

# Introduction

"It may not be generally known that our city is getting to have quite a world-wide reputation," wrote Walt Whitman, Brooklynite and poet, in 1862. Today, the whole world knows about Brooklyn. From Sicily to Singapore, from Bangor to Berkeley, mention Brooklyn and almost everyone will have a memory or an image of that sometimes venerated, sometimes beleaguered, ever changing borough. Mention a few of Brooklyn's claims to fame and watch people's eyes light up. Who hasn't heard of the Brooklyn Bridge or Coney Island or Jackie Robinson?

In *Brooklyn!*, five of Brooklyn's most famous features—its people, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Coney Island, and the Brooklyn Dodgers—serve as points of entry to the borough's rich history and everyday life.

The first chapter chronicles the stories of Brooklynites who came in search of new opportunities. They arrived in successive waves: some by boat across the Atlantic, then others by train (like the African Americans from the rural South in the early twentieth century), and still others in the 1940s and later by plane from Puerto Rico and the world. Here are the stories of the early Brooklynites, among them accounts of the Native American families who once made their camps on Brooklyn shores, Captain Thomas Dring's tale of the horrors aboard the prison ships moored in Wallabout Bay during the Revolutionary War, Democratic Party boss Hugh McLaughlin's maneuverings, and Walt Whitman's song of the poor districts that housed early immigrants. Seventeenth-century Dutch landowner Simon Aertsen de Hjirt has a story here, and so do nineteenth-century African American doctor Susan Smith McKinney Steward, Italian newcomer Rocco Yulo, and the Mexican congregants of All Saints Church.

The Brooklyn Bridge dominates the next chapter, as it for many decades dominated the borough's landscape and connected Brooklynites with all those people not fortunate enough to live in their neighborhoods. "And if you believe that," goes a classic American punch line, "I've got a bridge to sell you." Its source is the apocryphal story of a shyster offering naive New York newcomers a piece of the Brooklyn Bridge, a bit of Americana that this chapter explores along with the growth of the borough and of its transportation system, from the small wooden boats that once ferried Native Americans and colonists across the East River to the speeding subways that hurtle through Brooklyn's tunnels today. The chapter is peopled by characters like Hezekiah Pierpont, who spearheaded the

Brooklyn Heights real estate boom in the nineteenth century; Sylvanus Smith, an early African American landowner in Weeksville; and Brooklyn artist John Mackie Falconer, who chronicled Brooklyn's changing landscape.

The mammoth Brooklyn Navy Yard once churned out U.S. battleships, and at its peak during World War II employed some 70,000 men and women who worked around the clock in three shifts. Its development from tiny shipyard to massive industrial complex, its decline and subsequent revitalization as an industrial center for small businesses, in many ways mirrors Brooklyn's industrial history. The third chapter tells its story and chronicles all the goods made in Brooklyn, from shoes to beer. It recalls the worlds of the German and Irish laborers who clashed at the Atlantic Docks in 1846, and the nighttime excitement of Sands Street, where sailors on leave once swaggered down the sidewalks. And it remembers people like World War II Navy Yard worker Hazel Licouri and Puerto Rican newcomer Lucila Padrón, a Williamsburg garment factory worker, as well as movers and shakers of the time—factory and refinery owners like Freeman Murrow and Charles Pratt.

On the subject of movers and shakers, many people with only a passing knowledge of New York geography are surprised to learn that Brooklyn is home to Coney Island. Probably the most famous amusement park in the country before Disney's advent, Coney competed with other forms of entertainment in the rapidly expanding city. From leisurely walks through nineteenth-century Gowanus to a visit to Lilly Santangelo's wax museum, the fourth chapter evokes Brooklyn's lighter side.

