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Genealogy: 36 Cambridge Place, Clinton Hill

Clinton Hill: A Brief History

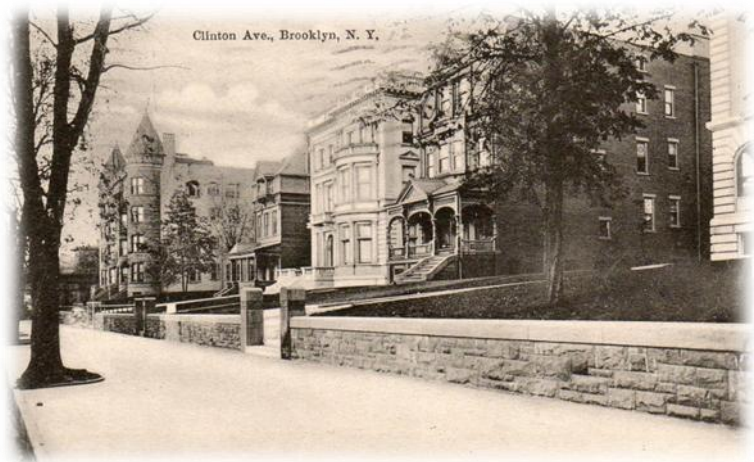
The growth of Brooklyn's neighborhoods is a pattern of development spreading out like a fan, from Brooklyn Heights, to the south and east, beginning in the early 19th century. The Dutch and the Walloons had already settled in Wallabout, by the river, north of Clinton Hill, as early as the 1640s. By the turn of the 19th century, most of the land that

would comprise Clinton Hill belonged to the Ryerson family. They began to sell off their land in the 1830s for development, and when the street grid was laid out, Cambridge Place was originally called Ryerson Street. Reliable and fast ferry service from Brooklyn to Manhattan spurred the growth of Brooklyn, as it was now possible to work in Manhattan and live in Brooklyn. As the communities of Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, and Boerum Hill developed, East Brooklyn, which included Fort Greene and Clinton Hill, were becoming more and more desirable.

Clinton Avenue had already been laid out by merchant and auctioneer George Washington Pine in 1832. He planned a wide, tree lined street with suburban villas for the wealthy, on the area's highest point, with fine views, and in the mindset of the time, above the miasmas and foul odors of the low-lying areas. By 1860, most of Clinton Avenue was lined with wood-framed villas, with carriage houses on Vanderbilt and Waverly Avenues. While Clinton Avenue and other large streets became home to the wealthier classes, the smaller side streets were also being developed with brownstone and wood framed rows built for the growing upper middle class market.

In the late 1880s, Clinton Hill had a second renaissance. Led by Charles Pratt, the wealthiest man in Brooklyn, the mansions for himself and his sons, as well as his business partners and other wealthy entrepreneurs, turned Clinton Hill into one of the wealthiest communities in Brooklyn. Large stone and brick mansions replaced earlier wood-framed villas, on Clinton and Washington Avenues, drawing large churches, clubs, civic buildings and other amenities to the area. By the turn of

the 20th century, Clinton Hill was a thriving neighborhood, with housing stock running the gamut from mansions to





tenements. Smaller streets like Cambridge Place remained stable and attractive streets, removed from the hustle and bustle, but still convenient for public transportation, shopping and local amenities.

Cambridge Place

Ryerson Street was changed to Trotter Street, named after a local merchant and former mayor of Brooklyn. By the time 36 Cambridge Place was built, the many streets were being renamed after famous English terrace blocks to capitalize on the cachet of London terrace house blocks, such as Cambridge

Terrace, on Regent Park. They also named Portland, Oxford, Downing and other local streets with the same reasoning, hoping these names would resonate with the snob appeal of buyers. (The Cambridge Place name did have more appeal than Trotter Street.)

