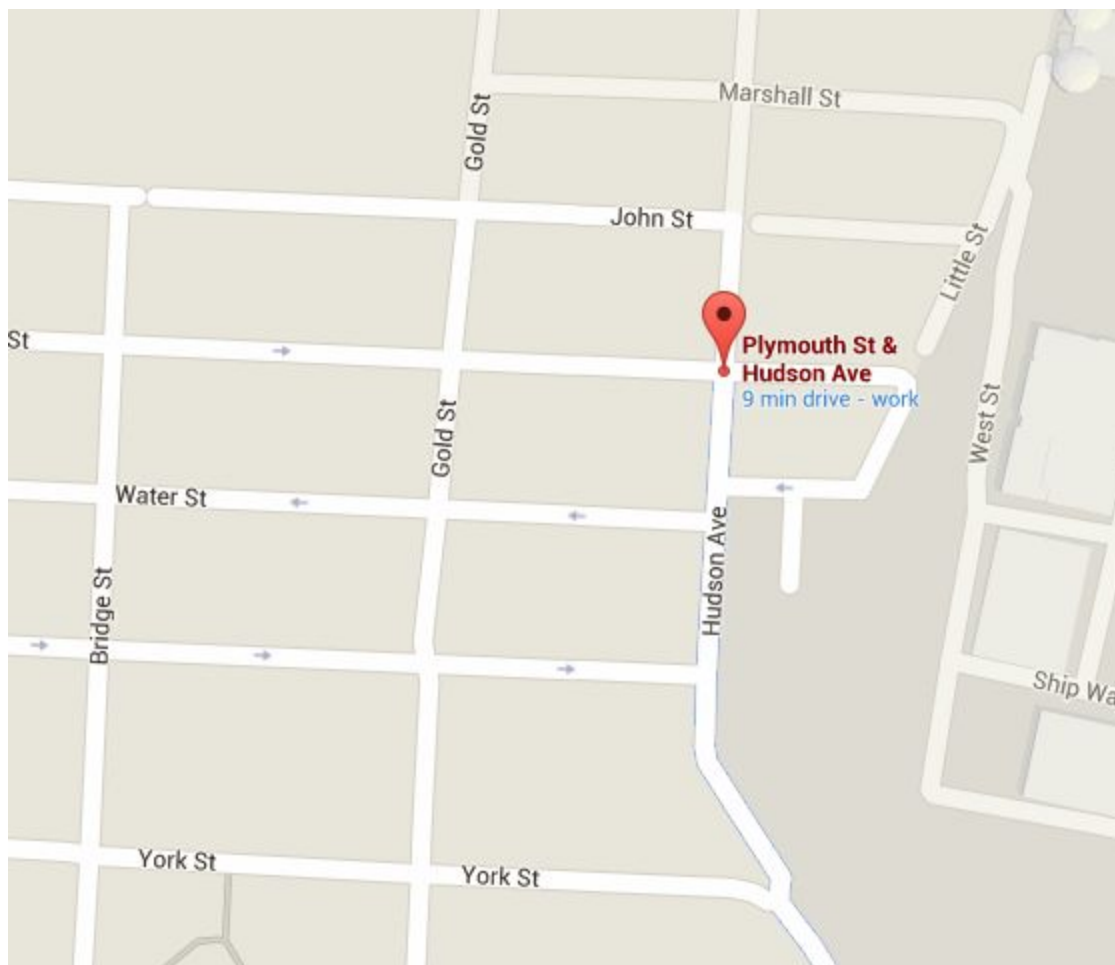
02.22.2016

INTRODUCTION

I explored the general vicinity Hudson Ave. and Plymouth St. in the historical district of Brooklyn called Vinegar Hill. During the exploration, sections of Vinegar Hill were compared to a 1855 fire insurance map of the area. Special attention was payed to see whether building and structures still remained, had been moved or modified.