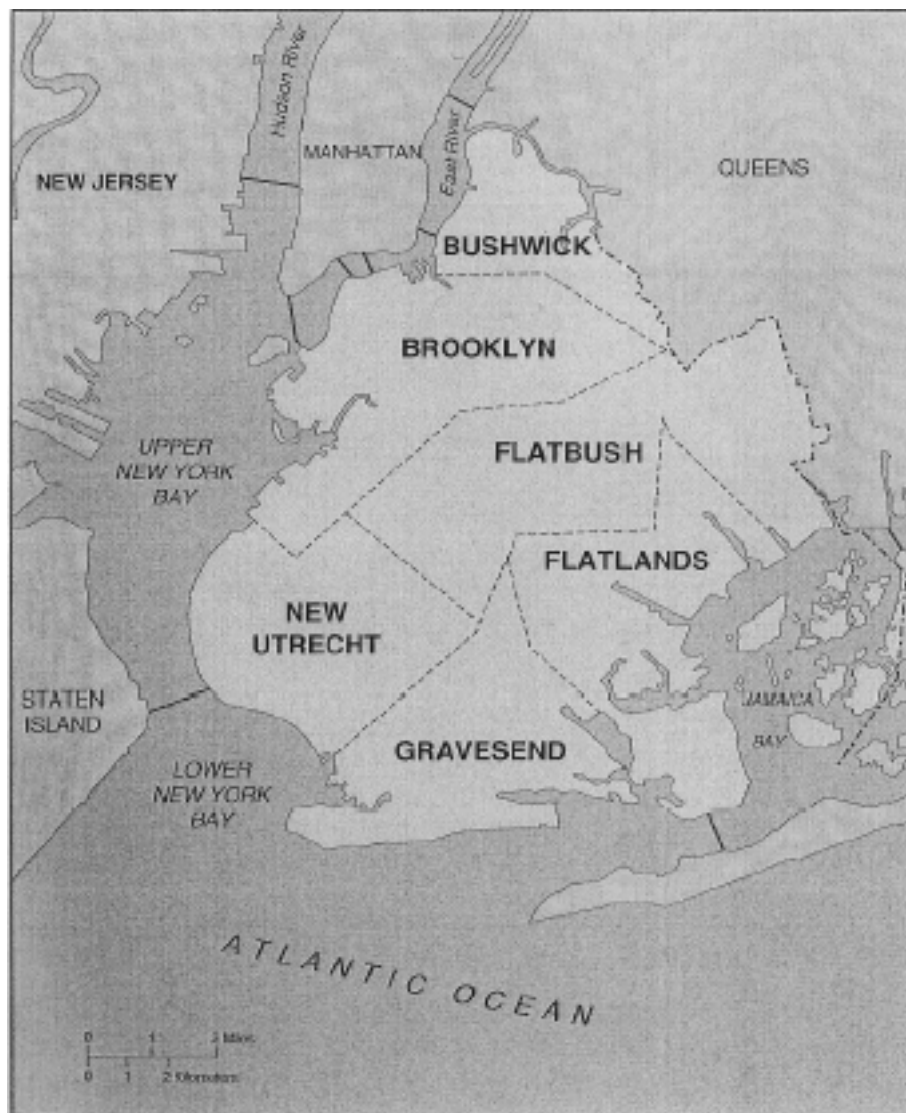
The last chapter, on those beloved "bums," the Brooklyn Dodgers, combines the history of the baseball team and a story about community pride. Rich with colorful characters like nineteenth-century star of the diamond James Creighton, Superbas manager Ned Hanlon, and base stealer par excellence Jackie Robinson, here's the whole story, from triumph and victory to that dismal day in 1957 when the Dodgers walked out of Ebbets Field for the last time. In the Epilogue, find out about Brooklyn's subsequent rebirth.

## **Brooklyn's Beginnings**

Located at the far western end of Long Island, Brooklyn is one of New York City's five boroughs and home to 2.3 million. Native American life flourished here until the seventeenth century. While explorers like Giovanni de Verrazano and Henry Hudson visited the New York Bay area in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, European settlers did not arrive until the Dutch established a trading post in New Netherland (now New York) in the early 1600s. Europeans began to buy land in what is now Brooklyn only in 1636.

Over the next thirty years the Dutch created five towns in what is today the borough of Brooklyn: Breuckelen (Brooklyn), New Amersfoort (Flatlands), Midwout or Vlacke Bosch (Flatbush), New Utrecht, and Boswick (Bushwick). A sixth, Gravesend, was settled by the English in 1643, when Lady Deborah Moody, fleeing religious persecution in England and then in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, settled there with her followers.