The block of Cambridge Place, between Gates and Greene Avenues, is a microcosm of this mid-19th century development. By the late 1860s to early 1870s, the block was completely developed, with a mixture of groups of Italianate brownstones and free-standing and semi-detached wood frame houses. Notable architects such as Amzi Hill and Mercein Thomas are represented on this block, as well as numerous builders and developers who have left only their names behind. They were building for the upper-middle class-- not the bank and factory owners, but successful brokers, managers, and merchants. The occupations of the first owners of the houses on Cambridge Place reflect this, with a dry goods merchant, restaurant owner, pay director for the Navy, importer, jeweler, banker, fruit merchant, belting manufacturer, and hat and fur trade manufacturer as neighbors on the block.



The House: 36 Cambridge Place

36 Cambridge Place is one of a group of four wood framed houses, built in semi-detached pairs. The group was built by broker and developer John T. Bernard in 1866. The houses are in the vernacular Second Empire style, with a classic Mansard roof and a high basement. They have high stoops with handsome wooden porches and angled oriel bays. The porch, oriel and roofline have jigsaw cut brackets and modillioned cornices. They were all clad in wooden clapboard, with wooden shingles on the Mansard roof. The houses are 20 feet wide and 40 feet deep on 24 1/2 x 100 foot lots.

Today, many people think these wood frame houses were built at an earlier date, or designed to be less expensive, or not as good as their brownstone neighbors— but this is not true. They were built at the same time as the Italianate brownstones around them, wood being just another building material, along with brownstone and brick. In fact, the Second Empire style is often incorporated into the Italianate style in brownstone styles of the period, simply by adding a Mansard roof to a classic Italianate base. The interior set up of these houses would have been the same as well, and from the inside would have been indistinguishable from any other row house of the same period.

The People of 36 Cambridge Place

The first owner of the property was Stephen Pettit, a heating dealer. His neighbor in the adjoining house was Charles Stokes, a broker and member of the NY Stock Exchange. We get an idea of what life was like for the house's residents by looking at the advertisements placed in the *Brooklyn Eagle* for domestic help. A house of this size and during this period could have easily supported at least one live-in servant, usually an all-purpose maid. If the family needed a cook, washer-woman or nurse-maid, these were usually day workers who lived elsewhere. Most of the servants at this time were Irish immigrants, although ads in the paper were quite specific as to what kind of help they wanted, often advertising for mostly female help from specific ethnic, racial and religious groups. In 1872, an ad appears in the *Eagle* seeking, "a young Protestant girl to take care of grown children and sew." A similar ad also appears four years later in 1876. The same homeowner in 1877 was

WANTED--IN A SMALL FAMILY, A
young Protestant girl, to take care of grown children and sew; city reference required. Apply at 36 Cambridge place.

seeking two women, one as "cook, washer and ironer, the other as chambermaid and waitress."

ALBERT ROWSE WILL RECEIVE
AT HIS RESIDENCE, 36 CAMBRIDGE PLACE
PUPILS IN THE STUDY OF MUSIC,
(Piano and Vocal Instruction.)

By 1883, the house was home to David Rowse, a teacher of music who advertised in the *Eagle* for pupils in both piano and voice. In 1886, Mr. and Mrs. William J. Disbrow returned to 36 Cambridge after

their honeymoon tour. In 1894, the house was offered to let in an ad in the *Eagle* which touted its 12 rooms and amenities, and claimed it was in "the choicest of Hill sites." Soon after, another ad was from a family seeking a young girl to tend a new baby. The house was again for let in 1897, the same year a German girl was requested for general housework. The house's history continued.

The 20th Century

By the turn of the 20th century, many of the middle class blocks of Clinton Hill such as Cambridge Place were now 40 years old, and no longer as desirable to the upper middle class, which had moved on to newer neighborhoods like Park Slope and the St. Marks District.

TO LET--HOUSE--AT 36 CAMBRIDGE
place near Greene avenue; semi-detached; 2x100;
12 rooms; dumb waiter, bay windows, vestibule doors;
good plumbing; furnace in cellar; thoroughly repaired
and newly decorated; choicest of Hill sites; immediate
possession.

