

The Legend of Local Industry

Employment on the Red Hook Waterfront

Abstract

Four cranes loom large on the waterfront, hulking silhouettes against the lights of Lower Manhattan. The cranes look antiquated against the shining skyline, but the antiquity has its appeal, evoking an image of the once-great “Industrial City,” with its strong unions, flourishing immigrant communities, and above all, abundance of local, working-class jobs. The cranes belong to the Brooklyn Marine Terminal, home to Brooklyn’s last remaining maritime distribution site, which is slated for redevelopment after its acquisition by the City Government from the Port Authority. The site’s future use is debated, and many feel a strong desire to maintain industrial programs, enticed by the number of jobs that would ostensibly come with them. It makes sense; the waterfront’s heyday around 1900 saw entire communities form around the sheer number of local jobs, jobs which today could benefit underprivileged communities such as that of the NYCHA Red Hook Houses. But how genuine is this narrative of local employment?

The history of these piers and their impact on surrounding populations has been severely understudied, and narratives often ignore the way this impact has changed throughout the 20th century even while maritime industry was still alive and well. This project analyzes data from both the economic census and internal hiring databases to examine where and when these piers really employed local communities. It is well known that immigrant communities benefited from local waterfront employment structures in the 19th century, but can the same be said for the influx of Puerto Rican and Black migrants to Red Hook in the interwar period? During this time, when social networks had already been established, exclusive unions had been formed, and organized crime had become involved, it is difficult to imagine this new population benefitting in this same way. If the data supports this hypothesis, it will strongly suggest that the presence of maritime industry and the uplift of local communities is not (and has not been) a package deal as it is often portrayed. If local uplift is a goal of this redevelopment, steps such as direct job training programs may need to be taken beyond the mere promotion of industrial land use.

Literature Landscape

The existing literature on dockworker hiring practices in New York paint a nuanced, but incomplete picture which I hope to expand. Many actors were at play on the New York waterfront, making for a muddy environment: the International Longshoreman’s Association (ILA) union, like many unions at the time, was incredibly inward facing—prioritizing its members’ job security over the well-being of the industry—and also

incredibly corrupt. The ILA worked hand-in-hand with both organized crime groups and employers to maintain their steel grip on the waterfront. Unfortunately, the literature goes less in depth on the period in which I am most interested, 1900-1950, often focusing on post-industrial fallout or the 1800's construction boom around the docks. I hope to accompany the discussions of these hiring practices with data on the changing population in the neighborhood, particularly the rise in Black and Puerto Rican migrants. A common narrative is that unions such as the ILA were the number one force in preventing these workers from entering their industries (and this seems true to an extent) but how did these dynamics manifest spatially? Were the exclusionary union members living right next to the people they refused to welcome?

.

Methods

In addition to a literary analysis, this project will use two primary methods to assess the interwar dynamic of neighborhoods around what was once called the South Brooklyn docks. The first of these methods will be quantitative analysis of census data from 1900 to World War II using Python scripting and visualization tools such as Geopandas, Matplotlib, and of course, GIS. This was a time period when neighborhood demographics were changing but maritime industry remained strong, thus inviting a comparison of trends over time. Isolating the neighborhoods of Red Hook, Carroll Gardens, Cobble Hill, and Columbia Street Waterfront, I will compare variables such as employment and employment type with individual data such as homeownership, race, and recency of entry into the city. Visualizing this data will give us the most important piece of this puzzle, the where. I hope to produce a series of data-driven maps which support and illustrate my argument.

Census data is powerful, but to understand the human implication of these broad trends, we need to peer deeper. My second method will be an archival analysis of a specific historical case which helps to illustrate my argument. The typology of this archive depends on what I find, whether it is a series of letters between a worker and his wife, photographs of the waterfront, or internal documents of dock companies. This research will complement my data and help paint a real picture of what the data suggests. From my research so far, I will likely be using a collection of oral histories from Puerto Rican New Yorkers who immigrated in the 20's to 40's