For ten years, the English and Dutch tossed the colony back and forth. In 1664 the English took over New Netherland and renamed the colony New York after James, Duke of York. The Dutch recaptured it in 1673; in 1674, the English



#### Six Towns.

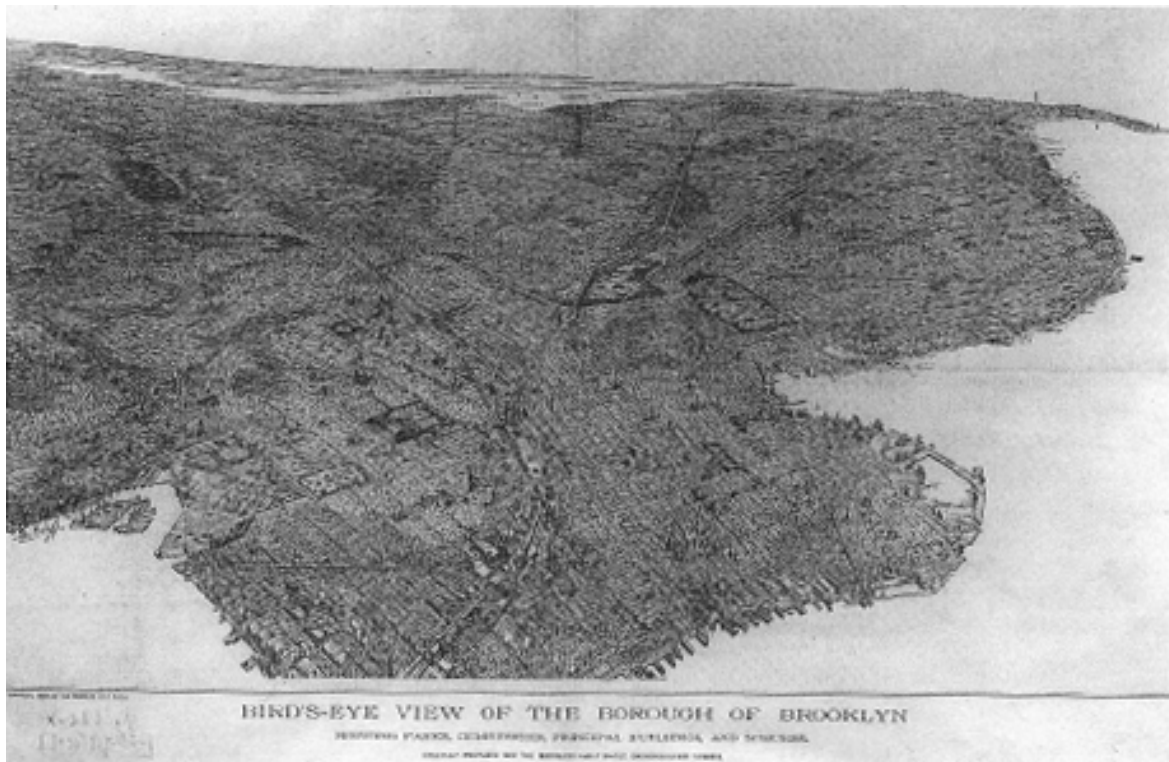
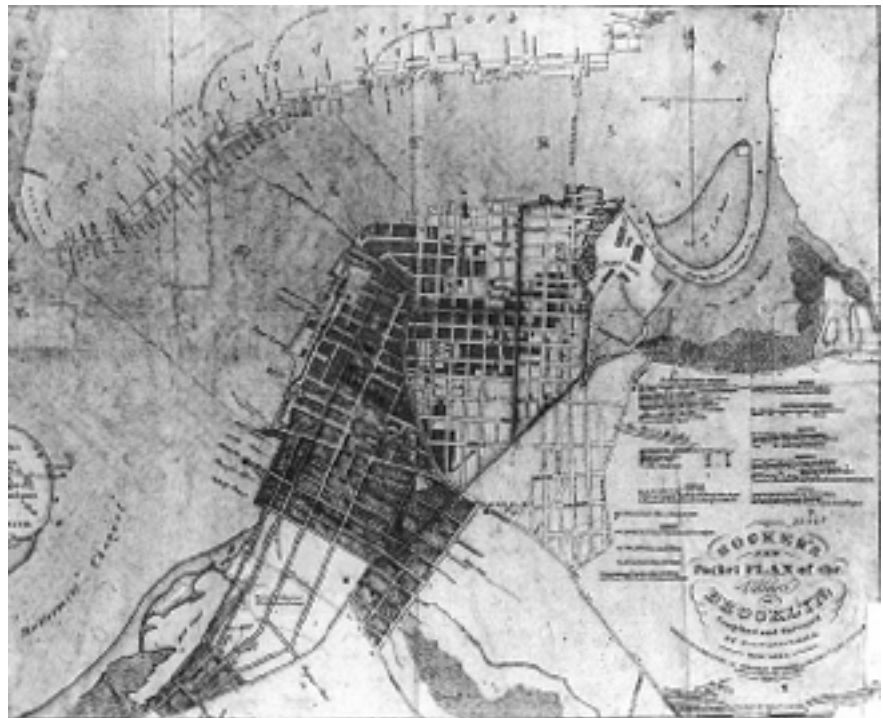
The six towns of seventeenth-century Kings County—today, Brooklyn.