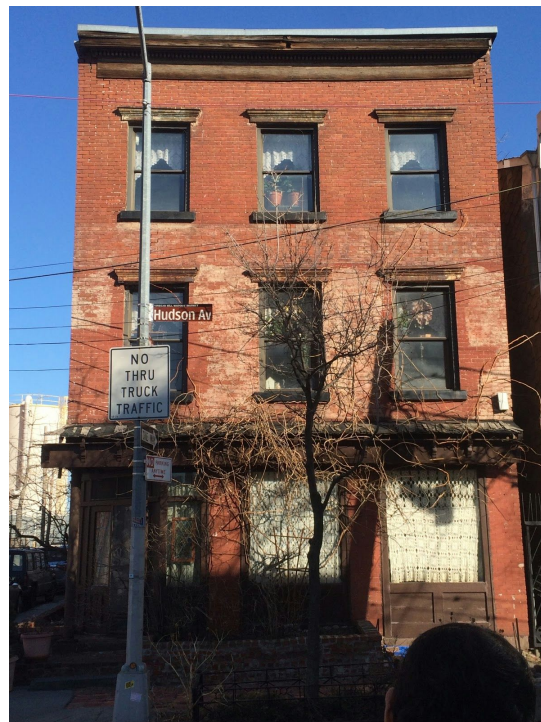
PRE-VISIT REFLECTION

I anticipate to learn about the architecture of the buildings as it relates to the historical Navy Yard district. I am curious to see if the area is more commercial or residential. My interest is in examining the changes made to the district, both in terms of architecture and urban planning.



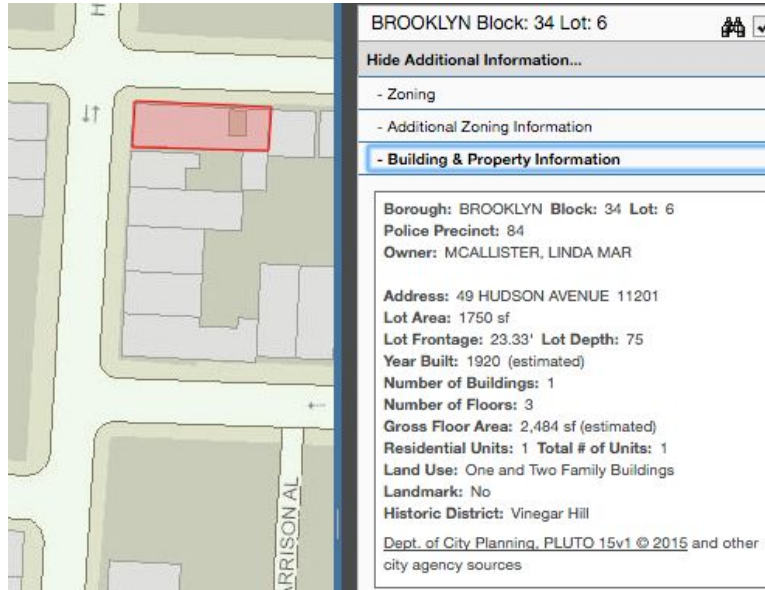
SITE DOCUMENTATION (photos/sketches)

During our first visit, the three story building at 49 Hudson Ave immediately drew my attention. I sketched the building as I wanted to capture the historical importance that it exudes, despite its neglected current condition. The dentil wood cornice, above the first floor window, is a historical architectural detail that is now deteriorating. This building has running bond brickwork, and more ornate window lintels, relative to other buildings on this block. The corner cast-iron column and double door entrance lead me to believe the bottom floor of the building may have once served a restaurant or store, a possible lively hangout spot for locals. This building is the last of historically significant buildings on the cobble stone brick lined Hudson Ave. Many of the buildings on Hudson Ave between Front Street and Plymouth Street have large display windows which seem to have been commercial stores or businesses in the past. I imagine these few blocks were an area where residents would gather or shop in past. Currently, the Con Edison facility, which begins at Hudson ave and Plymouth Street, is a large eye sore and does not seem to fit with the small- business-type stores that line Hudson Ave. My immediate reaction is to research the year in which the Con Edison facility was developed and the impact it has had on the district.

