

## SITE REPORT #3



Brooklyn Public Library, 10 Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, NY

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### INTRODUCTION

On Monday, March 13<sup>th</sup>, the professors organized a trip for the class to visit the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza. There, the professors set up an appointment with a librarian from the Library to give us access to the archives. Typically, the archive section of the library is closed on Mondays so it was a privilege to have the room assigned to our class. The trip was intended to be organized into special groups. During class before the visit, the professors split the class into groups to help brainstorm what type of information we would look for. We hoped the visit would help guide us in the direction of a new hypothesis for what argument we will make as a group focused on the *preservation and development* of Vinegar Hill.

## OBJECTIVES

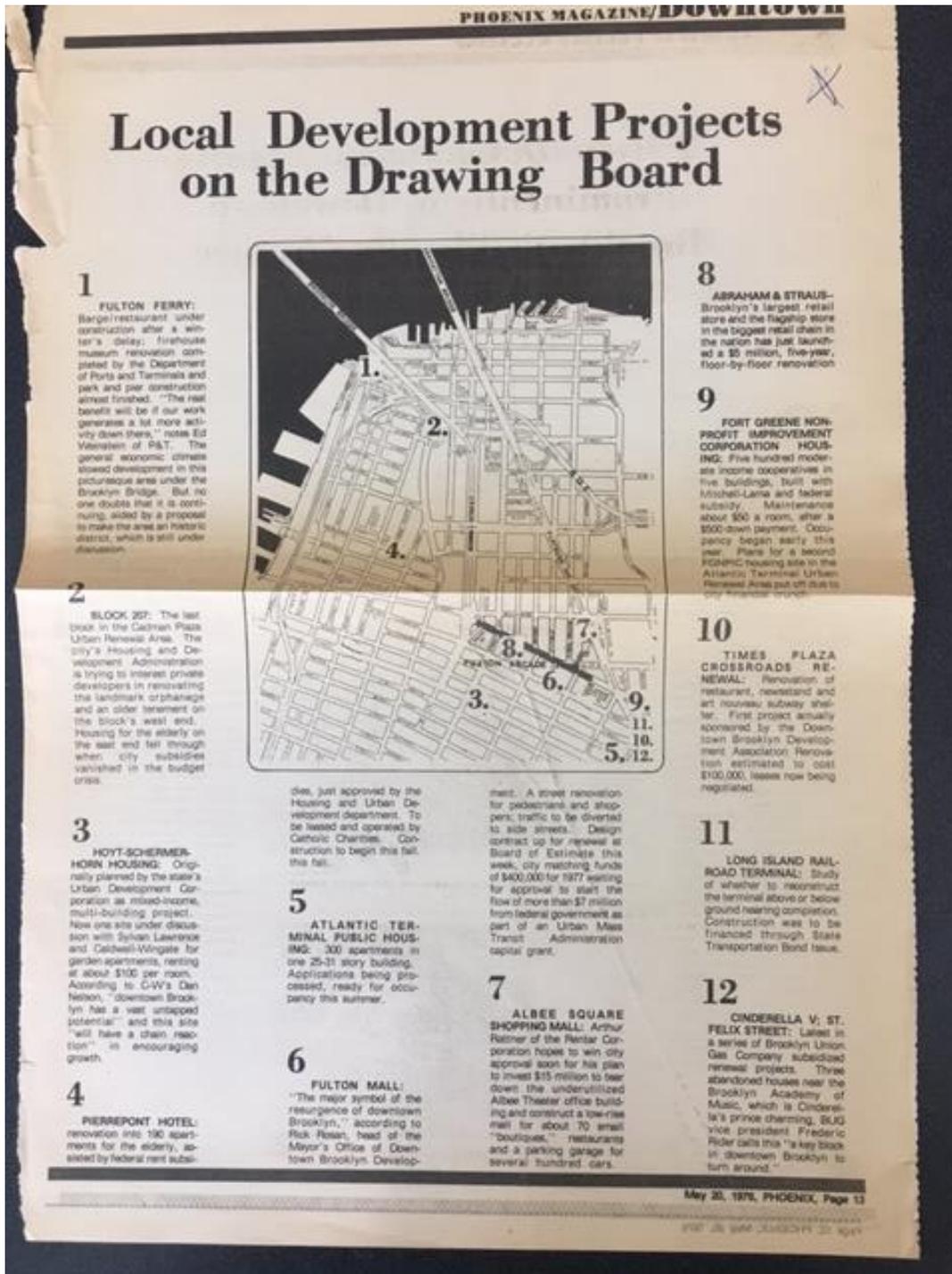
As a group, we decided to search for newspaper articles and maps. We hoped to find newspaper articles close to the time when Vinegar Hill was established. We also wanted to find articles that show the opinions of citizens of Vinegar Hill regarding the changes brought to the neighborhood at different times. Here we hoped to find things like, industrializing the neighborhood, bringing transportation to the neighborhood, and bringing higher property value to the neighborhood. For maps, we hoped to find original maps prior to the opening of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. We also hoped to find maps before any development of Vinegar Hill. We wanted to know what type of site was all of the current factories and worn down residences have erected on. Other maps we were looking for were transportation maps. We felt this could help in the argument that transportation influences the development of a neighborhood. Our main goal was to find out why Vinegar Hill is stuck in the past and forgotten.