again, this time for a century. In 1683 the six towns were united under one jurisdiction: Kings County in the English colony of New York. One year later, the last of the Native American lands in Brooklyn were "sold" to European newcomers. By 1698, when the first census of Kings County was taken, the six towns had a combined population of 2,017. Roughly 15 percent (296) were people of African descent, forcibly brought from their homelands as slaves and indentured servants.

Most early Brooklynites made their living on farms, often an isolated way to live, and they established various social institutions. Church on Sunday might well be at the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church; legal disagreements were re-

Hooker's New Pocket Plan of the Village of Brooklyn. Engraved and printed by William Hooker, 1827. Bird's Eye View of the Borough of Brooklyn, Showing Parks, Cemeteries, Principal Buildings, and Suburbs. Specially Prepared for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* Consolidation Number, 1897.

Brooklyn mushroomed from its origins as a small settlement, until by 1897, on the eve of consolidation as part of Greater New York, its southernmost boundary was the Atlantic Ocean.





*First Reformed Dutch Church by James Ryder Van Brunt, watercolor on paper, 1875.*

The Dutch erected numerous buildings in colonial Brooklyn. Painted from a sketch made by a British officer during the Revolutionary War, the watercolor depicts the church at Fulton Street between Duffield and Lawrence Streets built in 1776, its stained-glass windows imported from the Netherlands.

solved at local courts. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the population grew slowly—more slowly in fact, than in any New York county. French visitor Moreau de St. Méry attributed this lag to the fact that newcomers could not afford to buy Brooklyn farmland; he suggested that it was "high-priced, because the nearness of New York assures a market for all farm products, and because the Dutch families who form such a large part of the population refuse to sell their holdings."

In 1772, residents founded a volunteer fire department, then paused for the Battle of Long Island in 1776, one of the major conflicts of the war, fought on Brooklyn soil from Gravesend to Gowanus. In a move that showed just how strong a Dutch presence remained even after seven years of British occupation, in 1786 the Flatbush Reformed Dutch Church opened Erasmus Hall Academy as a private school for Dutch farmers' children. The academy still stands. It is in the courtyard of Erasmus Hall High School, a public school, the alma mater of such luminaries as singer Barbra Streisand and chess great Bobby Fischer.

In 1790, the first official U.S. census showed that the population of Kings County had more than doubled in less than a century—to almost 4,500; as today, almost one-third of the population was African American. Most of Kings County's growth occurred in the Town of Brooklyn; directly across the East River from Manhattan, the town profited from its neighbor's emergence as one of the world's greatest ports. Still, Brooklyn's population was so small that everyone probably knew everyone else. In 1794, Moreau de St. Méry wrote that "Brooklyn has almost one hundred houses, most of them only one story high . . . most are chiefly along the shore."

As Brooklyn moved into the nineteenth century, people like Joshua Sands, a speculator and merchant, bought up land and started manufacturing businesses.

Using machinery imported from England and British workers, Sands established an important early Brooklyn industry, rope making, on the waterfront. As the area grew, and word of mouth no longer served as an informal news carrier, Brooklyn's first newspaper was founded in 1799, the *Long Island Courier*. The U.S. Navy opened a yard on Wallabout Bay in 1801, which became a hive of activity during the War of 1812. And in 1814, the advent of the first steam-ferry service between Brooklyn and Manhattan further cemented a long, although not always harmonious, relationship. It was also the catalyst that made Brooklyn Heights emerge as an early suburb.