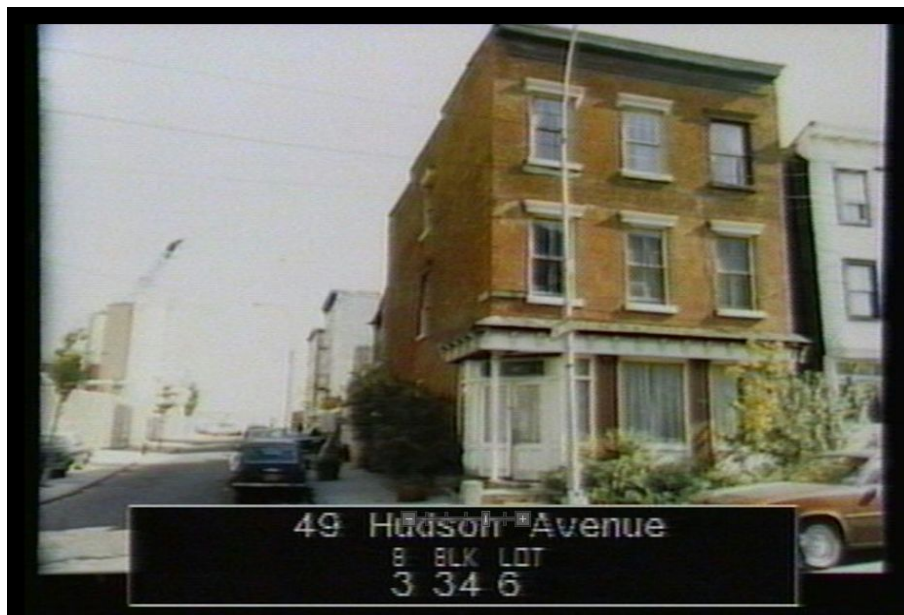


After the Site visit, I used ZoLa (Zoning & Land Use), provided by NYC.gov, to obtain building information about 49 Hudson Ave.

According to ZoLa, the building at 49 Hudson Ave is estimated to have been constructed by 1920.