## PRE-VISIT REFLECTION

Prior to the visit, I anticipated finding very aged documents from well before my time. I specifically hoped to find documents as old as the late 1700's when Vinegar Hill was established. (Reference to the bulletin board found from the second site visit) I anticipated having to follow many rules for handling the documents. I wanted to wear the gloves and mask as if I was dealing with a valuable historic document like the Declaration of Independence in the Movie, *National Treasure*, featuring Nicolas Cage. I was also hoping to find information that was never noticed before. I hoped to make some sort of grand discovery.

As a group, I believe we all anticipated finding all of the information we needed such as letters of complaints and historic maps. Since our group has yet to narrow down a valid hypothesis, I believe we were open to finding any sort of information that would speak out as development or preservation.

SITE DOCUMENTATION:



This is a magazine article from PHOENIX page 13 on May 20, 1976. This document was the first one I truly felt attached to because I had to handle it with care. I felt as if the pages were going to fall right apart in my hands. I personally felt this document should have a mylar cover simply because of the state of the document even though it is not as aged as some of the Atlas books. The significance I found within this object is that it shows the anticipated development of downtown Brooklyn. By no surprise, I found there was nothing intended for Vinegar Hill. I believe this will aid in the argument that Vinegar Hill was never a topic of discussion. I want to know why. Perhaps there was something on the other side of the river that wasn't worth the waterfront view.

BAF Vinegar Hill

By Beth Sherman

**L**IKE MOST PEOPLE, Per-Olaf Odman discovered Vinegar Hill by accident.

Ten years ago he was riding his bicycle through the streets of Brooklyn when he came upon a gritty industrial area near the Manhattan Bridge. Factories and warehouses peppered the streets, which lay in the shadows of the Con Edison smokestacks. The blocks were eerily quiet, as if everyone had finished work and gone home for the day. And yet, despite the isolation and the glam-looking vacant lots, the area had a certain charm.

He paid \$16,000 for an abandoned bakery and set to work building the house of his dreams.

Today, there is more of a neighborhood feel to Vinegar Hill, an eight-block enclave roughly bounded by the East River to the north, York Street to the south, Bridge Street to the west and the Brooklyn Navy Yard to the east. The manufacturing and storage plants are still there, and the Farragut Houses project skirts one edge of the area. But many of the wood-frame and brick buildings are clearly residential. Painted cheery shades of blue, yellow and cream, they have high stoops and wrought-iron railings. Twig wreaths are hung on wooden front doors. And mothers pushing baby carriages are seen on streets that were once occupied solely by Con Ed workers in hard hats.

About half the people living in the neighborhood are elderly Lithuanians and Italians who grew up in the area and remained in their homes for three generations. The other half are newcomers — artists, designers, architects and engineers — who moved here in the early 1980s and set about renovating the four-story buildings.

Odman and his wife, Monique, keep a looseleaf notebook that chronicles the gutting and rehabilitation of their 100-year-old home. Ironically entitled "House and Garden," it features photos of the house, which was uninhabitable for the first six years of the renovation.

"Everything was ruined and damaged," he says. "We removed two thousand square feet of rotten floorboards. We repaired the brick walls, the sagging floors. We hauled out tons of ashes, stone and dirt from the sub-cellar. We tore out all the lathes. We rebuilt all eight fireplaces, including the flues."

"We worked like slaves," adds Monique. "We had to rebuild the windows, the walls, the roof. In winter, the snow came right in here. It got a little crazy."