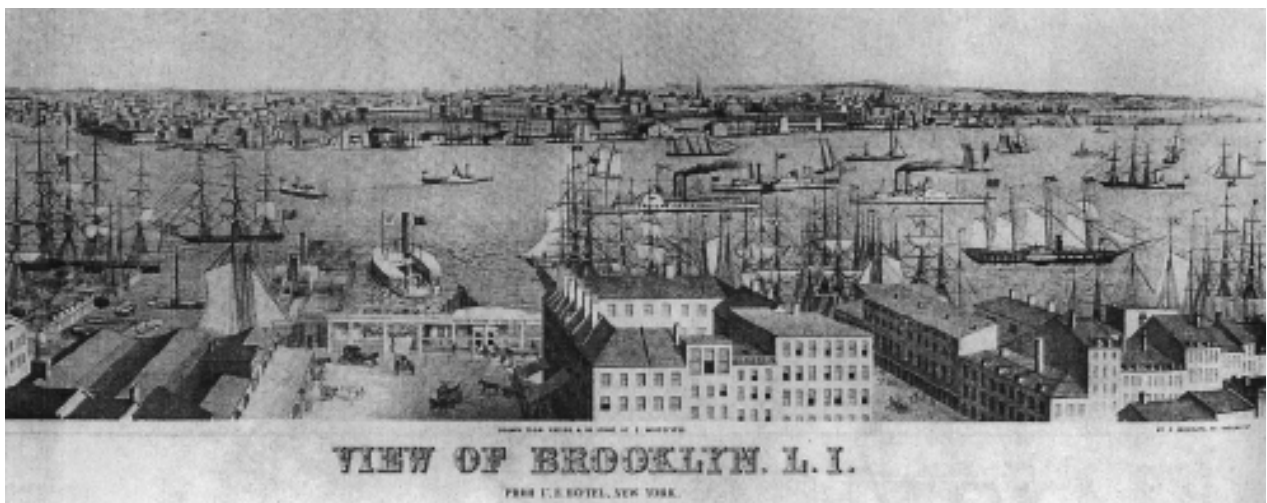
In 1816, the Village of Brooklyn was incorporated within the Town of Brooklyn and had grown beyond the few scattered homes of the previous generation. In 1822, lawyer and amateur historian Gabriel Furman listed these structures there (among others): 493 dwelling houses, 48 taverns, 48 groceries, 10 boot and shoe manufactories, 12 tar sheds, 26 store houses, 92 stables, 6 bakeries, 7 confectionary shops, 5 butcher's stalls, 5 tailor's shops, 5 blacksmith's shops, 8 schoolhouses, 5 rope walks, 1 windmill, and 6 house-carpenter's shops. By 1816, Brooklyn also had three churches, and in 1818 the town's first Black church, today's Bridge Street African Methodist Wesleyan Episcopal Church, was founded.

Brooklyn mushroomed during the 1830s and 1840s, in part because the Erie Canal was completed in 1825, which dramatically spurred the growth of the Port of New York. By the 1830s, Manhattan's main residential areas reached farther and farther uptown; as the area below Canal Street was converted to commercial and business use, Brooklyn became increasingly attractive as a place to live—commuting across the river seemed almost as easy as traveling uptown. Where once artists had carried their canvases and sketch pads across the river to contrast its rural landscape with Manhattan's densely packed waterfront, by the 1840s, printmakers were portraying Brooklyn's own bustling waterfront.

Brooklyn assumed the status of a city in 1834, and over the next fifteen years a rapid succession of changes boosted the young city's pride. Green-Wood Cemetery opened, one of the first rural cemeteries in the United States; a city plan was

View of Brooklyn, *Long Island from the U.S. Hotel, New York* by E. Whitefield, color lithograph, 1846.

By the mid-nineteenth century, almost any view of the East River was a crowded one. In the Manhattan foreground, an omnibus lets off a passenger. Beyond the ferry steaming toward Fulton Street lies the Brooklyn waterfront, lined with industrial buildings, docks, and warehouses.