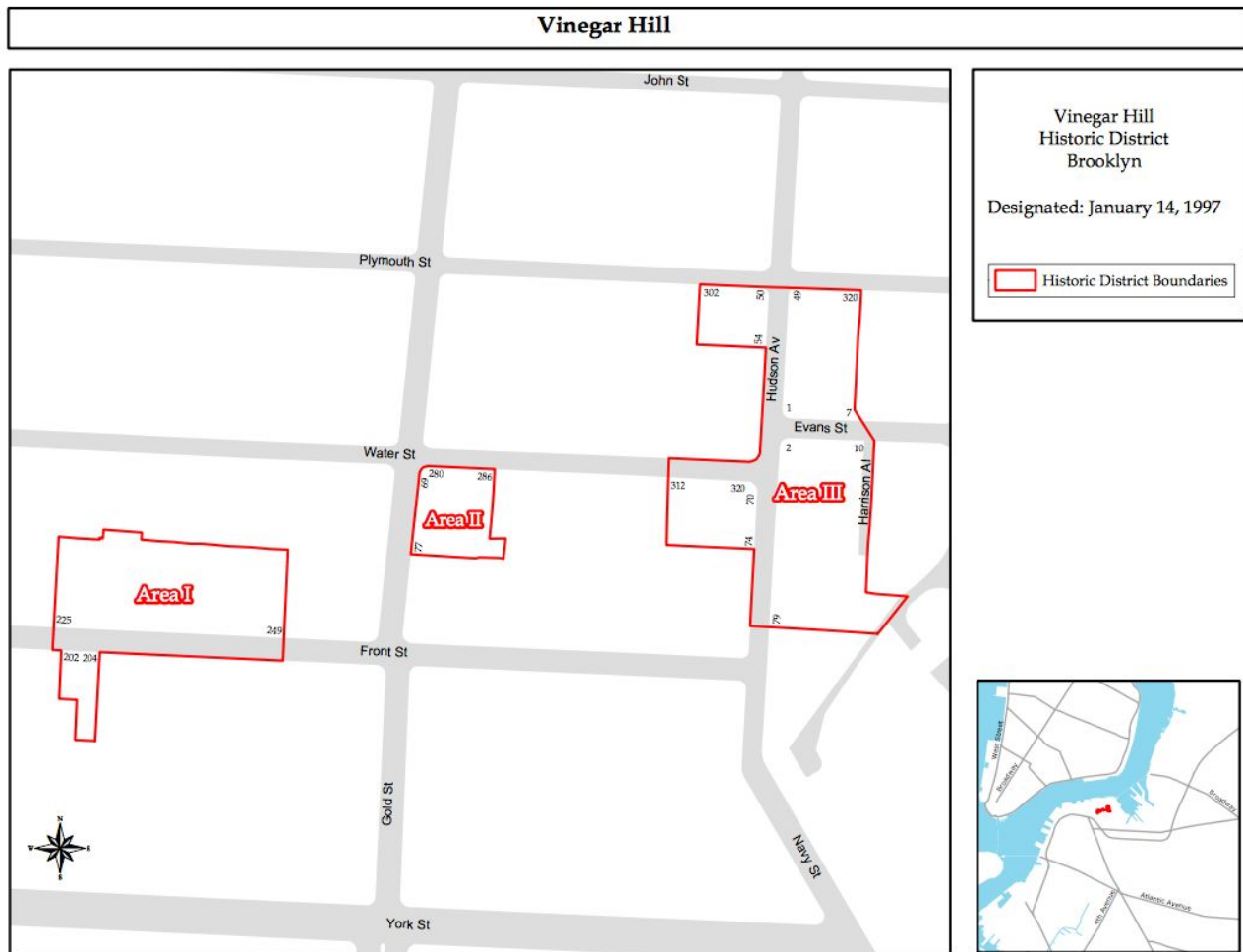


Using the block and lot number (Block:34 and Lot:6), I was able to find photos of the building from the early 1980's Tax Records, provided by the NYC Municipal Archives. Photos were taken of each building in NYC in the 1930's and 1980's for property tax assessment purposes.



Using the 1980's tax photo of 49 Hudson, I can see the building has not changed drastically. The corner entrance was painted white, as opposed to the current dark brown paint (or lack of paint, thereof). The cornice appears in better condition as the wood planks behind it are not yet exposed. The 1980's tax photo shows a cleaner street corner and maintained block. The Con Edison facility appears to be visible in the 1980's tax photo.

Although ZoLa does not note 49 Hudson as a Landmark building, I researched further and learned that Vinegar Hill was designated as a Historical District in January 14, 1997 by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC).



(http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/maps/vinegar_hill.pdf)

The building at 49 Hudson falls at the end of the Area III Historic District Boundary.

The LPC Designation Report, prepared by Donald G. Presa, provides a comprehensive, fascinating background on the history of the area and architecture of the buildings in the historic district. According to the designation report, the building at 49 Hudson Ave was constructed between 1801-35 with roof alterations conducted in the late 1890s (ZoLa was incorrect with 1920 estimated building date).

49 Hudson Ave can be classified as modified Federal architecture. Some may argue that the dentil cornice, corner column and doorway focal point are elements of the Greek Revival Style. The street has Belgian block paving.

The original owner/developer of 49 Hudson was “John Jackson or his heirs, who owned the property from 1781 to 1839” (Presa). According to the LPC designation report, Hudson Avenue was originally called Jackson Avenue.

John Jackson, a famous ship builder and entrepreneur, was one of the founding developers of Vinegar Hill. The LPC Designation report sheds a vital historical spotlight on John Jackson and his impact on the developing the area around shipyard activity.

“Developers John Jackson and Comfort and Joshua Sands purchased land in the area in the late eighteenth century. Jackson, a noted ship builder, opened a shipyard at the foot of present day Hudson Avenue and built housing nearby for his workers. In the first years of the nineteenth century, Jackson sold forty acres to the United States government for the Brooklyn Navy Yard, then built additional housing for Navy Yard personnel. Jackson named the area Vinegar Hill in honor of the last battle of an Irish-English conflict. The historic district includes a number of houses built by Jackson and his heirs between 1801 and the 1830s. They exhibit Simplified Federal and Greek Revival elements.” (Presa 1)

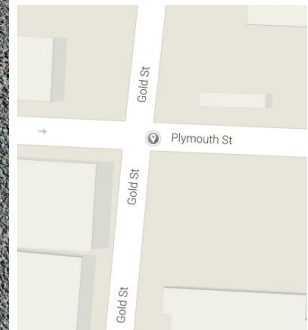
During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Vinegar Hill had a small population; it was comprised mostly of English and Irish residents who were ship industry related laborers and businessmen. In the 1820’s industrial development began in the Vinegar Hill. By the late nineteenth century, 140 factories ranging from sugar refineries, iron part manufacturers, warehouses and supply yards (in addition to the Navy Yard) were constructed. This growth, spurred by the industrial development, also boosted residential growth in the district.

