

The Vinegar Hill Historic District today constitutes a six-block area that extends from the East River waterfront to Front Street and from the Brooklyn Navy Yard to Bridge Street (Revilla). It is represented by three separate small groups of brick row houses of early and mid-nineteenth century houses, complemented by mid-nineteenth century firehouse, a portion of an early twentieth-century industrial building and four vacant lots, whose architecture and scale contribute to the district's special sense of neighborhood (Persa, P. 2). However, the area was larger, extending south to Tillary Street before the construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in the 1950's (Revilla). By 1822, Spooner's Directory listed 58 occupants or household heads in the Vinegar Hill area; most of the residents were Irish descent which had given the neighborhood the popular name "Irishtown," although other ethnic groups, including Germans, Norwegians, Swedes, Poles, Italians, and Eastern European Jews, were also present. Most of the residents worked on the waterfront, in the Navy Yard, or in neighborhood industries (Persa, p. 7). One-quarter of the households were listed as tavern proprietors, which is a clear sign of the liveliness of the area. Ten year later, the Spooner's Directory listed 140 heads of households, another sign of the rapid population and economic growth that the district was experiencing (Revilla).

Geographical context: The adjacent Brooklyn Navy Yard is set off from the Vinegar Hill region by an iron fence and a drop in elevation. It now hosts a variety of industrial uses, an auto pound, and a sewage treatment facility (Persa, p. 2). The blocks to the west of the Vinegar Hill Historic District, stretching beyond the base of the Manhattan Bridge, are lined mainly with brick factory buildings (persa, p.2). They are currently occupied by small manufacturing and storage firms and artists' lofts. One-story industrial buildings and unimproved lots are occupied by waste

transfer stations and vehicle storage facilities. To the north, Con Edison's Hudson Avenue plant dominates the skyline and streetscapes adjacent to the East River (Revilla).

Early History of the Vinegar Hill Area: The first inhabitants of the Vinegar Hill area were the Canarsee Indians, the indigenous people of Brooklyn, members of the Algonquin linguistic group that occupied the Atlantic seaboard from Canada to North Carolina (Persa, p. 3). The Canarsees were an autonomous band of the Delaware (Leni Lenape) Indians. They lived communally in several settlements in western Brooklyn, including one located on the high ground near the present-day Vinegar Hill Historic District, called Rinnegokonc (Persa, p. 3). When the Dutch settlers arrived in the early seventeenth century, the Canarsee, already weakened by disease, hunger, and warfare, began to sell their land to the settlers and commenced on a long westward migration that would take them as far as Illinois territory (Persa, p. 3). In addition to Brooklyn's early Dutch settlers, there were also inhabitants from Germany, England, France, Scandinavia, Flanders, Belgium,; and Africa, the latter of which were generally slaves or indentured servants brought to America by the Dutch West India Company. Slavery flourished in Brooklyn, particularly in the more rural areas (Persa, p. 3). Nevertheless, a number of free African-Americans were living in Brooklyn in the mid-seventeenth century (Revilla).

In the late eighteenth century, developers John Jackson and Joshua Sands purchased land in the Vinegar Hill area. Jackson, a noted ship builder, opened a shipyard at the foot of present- day Hudson Avenue and built housing nearby for his workers (Persa, 1). In the first years of the nineteenth century, Jackson sold forty acres to the United States government for the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and then built additional housing for Navy Yard personnel (Revilla). Jackson named the area Vinegar Hill in honor of the last battle of an Irish-English conflict (Persa, p.1). The

Sands family, who had amassed a fortune as merchants and speculators, laid out their land, located west of Jackson's property, into blocks and lots for a community to be called "Olympia" as early as 1787 (Persa, p. 1). The brothers expected Olympia to become a summer retreat for New Yorkers because of its hilly topography, plentiful water, and refreshing breezes (Revilla). However, the Sands's lots that are located within the historic district were not developed residentially until the mid-1830s to the early 1850s when Greek Revival row houses were constructed on the lots (Persa, p. 9). It was not until the early nineteenth century, with the opening of the Navy Yard in 1801, that the area started developing faster (Revilla). In the late 1830s and early 1840s, the heirs of John Jackson sold off their estate's remaining lots on Hudson Avenue, which were developed individually or in small groups in the 1840s and 1850s with houses that have Greek Revival and Italianate characteristics because of the associations with Athenian democracy (Persa, p. 9). Classic Greek architectural forms were reinterpreted by the architects and builders of the new Republic in their designs for buildings both large and small, whether State Capitol or small row house (Persa, 9). Further residential construction occurred on a few remaining vacant lots on Hudson Avenue, Water Street, and Front Street in the years following the Civil War (Revilla).

References

1. http://www.nyc.gov/html/lpc/downloads/pdf/reports/VINEGAR_HILL_HISTORIC_DISTRICT.pdf
2. <http://thesixthborough.weebly.com/vinegar-hill-the-history-of-irishtown.html>