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*Brooklyn Paper Hangings  
Manufactory of Robert Graves & Co.,  
ca. 1865.*

Brooklyn's manufacturing concerns were diverse. Graves & Co., "manufacturers of all grades of paper hanging: stood at the corner of Fulton and Adelphi Streets in Fort Greene. The first floor was the firm's showroom, with the factory probably housed in the building at left. Note the man with the wheelbarrow—possibly laden with rolls of wallcovering.

adopted; the Brooklyn Board of Education was established; gas lights were introduced; and the long-delayed Brooklyn City Hall was finally completed and became—with its distinctive rotunda and cupola—a crowning glory.

### **The Nation's Third-Largest City**

From the 1840s into the early twentieth century, Brooklyn saw massive European immigration. By 1855, almost half of Kings County's population was foreign-born. By 1860, Brooklyn ranked as the third-largest city in the United States (after New York and Philadelphia), a result of this massive immigration as well as the merging in 1855 of the City of Williamsburgh and Town of Bushwick with the City of Brooklyn, (The final "h" in Williamsburgh dropped out of usage by the late nineteenth century.) The industrial landscape continued to evolve as manufacturing grew. The city's built environment changed not just by the pulling down and putting up that accompanies growth but also by great fires that were a fact of nineteenth-century urban life, like the devastating blaze that tore through downtown Brooklyn in 1848. The rural landscape, itself shaped by the farmers who cut down trees and tilled the soil, increasingly gave way to the features of the city. One-time rural retreats like Brooklyn Heights gave way to the seaside lures of Bay Ridge.






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***New York Bay from Bay Ridge, L.I.***  
by F.F. Palmer; Currier and Ives,  
New York, printers and  
publishers, color lithograph, 1860.

By the turn of the twentieth century, wealthy Brooklynites and New Yorkers had discovered the views from Bay Ridge, and summer mansions like this one lined the bluffs overlooking the entrance to New York Harbor.

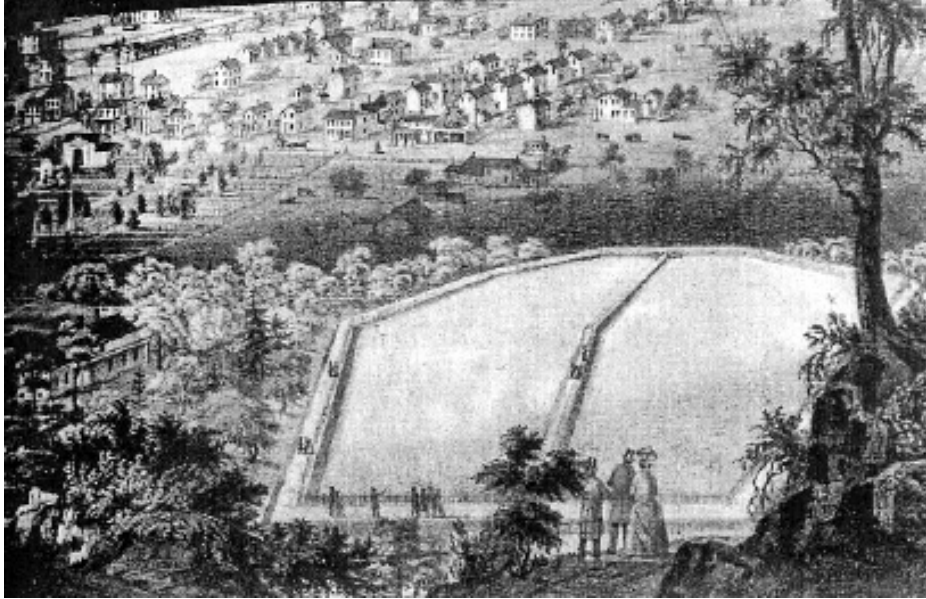
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**Judge John Courtney, president,  
Brooklyn Veteran Fireman's  
Association, ca. 1890.**

The portrait of this former volunteer fireman gains stature and status from its elaborate frame adorned with fire-fighting imagery. Although Brooklyn switched to a paid fire department in 1869, many fire companies reorganized as veterans' organizations, honoring their tradition with parades, fancy balls, and story-swapping conventions.