Image Library

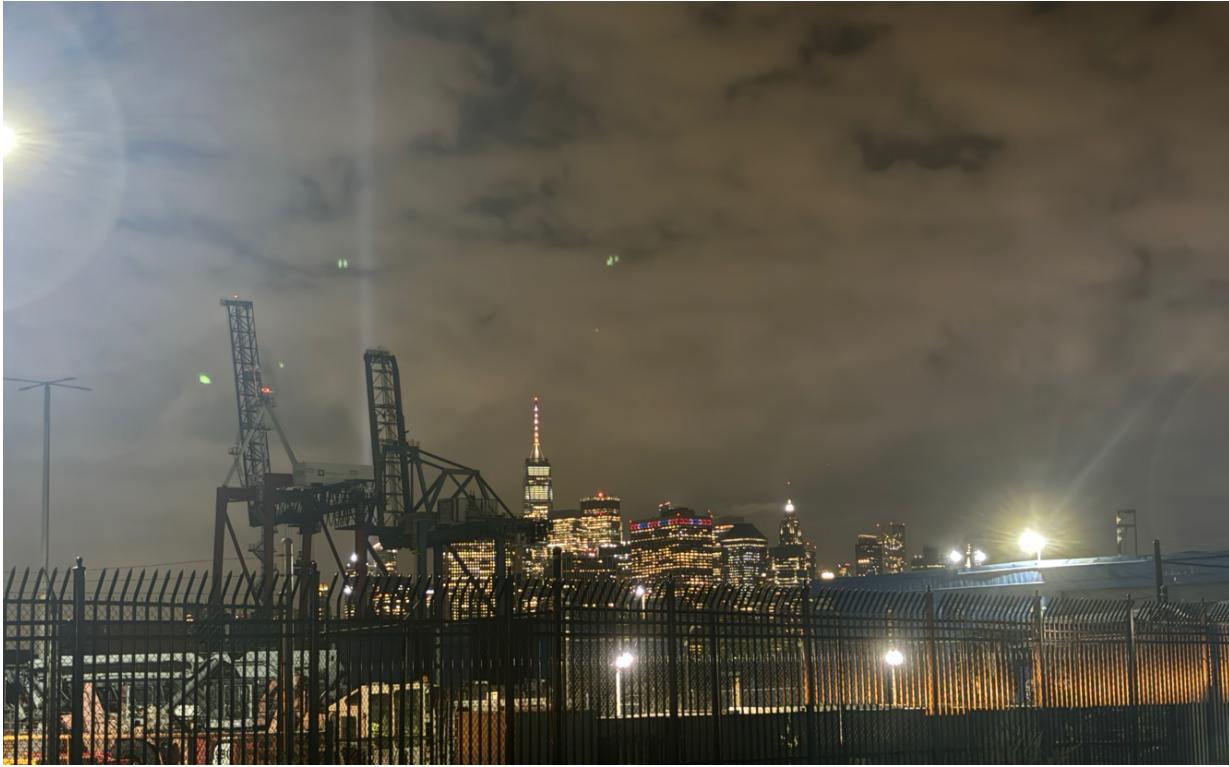


Figure 1. Only two of the Red Hook Container Terminal's four cranes are in use; the other two (not depicted) stand alone on unused waterfront space. If those two are the corpses of giants, then these are the last two living, their hulking frames starkly silhouetting the bright lights of Manhattan. Remnants of an age of large-scale city industry—an age long past as we once knew it—these giants have refused to die. Fenced off from the public sphere, the blind Gargantua painstakingly repeat the only task they know. Pick up. Put down. Pick up. Put down. 24-09-06.