With the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1870’s, the addition of more large factories, such as Benjamin Moore & Company in the early 1920’s, and the development of the Consolidated Edison Company power plant in the 1920’s,

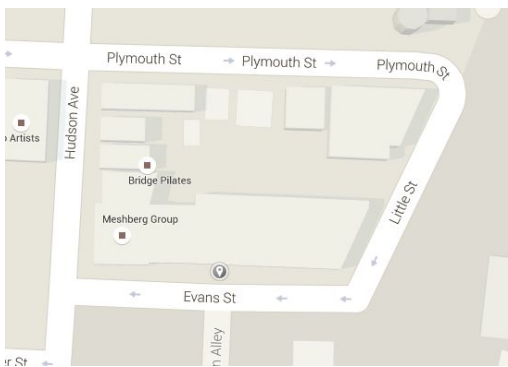
represented a huge shift of the primarily small-ship focused district to a highly industrial area. Post World War II, the small historical district continued to change with the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway and the Farragut Houses (low-cost housing for veterans).

Returning to the analysis of the building at 49 Hudson Avenue, I can now understand why this building gave me the sense of historical importance. Again, this notion was amplified with the overshadowing Con Edison facility. The street paving transformation along the lot of 49 Hudson is symbolic of the transformation of Vinegar Hill from the eighteenth century to present day. The old belgian style brick paving represents the historical shipping district upon which the area was founded and developed. However, one third of the way along the lot towards Plymouth Street and ConEd facility,, the paving changes to cement representing the industrial impact of the twentieth century on Vinegar Hill.



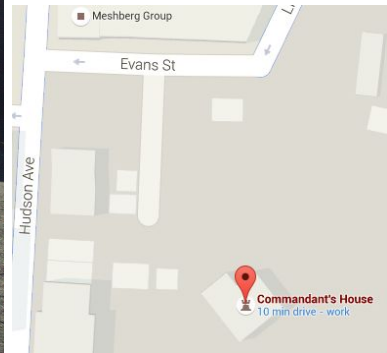





This photo shows a change from cobblestone to asphalt on Hudson Ave. A new sewage/drainage system must have been built because the old one is filled in with cement (left grate and 2 manholes).



This photo is of a wooden structure remaining from a long time ago. It is located on Evans St. This structure is present in the 1855 map. This may have been a horse stable in the past, that was converted into a garage at a later point. I was not able to find much information about this structure,

nor a tax photo.



BROOKLYN Block: 2023 Lot: 100   

Hide Additional Information...

- Zoning
- Additional Zoning Information
- Building & Property Information**

Borough: BROOKLYN **Block:** 2023 **Lot:** 100
Police Precinct: 84
Owner: CHARLES GILBERT

Address: 24 EVANS STREET 11201
Lot Area: 107157 sf
Lot Frontage: 236' **Lot Depth:** 481
Year Built: 1901 (estimated)
Number of Buildings: 2
Number of Floors: 2.5
Gross Floor Area: 9,900 sf (estimated)
Residential Units: 1 **Total # of Units:** 1
Land Use: One and Two Family Buildings
Landmark: COMMANDANT'S HOUSE, QUARTERS A, BRO
Historic District: No

Dept. of City Planning, PLUTO 15v1 © 2015 and other city agency sources

This out-of-place mansion is located at the end of a partial cul-de-sac on the corner of Little and Evans streets. Neither this structure, nor the cul de sac, was in existence at the time of the 1855 map; there were other buildings in this location adjacent to the navy yard. Google Maps identifies the structure as the “Commandant's House.” It is also interesting to note that there is dropoff, of about 15 feet to the left of this photo, continuing Northeast along Little St., all the way down to the ConEd facility. The drop off levels to where the water reclamation facility is located currently. The drop off does not look natural; I surmise that the topography of the region was altered in order to make a flat surface for the water reclamation plant’s machinery operate.





A 3D representation of the drop off seen on Little St., with driveway to the Commandant's House in the upper left corner of the screen.



These notes taken over William Perris's 1855 map show differences noted in the "10" zone. The boxed off areas are what is standing on 2016.