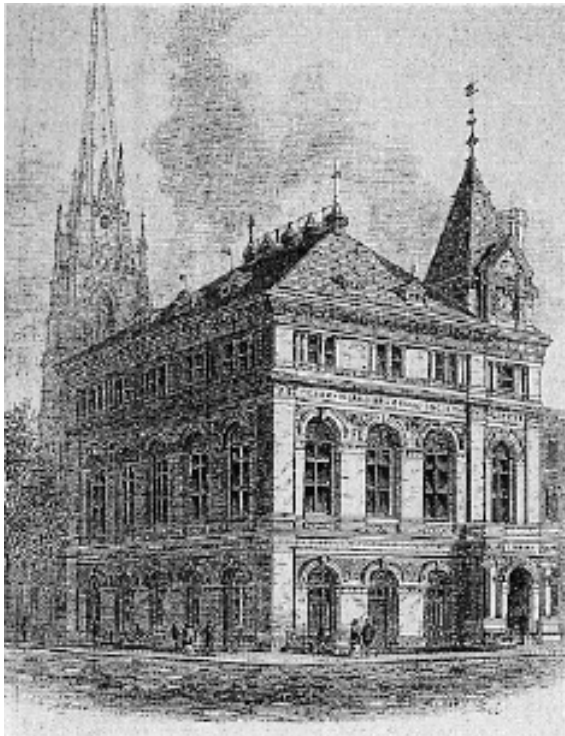

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*Detail, View of Brooklyn City Water Works and Cypress Hills from Ridgewood Reservoir* by F. Blumner; G. Kraetzer, East New York, publisher/lithographer, 1859.

Services developed to address the changing needs of an expanding city. In 1869, the fire department professionalized, changing from a volunteer to a municipal paid force. A new water-supply system was introduced in 1858, when the Ridgewood Reservoir began providing water to the city. And cultural institutions like The Brooklyn Historical Society emerged on the landscape, odes to a growing city.

Two years after General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox in 1865, marking the end of the Civil War, a group of civic-minded men formed the New York Bridge Company to build a bridge between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Completed in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge was a monument to nineteenth-century technology. It reoriented downtown Brooklyn,

Well-dressed excursionists on the hill at right take in the spectacular view, including the new reservoir, which replaced local wells and was greeted with great enthusiasm by residents.




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**The Brooklyn Historical Society, ca. 1883.**

This engraving views the Society from the corner of Pierpont and Clinton Streets, with Holy Trinity Church in the background. Founded in 1863, the Society commissioned this handsome building with its fashionable terra-cotta ornamentation; it was completed in 1880.



*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* building. ca. 1892.

From the portal of this building in downtown Brooklyn, an enormous, cast-copper eagle glared down at all who passed through the doors of the paper, for a time edited by Walt Whitman. In business for 114 years, until 1955, the *Eagle* was one of Brooklyn's trappings of citydom.

rerouting traffic farther up Fulton Street and away from the traditional waterfront hub. Theaters, stores, hotels, and business offices sprang up in the burgeoning downtown area.

In the meantime, industry continued to expand, so that by 1880, the manufacturing census showed Brooklyn with five thousand factories employing 49,000 people. With a population of 566,663 it was still the third-largest city in the nation, and growing, as it continued to annex outlying towns—in the decade from 1886 to 1896 it annexed the towns of New Lots, Flatbush, Gravesend, New Utrecht, and Flatlands. Then Brooklyn itself was annexed, becoming a borough of Greater New York in 1898. With the end of the century came some of Brooklyn's most enduring treasures: the Brooklyn Public Library was founded, the Brooklyn Museum began to build its present home on Eastern Parkway, and The Brooklyn Children's Museum opened its doors. By 1900, the population of the Borough of Brooklyn topped one million.

The first decade of the twentieth century was marked by major additions to Brooklyn's transportation network, as the Williamsburg Bridge opened in 1903, and the Manhattan Bridge in 1909. In the interim, the subway finally reached from Manhattan to Brooklyn and eventually helped kill ferry service.