The house, which is nearly completed, is simply decorated, as if to show off the structural elements of the finished product. "We didn't have much money

# The Quiet Charm Of Brooklyn's Vinegar Hill

NY Newsday March 9, 1989 P. 8.1. III City Living



left over to spend on furniture," says Per-Olaf. Many pieces, such as the slat-back kitchen chairs, were in the house when the couple purchased it. Other objects — the gas stove, a cast-iron table — were donated by friends. More elaborate touches were provided by chests and boxes that Monique decorated with paint.

Apart from their restoration work, the Odmans' other contribution to the area was to organize the Vinegar Hill Neighborhood Association. The group has successfully lobbied to keep St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church on Front Street from becoming a garbage recycling plant. They have also joined forces to fight a proposal

to house a garbage incinerator at the Navy Yard.

"Everyone knows each other," says Vivian Scott. "It's a little like living in a small town in the country." Scott and her husband, Steve Woodburn, both artists, began renovating their house in 1982. They use the ground floor of their home as a joint studio. Upstairs, most furnishings are made of dark wood. The carved bed is "on permanent loan from friends."

Other pieces date back to the 1960s, when the couple lived in a loft in SoHo.

"We're used to living in places that haven't been discovered yet," says Woodburn. "We had a loft on



Leonard Street before anyone ever called it TriBeCa. This area is similar. The stores haven't arrived, and once you've adjusted to the hum of the Con Ed plant, that's about it. There's no through traffic except for a few lost trucks."

Still, he maintains that it's somewhat refreshing to live in a neighborhood that hasn't been gentrified, where older residents haven't been forced out. "If there's a yuppie tucked in here somewhere, he's keeping a very low profile," he jokes.

According to architectural historian Justin Ferate, that is unlikely to change in the near future. "This is not where you move if you want to impress your Wall Street friends," says Ferate. "The neighborhood reflects Brooklyn's industrial past. It was designed so that people could walk to work, so they didn't have to spend five cents on car fare. The commercial strip is now defunct, but many of the first floors of the buildings that are still standing were once used as shops — grocery stores, hairdressers, that sort of thing. You see all these funny bay windows, and you know a cat used to hang out there."

The area was first settled by Irish immigrants who named it after the Battle of Vinegar Hill, an Irish uprising for independence in 1798. Because of its proximity to the water, Vinegar Hill — or Irishtown, as it was later called — attracted a host of factories, which produced everything from Brillo soap pads to Corning glass. In the heyday of the Navy Yard, bars and rooming houses lined the streets, and the neighborhood became a red light district of sorts. Now most of the merchants — seedy and otherwise — are gone. Residents drive through the streets, some of them lined with desolate factory buildings, to nearby Brooklyn Heights to shop for groceries or to pick up the morning newspaper. Bonnie Parsekian takes her 7-month-old twins to the Heights most afternoons. "We're off the city maps," she says, "so there's very little here in terms of services. Things like garbage pick-up, street cleaning and parking rules aren't strictly enforced. There's a sense of having to fight for every inch."

Parsekian first heard about the neighborhood in 1985, when she was getting her master's degree in historic preservation at Columbia University. She canvassed the neighborhood, looking for buildings that needed conservation work. And she arranged for local residents to speak to her class about the area. One of the panelists was Robert Parsekian, an architect with the Port Authority, the man who would become her husband.

"There's a lot of potential here from a preservation standpoint," she says. "It's especially interesting for artists. There's an odd juxtaposition of buildings and vacant lots and textures and patterns that's visually exciting. Plus, it's extremely quiet and private. I've met a lot of people who see this area and fall in love with it." ■



Photo by Oliver Morris

**Vivian Scott and Steve Woodburn in their living room; they began renovating in 1982.**

## Properties

If you're thinking of living in Vinegar Hill, residents suggest doing what they did — driving around the neighborhood. If you're investigating on foot, take the F train to York Street.

A bulletin board at the corner of Hudson Avenue and Evans Street often lists properties for sale or rent. Word of mouth is another good way of finding a vacancy. Locals say it's perfectly permissible to stop people in the street and ask what's available.

Since the housing stock in the area is among the oldest in Brooklyn, houses may need a partial or full renovation. Chris Thomas, a broker with Barbara D'Erasmo Realty in Brooklyn Heights, says he recently sold a partially renovated four-story house in Vinegar Hill for \$175,000. He says you can expect to pay about \$650 a month to rent a 600-square-foot floor-through. Larger spaces rent for up to \$1,500 for a 1,500-square-foot duplex.