QUALITATIVE SITE OBSERVATIONS

1. Neighborhood / Street Character
 - a. Run-down, low building, all under 4 stories
 - b. Almost no pedestrian traffic
 - i. No active businesses in direct vicinity.

- ii. Yoga/pilates studios. Looked closed down.
 - iii. ConEd facility in direct proximity
 - c. The vitality of the neighborhood is not active
 - i. Abandoned streets (afternoon). Random pedestrian. Random tourists
 - ii. Some cars parked on streets.
 - d. General Description
 - i. “Old” looking neighborhood. Looks neglected. Sometimes smells bad due to the sewage treatment plant in direct vicinity (adjacent to Little St.)
 - e. Vehicular Traffic
 - i. Random taxi. Random work vehicles
- 2. Age of Buildings (provide evidence for prediction)
 - a. Some building are older; they appear on the old fire insurance map.
 - b. Some building were newly built.
 - c. Some areas have had complete demolition and replacement
 - i. Especially true of areas adjacent to the water and Navy yard.
- 3. Relationship to the Waterfront
 - a. Close to the old navy yard.
 - i. Access to ships, in the past

QUANTITATIVE DATA for Area of Study

Subject	Data
Street Names, all about 25ft width (curb-to-curb)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Evans ● Little ● Hudson ● Plymouth ● John
Street Pavement	Asphalt, Cobblestone
Building Heights	All low buildings (< 4 fl) One exception is a new storage facility on John St. (~15fl)
Building Widths (Window Bays)	No older buildings wider than 50ft. Industrial buildings much wider.
Building Types/Uses	Living. Industrial.

Empty Lots / Gardens	Many empty lots. Look decrepit.
Shops / Restaurants	No shops (in this grid).
Transportation	Foot or car. No adjacent public transportation

QUESTIONS to Research Further

QUESTIONS:

1. Is property valuable in this area?
 - a. It is close to both air and noise pollution, and is inaccessible.
 - i. Are all the residents in the area for a long time, or their families?
2. How was ConEd allowed to demolish some parts of the area to build its infrastructure, but not others?
 - a. Did they buy lots in bulk, perhaps at auction?
3. Why were there signs on the CoEd fences prohibiting photography?
 - a. Is it because they expect a lot of tourists? Is it for security?

RESEARCH METHOD/SOURCE FOR EACH QUESTION ABOVE:

1. Question 1
 - a. Analyze the psych of the people living in the surrounding area, including DUMBO. Is it for the pleasurable view of Manhattan?
 - b. See how many deeds have changed hands in a specific timeframe. County clerk's office.
2. Question 2
 - a. Find the ordinance that allowed ConEd to build there initially.
 - b. Call ConEd.
 - c. Research DOB files, and/or Landmarks files.
3. Conduct a longer surveillance of the facility.
 - a. See what kinds of materials are shipped in and out.
 - b. Find out if there is explosive and/or flammable materials in excess in the area
 - i. Does this make it vulnerable to an organized terrorist plot?

SUMMARY / POST VISIT REFLECTION

A lot of the area looked disheveled and some infrastructure was falling apart. Signs of early gentrification, spilling over from the more gentrified DUMBO were starting to make their appearance. However, since the area is a historical landmark, the buyers may be blocked from developing.

The area I explored may have at one time been flourishing, but now it is very quiet and still. I expect that the Manhattan Bridge's construction cut off the area from other parts. Other than activity related to the ConEd facility, there is now much going on in the area, except for the occasional tourist with his camera walking around, or a resident returning home.

Sources

Pressa, D. G. (1997). VINEGAR HILL HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION REPORT (Rep.). Retrieved April 5, 2016.

49 HUSDON AVE [Photograph]. (n.d.). DOF: Brooklyn 1980s Tax Photos, NYC Department of Records, Brooklyn In *Department of Finance 1980s Brooklyn*. Retrieved April 4, 2016. (Originally photographed 1983-1988)

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Google Maps. Alphabet Inc. (2013). [Vinegar Hill, Brooklyn, New York] [Street map]. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Vinegar+Hill,+Brooklyn,+NY+11201/@40.7036698,-73.984086,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x89c25a36461bae37:0x91847f21ff46e632>