Like other industrial centers across the country, over the years Brooklyn has geared up to serve the country in war. During World War I Brooklynites worked long shifts in defense industries; many went to battle. Between the world wars,




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**Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show at Ambrose Park, ca. 1894.**

With its huge and growing population, Brooklynites needed some diversion. Like any of the traveling shows that came to Ambrose Park at the turn of the century, Buffalo Bill's set up amidst South Brooklyn's smoky industrial landscape. Part of Bush Terminal has replaced the park.

thousands of Brooklynites lost their jobs in the Great Depression. When they could afford it, they flocked to the magnificent Loew's Kings theater just opened in Flatbush to lose themselves in celluloid fantasies or to Coney Island for some fun. As Japanese warplanes over Hawaii signaled the entry of the United States into World War II, Brooklyn once again geared up, as companies like Mergenthaler Linotype were converted into defense plants. With rumors of nighttime German air attacks, Brooklynites pulled down the blackout shades in their homes and doused the lights that might serve as guides to bombers. Employment soared as workers toiled in round-the-clock defense work. In the 1950s, the pulse quickened again with the Korean War.




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**Cake-eating contest, Coney Island, September 1941.**

"Underprivileged" children of the metropolitan area were invited to the ninth annual three-day Kiddy Party at Coney Island's Luna Park by Drake Bakeries, Inc. Radio singers Diane Courtney and Bradford Reynolds judged the cake eating.

By the 1950s, however, Brooklyn's population and status as an industrial center had peaked. Hard times lay ahead. Industry seeking cheaper locales and veterans' families eager to apply low-interest G.I. loans to suburban dream houses were forsaking the city. Government policies that backed new highway construction and automobile use encouraged the exodus of both businesses and people. Technological advances meant fewer or less skilled jobs. And in 1957, the Dodgers left for Los Angeles.

But Brooklyn's story doesn't end there. Among the dynamic people and institutions rooted in the community were leaders such as Reverend Milton Galamison and the Siloam Presbyterian Church. Continuing in the activist tradition of the Black church, Galamison, an outspoken advocate of school integration, and Siloam were the focus of national attention in the late 1950s and 1960s; in 1964 he and parents organized a school boycott aimed at instituting educational reform. During the Vietnam War, students at Brooklyn College protested U.S. activities in Asia; in 1968, a public school strike centered in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area put the largely Jewish United Federation of Teachers against African American advocates of community control in a bitter fight; in 1969, Medgar Evers College opened in Crown Heights, a memorial to the slain civil-rights leader.

Hollywood captured Brooklyn in the 1970s with its portrayal of teenage life in Bay Ridge in the film *Saturday Night Fever*, but for residents the drama of the decade lay also in concrete. One of the city's best known schools, Boys High School, moved to a new building on Fulton Street and became Boys and Girls

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#### Milton Galamison, 1951.

The Reverend Milton Galamison led Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn's annual Sunday School Parade in 1951. Siloam, which joined the historic Black church movement of Brooklyn in 1849, named this worker for social justice its pastor in 1949. Photograph courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History.





High, the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Plaza was built, and the massive new Fulton Mall, New York City's first pedestrian and transit way shopping mall, opened. There was more to come: One Pierrepont Plaza, Brooklyn's first skyscraper since 1929, opened in 1988 and soared above Brooklyn Heights, and in the mid 1990s, MetroTech, an enormous office and research complex, brought new energy and thousands of workers to downtown Brooklyn.

The easing of U.S. immigration restrictions in 1965 brought an influx from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia, and by 1990, 2.3 million residents made Brooklyn the most populous borough in New York City. With more people than eighteen of the states, it would be the fourth-largest city in the United States if it were still independent. Its economic base has turned from manufacturing to service, but many industries still thrive in Williamsburg and other older industrial areas, as entrepreneurs adapt the old to new needs. And Brooklyn's population—as always, diverse—remains central to the borough's ongoing revitalization. While media attention has focused on such incidents as the Crown Heights riots of 1991, the stories about how well so many different people get along go largely untold.

This brief introduction only hints at the richness of a complete history of Brooklyn. This entire book can tell only part of it. As Thomas Wolfe summed it up in *Death to Morning*, "It'd take a guy a lifetime to know Brooklyn t'roo an' t'roo. An' even den, yuh wouldn't know it all."

#### Eighth Avenue, Sunset Park, 1994.

If anything remains the same about Brooklyn, it's its diversity. Each of the borough's neighborhoods has its own special flavor. Along Eighth Avenue, the bustling, main commercial thoroughfare of Sunset Park's Chinese community, shoppers crowd the streets and crates of fish and produce vie for space on the sidewalks. Once largely Norwegian, the area still boasts Scandinavian businesses alongside more recent Chinese ones and the even newer Middle Eastern shops.

Photograph by Rex Chen.