In their place were middle class owners who often needed a lodger or two to supplement the family income. The 1900 census shows the owners of 36 Cambridge Place to be the Charles Gibson family. He was a 57 year old cashier for a fire insurance company. His wife (36) was Mary T. Gibson, and they had a daughter of 12 named Emily, who was a student. They also had a 16 year old Irish maid named Ellen Henry, and six lodgers. The oldest was Mary J. Schwetzsky, a 45 year old teacher and her 12 year old son, Paul. Also in the home were Mary Lamston (23) and William Cranston (22), both students, perhaps at nearby Pratt Institute. The remaining lodgers were Edwin Johnson, a 25 year old lawyer, and Harry Tucker, a 23 year old salesman.

By 1902, the house was for sale, so it is unknown how long any of the people who were in the house from 1900 stayed. By 1910, the house was owned by a Swedish family named Anderberg. The mother, Ada Anderberg (58), had her own income, supplemented by her five grown children: 38 year old Anna, who was a work-at-home dressmaker, Agnes (35), a pay clerk, Charles (34), either a polisher or publisher, Hannah (29), a department store saleslady, 28 year old Feckla, who did not have an occupation, and 26 year old William, a lawyer. They were joined by a boarder, Nellie Harris, who had her own income.

36 CAMBRIDGE PLACE, BETWEEN
GREENE AND GATES AVS, FUR-
NISHED ALCOVE ROOM, ALSO
SMALL ROOM.

The 1920s census shows the house belonging to Clarence C. Mead, a 43 year old gas appliances salesman, his wife, 36 year old Anna, a housewife, and their four children: Howard, at 17, a clerk, Virginia (15), Clarence Jr. (13), and Donald (9), all students. In the

1930 census, the last one made public, the house was the home of a Holland-born couple: Albert Roodenburg, a 44

year old printer of outdoor advertisements and his wife Dolly, who was 40 and a housewife. They had two lodgers, Anna Low, a 64 year old woman with her own income, and Selma Backstrim, 44, a dental assistant.

Between 1930 and 2000 are 70 years of history, both international and local. The owners and tenants of 36 Cambridge Place did not make the papers, for good or ill. Clinton Hill remained a middle class neighborhood in which some areas slipped into decline while others maintained stability. World War II saw the neighborhood change as large areas of Clinton Avenue and other streets were razed of mansions for the building of high-rise apartment buildings for U.S. Naval personnel, assigned to the Navy Yard. The presence of Pratt Institute and St. Joseph's College kept the area a mix of incomes and ethnicities, but the urban ills of the 1960's through 1980's did not leave Clinton Hill unscathed.

Landmarking and Rebirth

On Cambridge Place, perhaps owners found the clapboard and wooden trim of this group of four houses either too expensive to maintain or just too old fashioned. By the time the Clinton Hill Historic District was designated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1981, all four houses were altered from their original design. They were covered with asphalt or aluminum siding. Some lost porch and roof detail, and number 40 lost its porch altogether. 36 Cambridge Place was covered in asphalt siding, and had lost its moldings. Fortunately, Landmarks could see beyond the present condition and designated the houses, guaranteeing that any further alterations would have to restore, rather than further remuddle.

In the late 1990's all but one of the four houses were restored to their original design. With the exception of number 40, the clapboard and Mansard roof details were replaced, and the bays uncovered from their sheaths of aluminum and asphalt, and modillions and detail restored, with period appropriate paint jobs. 36 Cambridge still had its original wooden stoop and railings, cast iron areaway, wooden roof cornice and bays intact, and needed less restoration than others in the group, although it and its neighbor did not retain the cast iron roof cresting.

For the past decade, Clinton Hill has benefitted from the renaissance of Brooklyn, with its growing appeal as an area for families to raise their children. These families are rediscovering Clinton Hill and its historic townhouses and mansions, and making long-term commitments to these homes and the community. Today, Cambridge Place is again a quiet tree-lined block, and one of Clinton Hill's most desirable.



--Written by Suzanne Spellen for Brennan Realty Services.

Photos: Property Shark, NY Public Library, Suzanne Spellen, and Nicolas Arellano Photography. Research sources: 1981 LPC Designation Report for the Clinton Hill Historic District, United States Census documents, Brooklyn Daily Eagle.