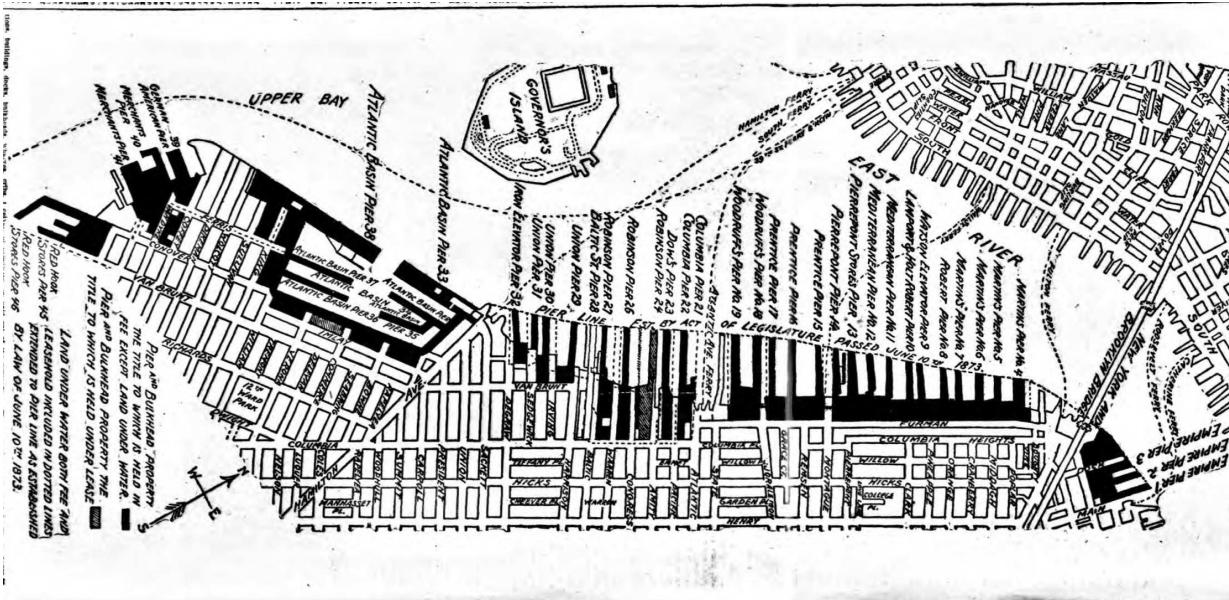


Figure 2. Notice of Sale: Atlantic Basin and Red Hook Piers, 1901. [Red Hook WaterStories](#). This sale marked the dissolution of Brooklyn's great maritime monopoly: the New York Dock Company.

