

Brooklyn

Waterfront History

By Marcia Reiss

Brooklyn began on its waterfront. It was here, along more than 100 miles bordering the turbulent East River, tranquil bays, ocean beaches and winding creeks, that Native Americans enjoyed an unimaginable bounty of fish and fertile soil for thousands of years. And it was here, four centuries ago, that the first European settlers established farms and villages, connected to Manhattan and the Old World by a lifeline of ferryboats and sailing ships.

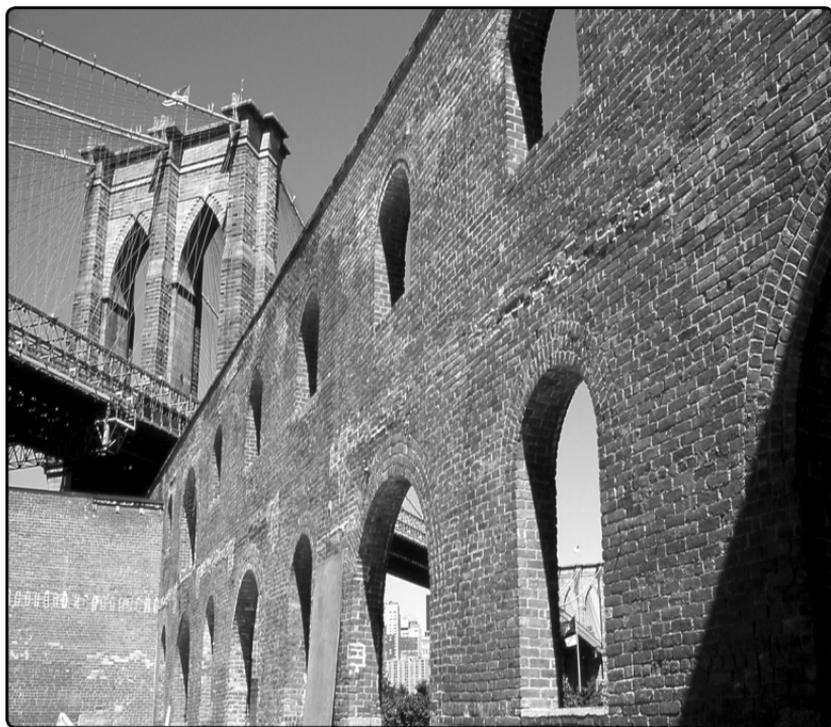
Sailing through the Narrows and up the East River in the early 17th century, the Dutch had their eyes fixed not just on Manhattan, but also on Brooklyn. Soon after establishing the center of New Amsterdam in Lower Manhattan, they cut the first canal from the Red Hook peninsula to Gowanus Creek settled along Greenpoint's Newtown Creek, and started the first ferry route from Manhattan to the foot of today's Old Fulton St, the start of the old City of Brooklyn.

From Greenpoint to Red Hook, the waterfront was literally Brooklyn's cutting edge of development. It expanded with masses of landfill, reached into the waters with fingers of new piers and soared upwards with the towering masts of great ships. The new waterfront began to take shape after the War of 1812 when New York became the nation's leading port. The invention of the steamboat in 1815 and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 created an unprecedented demand for dock space. While shippers were already vying for space in crowded Lower Manhattan, Brooklyn's spacious waterfront had the clear advantage, particularly for bulk cargoes like grain, sugar, and coffee. In 1850, the largest port facility in the nation, Red Hook's Atlantic Docks, was completed with room for 150 ships, huge grain silos, and hundreds of warehouses. In these days before the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the grain terminals were the tallest structures on the city's horizon and dozens of them, filled with Midwestern grain from Erie Canal barges, lined the Brooklyn shore, ready for shipments abroad.

At the same time, Greenpoint became a burgeoning shipbuilding center. Great rafts of logs were towed from Canada down the St. Lawrence and Hudson rivers to Greenpoint where thousands of men and boys crafted them into graceful clip-

per ships, sloops, schooners, yachts, paddleboats, and ferries. Greenpoint shipyards and ironworks turned out the largest and most famous vessels of the day, including the *USS Monitor*, the Union's first ironclad vessel. Hundreds of other warships were built and repaired in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Opened in 1801, the navy yard grew over the next 150 years to become the zenith of Brooklyn's industrial might

The thriving port spurred the growth of an astounding number and diversity of industries. Some of the biggest companies in the world—Domino and Jack Frost Sugar, Corning Glass, and Standard Oil—came to the Brooklyn waterfront in the 19th century. Although many were known by their Manhattan addresses, their massive operations were in Brooklyn where they could receive raw materials and ship finished products with ease. Hundreds of smaller manufacturers—Brillo, Benjamin Moore, Borax, Sterno, and Eskimo Pie—once operated in the neighborhood known today as DUMBO. Breweries, printing plants, sugar, and oil refineries had transformed Williamsburg from a farming village to a city in 1851, a time when it was nearly as large as the separate City of Brooklyn. In his 1856 poem, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Walt Whitman described the “wild yellow and red light” of the refinery chimneys against the Brooklyn sky. These “black arts” also darkened and



Brooklyn Bridge & Empire Stores

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fouled the sky with smoke, soot, and sulfuric fumes. Others, like Greenpoint's glass and porcelain factories, where Mary Todd Lincoln purchased tableware for the White House, produced works of great artistry.

For skilled craftsmen, manual laborers, and daring industrialists, the Brooklyn waterfront in the 19th and early 20th centuries was a place of virtually unlimited opportunities. But the waterfront was not only a place for work. Even when industry dominated the shoreline, boys swam in the East River by jumping off the piers. Those who could afford it traveled south to the glittering amusement parks of Coney Island, the grand hotels of Brighton and Manhattan Beach, the horseracing tracks of Sheepshead Bay, and the great estates and resorts of Bay Ridge. Throughout the 19th century, these were the summer places to be.

Like other industrial centers in the northeast, Brooklyn changed dramatically in the 20th century, particularly after the Second World War when many manufacturing and shipping firms moved to other parts of the country. Yet the changes on the waterfront had begun much earlier. Ironically, they began to shift after the completion of the greatest structure on the waterfront—the Brooklyn Bridge. Once the bridge opened in 1883, it provided a quicker, safer, and more reliable river crossing than the ferries ever could. Although ferry service from the end of Fulton St. continued for several more decades, the area, once Brooklyn's commercial center, became a backwater as businesses moved inland. The pattern was repeated all along the waterfront as other bridges, elevated trains, subway lines, cars, trucks, and airplanes made the old ferry landings and shipping piers all but obsolete.

While the old shipyards, warehouses, and factories deteriorated, the waterfront and its haunting sense of history have continued to draw people and inspire new developments. Nearly half a millennium after the first European settlement, Brooklyn is rediscovering and reinventing itself on its waterfront. The revitalization of the old industrial neighborhoods from Greenpoint to Red Hook is a continuing expression of Whitman's joyous delight in experiencing the city at its edge. "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky," the poet said in 1856, "so I felt."§

Marcia Reiss has been involved with the New York City waterfront as a journalist, city official, university professor, and parks advocate. She is the author of *Brooklyn Then and Now* 2001; *New York Architecture in Detail* 2003, and a series of history guides to Brooklyn neighborhoods published by the Brooklyn Historical Society.