"Rents are considerably less," says Thomas, "than in Fort Greene or Clinton Hill."

The newest development in the area is the Renaissance, a school being converted into condos. A red brick Victorian building at 131 York St., it should be ready for occupancy by May. Prices range from \$128,000 for a studio to \$200,000 for a three-bedroom apartment. ■

This is a Newspaper article from NY Newsday on March 9, 1989 page 8.1. III City Living. This article is unique because it provides insight of the residences of Vinegar Hill., The residents like the quiet neighborhood. They like that there is no hustle and bustle of the city. It is also mentioned that once someone gets used to the hum of the Con Ed plant that it's a really nice and calm neighborhood to be in. From visiting the site the last time, I too noticed the hum. It is louder than comfortable. I believe one must force themselves to be content with this neighborhood. This makes the Con Ed plant less likely to leave, by people adjusting to the disturbance.

**SITE OBSERVATIONS:** One or 2 general notes about the Brooklyn Collection, and 2-3 specific observations about how the primary sources you found are connected to the topic of your investigation

1. Small variety of information
2. Most of the articles relating to Downtown Brooklyn and Vinegar Hill are dated recently.
3. One primary source was the Atlas of the City of Brooklyn Volume 1 dated 1855. This is connected to the topic of investigation because we can see the types of uses fir Vinegar Hill early on.
4. The article for local development projects on the drawing board helps the argument that no one is interested in developing Vinegar Hill or that no one is allowed to develop Vinegar Hill
5. The article regarding the quiet charm of Vinegar Hill helps us understand how the residents felt about the neighborhood in 1989.

**QUANTITATIVE DATA:** under “subject” list the topic; Under “data” describe your findings and the quantity found

Subject	Data
Documents dated in 1800’s	I
Documents Dated in 1900’s	IIIIIIIIII
Documents Dated in 2000’s	IIIIII

**QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS** Consider the primary sources found during your visit and review the material you included so far in this report.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Why even in 1855 did Vinegar Hill consist majority of Industriial Use?
2. Why does the waterfront get neglected in the development of Downtown Brooklyn in 1976?
3. Why do residents chose to live in a neighborhood that has a consistent electrical hum?

**HYPOTHESIS:** From the questions you wrote above, select the most important question for your own research topic. Propose an explanation made on the basis of the evidence you have so far as a starting point for further investigation.

1. Perhaps Manhattan's waterfront at that area of the East River was also industrial or had a terrible view from the Brooklyn Waterfront Side. Perhaps it was all for trade by boat.
2. Perhaps there was a primary owner of the of the waterfront and the owner did not want to sell the land. Eventually we know DUMBO was bought over but what about Vinegar Hill?
3. Perhaps Vinegar Hill is a very affordable area and people who did not have the financial ability to live in a nicer area such as DUMBO.

## SUMMARY / POST VISIT REFLECTION / NEXT STEPS?

I was somewhat disappointed with the visit to the Brooklyn Public Library. Although I was impressed with the documents I found, I feel like there is more information available online. I now have lower standards for the next site visit because I am now accepting the fact that sometimes, history is not recorded. Next steps would be to narrow down a hypothesis with my group comparing the documents we have found individually. I hope to have an attainable hypothesis that we know can be proven through known primary sources. I will still look into maps for the time being but hopefully the members of my group have more optimistic results which we can collaborate.

## PRELIMINARY REFERENCES FOR PRIMARY SOURCES:

Record the essential information that you might use to create a citation for 3-4 primary sources you examined. Don't worry about creating a perfect or conventionally formatted citation; record the information that someone would need to find it again. Include a variety of sources: photographs, maps, articles, manuscripts, etc.

1. Phoenix Magazine, 1976, May 20, page 13, "Local Development Projects on the Drawing board", Original copy, Brooklyn Public Library,
2. Beth Sherman, 1989, March 9, page 8.1 III City Living, NY Newsday, "The Quiet Charm of Brooklyn's Vinegar Hill" Original Print, Brooklyn Public Library
3. Bill Farrel, 1989, February 16, 1989, Page KSI 1.2, "Trash outfit urged to clean act", Scan of original newspaper article, Brooklyn Public Library