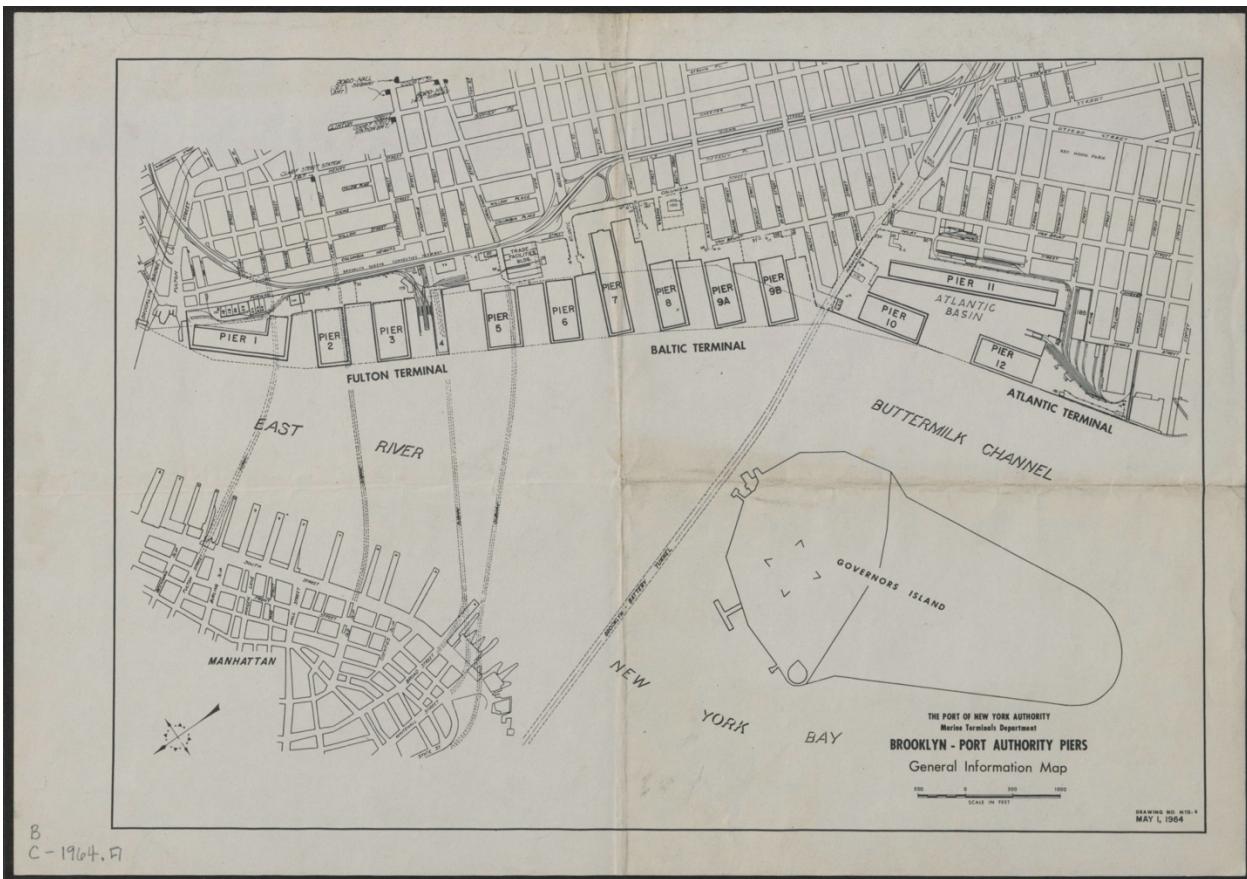


Figure 3. In the 1950's, the Port Authority acquired the Brooklyn Marine Terminal piers and renovated them into a state-of-the-art, break-bulk (non-containerized) facility. Unfortunately, in the decade to come, this style of shipping would become obsolete. [Port Authority, 1964.](#)



© www.freightrrofnyc.info

Figure 4. One of the warehouses built by the New York Dock company at the turn of the century. These buildings often fell into disrepair as industrial activity waned, were eventually destroyed, or transformed into luxury lofts. Photo curated by Philip Goldstein: <http://members.trainweb.com/bedt/indloco/nyd.html>

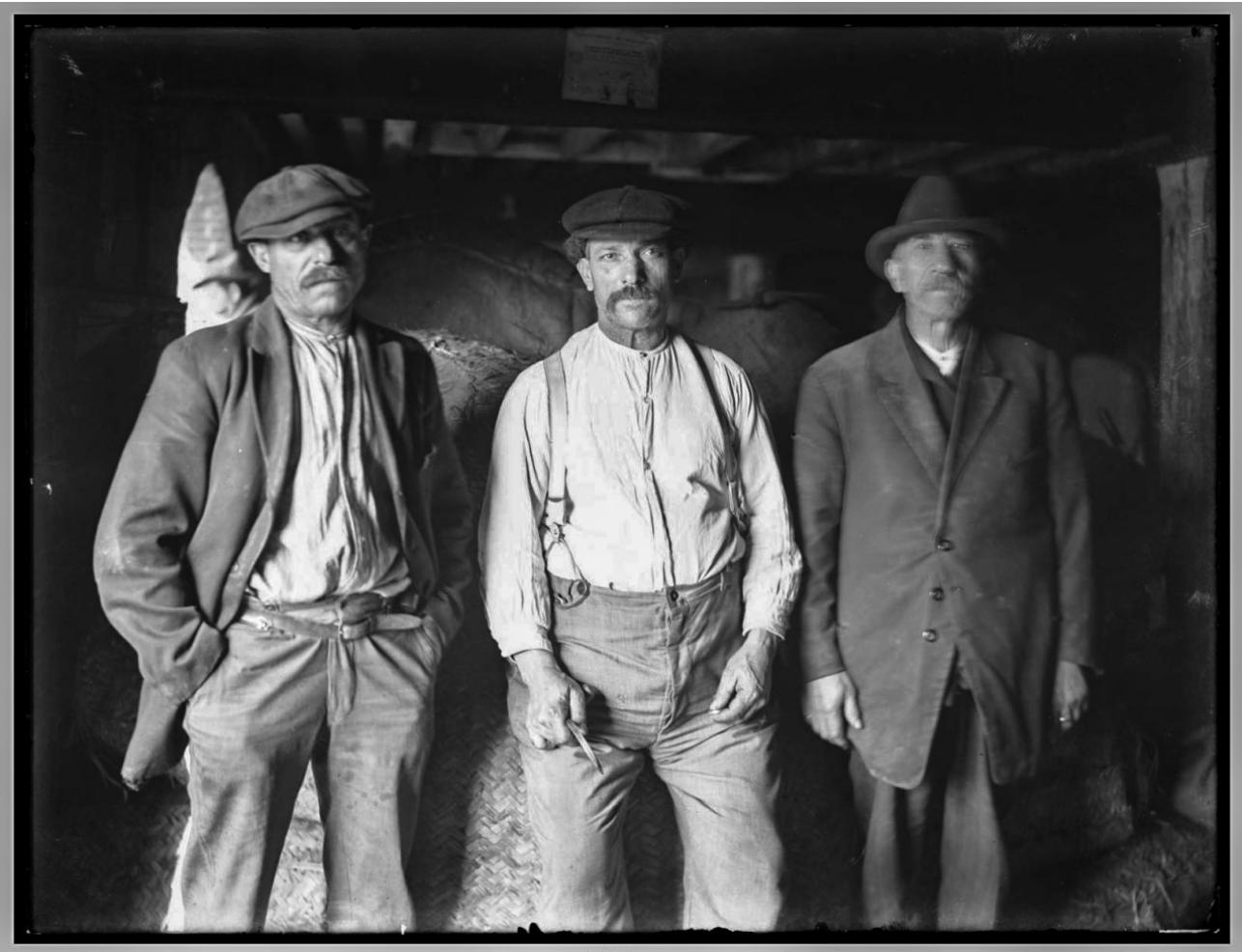


Figure 5. Italian Laborers at Pier 30. 1918. [Red Hook WaterStories](#).

Annotated Bibliography

Davis, Colin J. “‘Shape or Fight?’: New York’s Black Longshoremen, 1945–1961.” *International Labor and Working Class History* 62 (October 2002): 143–63.

- This article provides a much-needed history of Black longshoremen on the New York docks and outlines different strategies resistance and compliance exhibited by workers in response to racist or otherwise exclusionary hiring practices. It paints a more nuanced picture of the common narrative that unions and white workers were a one hundred percent opposing force to Black laborers. My research is linked to the exclusionary and racist hiring practices and hopes to extend Davis’s accounts earlier into the 20th century.

DiFazio, William. *Longshoremen: Community and Resistance on the Brooklyn Waterfront*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985.

Jensen, Vernon H. “Decasualization of Employment on the New York Waterfront.” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* 11, no. 4 (1958): 534–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2519354>.

- This article examines the New York City government’s “decasualization” of the New York waterfront in the 1950’s, that is to say, their or purging of inefficient and harmful hiring practices. These practices often resulted in a high number of low commitments employees and were embroiled in mob racketeering. The Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor formalized this hiring process, making sure all employees were on a register, establishing information centers, and generally ensuring the security of a smaller, but more committed, longshoremen workforce. One of Jensen’s arguments is that this decasualization worsened the already steep barrier of entry for new jobseekers. The role of organized crime and the “shape-up” hiring method in longshoremen hiring will certainly play a role in my senior project, and I intend to look further into Jensen’s literature on these hiring practices.

Kasinitz, P., and J. Rosenberg. “Missing the Connection: Social Isolation and Employment on the Brooklyn Waterfront.” *Social Problems* 43, no. 2 (1996): 180–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3096997>.

- This article is perhaps the most relevant to my research, undertaking a very similar task as mine but on a later time period and from a slightly different angle. Kasinitz argues, like myself, that the mere proximity of jobs (particularly industrial jobs) does not entail an uplift of local communities. Where my argument responds to an oversimplified and nostalgic narrative of the past, his responds to an equally oversimplified argument about the present, that is, the argument that inner-city Black communities fall into cycles of unemployment solely because of the lack of local jobs. What Kazinitz finds is that Black and Puerto Rican communities in Red

Hook are very much in the proximity of jobs, but are excluded from their hiring due to racially, economic, and spatially discriminatory hiring practices, as well as lack of “social capital” such as access to the social networks through which these industries hire. My project seeks to examine a very similar subject, but much earlier in time; how early have these practices been in effect?

Larrove, Charles P. *Shape-up and Hiring Hall; a Comparison of Hiring Methods and Labor Relations on the New York and Seattle Waterfronts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955.

- This article provides vital information on hiring practices on the New York waterfronts, specifically the (in)famous “Shape-Up,” a spontaneous hiring method that was heavily embroiled in mob activity and racketeering. The context of this kind of hiring method is very important in complementing the data and suggesting a narrative behind it.

Simon, Malka. “‘The Walled City’: Industrial Flux in Red Hook, Brooklyn, 1840–1920.” *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 17, no. 2 (2010): 53–72.

- Good general historical documentation, seen through a less rose-tinted lens.