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Preservation Primer, Part 2: The Fight for Brooklyn Heights **By Suzanne Spellen, aka Montrose Morris**

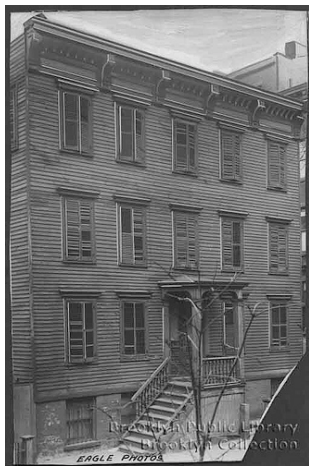
America's First Suburb

Brooklyn Heights is, and has always been, one of the finest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Coined "America's first suburb," it was, from the beginning, a refuge for the wealthy, with fine row house and apartment blocks. Later it became a tourist destination for those seeking the stellar views from the Promenade and roaming its streets in search of the dwellings of the many famous folks who have called the Heights home. You would think such a marvel would have always been protected and prized, but in truth, Brooklyn Heights was almost destroyed, caught between urban blight and urban renewal, Robert Moses and the inexorable march of "progress." The story of its preservation is today's chapter in our series on preservation history.



Brooklyn Heights' Penny Bridge in the 1850s

Brooklyn Heights' prosperity came first from the wealthy merchants whose ships brought in goods from all over the world to their piers and warehouses on the shores below the hill for which the Heights is named. Later, bankers, lawyers and real estate men would join them in the wide mansions and estates that grace the area. But



Brooklyn Heights, 1930

ships and warehouses and factories need workers, and parts of the Heights, especially close to the water, became home to thousands of people living in tenements, rooming houses and rickety wooden homes. All neighborhoods have their rise and fall, and the Heights is no different.

Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the Heights retained its quiet respectability, becoming home to the some very wealthy people, the comfortable upper middle classes, a large middle class of teachers and civil servants, and a sizable lower class. By the end of World War II, many of the grand row house mansions had been broken up into apartments and rooming houses, their stoops were removed to make ground floor entrances and facilitate the interior division into separate spaces. On many blocks, stand-alone mansions, as well as rows of townhouses, were torn down for apartment

buildings, some very nice, most pretty ordinary. As urban woes contributed to the further decline of the dock area and the part of the Heights called Willowtown, Brooklyn Heights started to gain a reputation as an undesirable place to live or raise a family. But that all changed after World War II, as Brooklyn Heights was about to be put on the front page once again.

Trouble on the Waterfront

The “Master Builder” Robert Moses had a grand plan to connect the entire city through a series of expressways and highways that would facilitate both commercial and passenger traffic throughout the city. It was a visionary plan, actually, considering the growth of New York and the millions of vehicles that used the streets for commerce and everyday travel. Unfortunately, his grand plan would destroy thousands of homes and obliterate entire neighborhoods in the process. In Brooklyn, his Brooklyn-Queens Expressway tore through the neighborhood of Red Hook, home to mostly poor Italian immigrants, cutting it off from the rest of Brooklyn. The BQE headed for Brooklyn Heights, on its way to Queens. It would have done the same to the Heights, had not the community stood up and said “No.” Had the road been placed where Moses wanted, this open-cut, six-lane highway would have continued from Red Hook, ripping through Hicks Street, destroying Richard Upjohn's historic Grace Church and everything on both sides of the street, to give room needed for right of way and construction.

The Brooklyn Heights Association, a community group in existence since 1910, took up the opposition along with residents such as Roy Richardson, who organized wealthy homeowners to stand with the BHA in opposition. Another wealthy Heights resident, Gladys James, heir to the Underwood typewriter fortune, championed the Willowtown area centered around Alfred Tredway White's historic tenement buildings, the Riverside Apartments. The entire complex, the first model for healthy, humane tenement buildings in America, was right in the path of the proposed BQE. Mrs. James put her money where her mouth was. She bought up houses on Columbia Heights to preserve them, eventually selling them to those who would protect them. The community opposition to Moses' plan was backed by the wealthy and well connected, including politicians such as Brooklyn Borough President John Cashmore. They came up with another plan for the highway, called the Citizen Alternative Plan. This plan called for a three-decked highway cut along the Brooklyn Heights waterfront. The bottom deck would carry three westbound lanes, the middle; three eastbound lanes, and the top deck would be an esplanade and park.



Riverside Apartments, 1892

Robert Moses understood money and power, and the BHA and the wealthy opposition had a lot of influence. Eventually, he agreed to the Citizen's Alternative Plan, even though it cost much more than his original highway. He also agreed to bend his roadway to miss most of Willowtown. After all, Darwin James, Mrs. James' husband, helped Moses get his start in public service, and backed him in his mayoral campaign in 1933. He did insist that the promenade and gardens, which the Heights committee wanted to be private to the homeowners whose homes overlooked the harbor, be made public. The compromise saved most of

the Heights, although some historically significant homes and half of the Riverside Apartments were lost to construction. But considering the alternative, it wasn't a bad compromise at all.

Would that he could have done the same for the considerably less well-connected residents of Red Hook. The Brooklyn Heights segment of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway was designed by the engineering firm of Andrews and Clark—Moses regulars—and opened with much fanfare in 1954. The Promenade, with its magnificent view of New York Harbor, Manhattan, and the Statue of Liberty, has been a local and tourist attraction ever since, the scene for many movies and television shows, first dates and fireworks displays. It is now one of Brooklyn Heights' greatest treasures, and a great legacy to both Moses and the Heights residents who fought tooth and nail to save their neighborhood.

More Trouble on the Waterfront

And yet, Robert Moses wasn't quite done with the Heights. His position in government gave him power not only highways, but also urban renewal projects. To Moses, neighborhood improvement meant “slum clearance.” From his time in Brooklyn Heights, he noticed that the area near the northwest corner of the Brooklyn Bridge was full of old, run down buildings. Once the home of transient dockworkers, factory

workers from the nearby DUMBO area factories and Navy Yard workers, this area was filled with 19th century rooming houses, tenement buildings, stores and modest homes.



Cadman Plaza West

In the early 1960s, Moses proposed tearing the entire area down under the Title One program building high-rise luxury rental apartments in a huge urban renewal project that would be known as Cadman Plaza West. Again, the Brooklyn Heights Association, this time with an ad hoc community organization called the Community Conservation and Improvement Committee (CCIC), rose in opposition. They successfully lobbied for roomy, middle-income co-ops which would attract families and people who would have an economic and personal stake in the fortunes of the neighborhood. The mixture of high-rise and duplex apartment buildings in Cadman Plaza today are a direct result of neighborhood input into the kind of community Brooklyn Heights would

be. The CICC would remain active in the further development of Brooklyn Heights.

By the 1960s, the battle lines had been drawn. Preservationists in Brooklyn Heights, as well as elsewhere in New York City, realized that more needed to be done by the city to protect not only individual structures but entire neighborhoods from over-development and destruction through inappropriate changes to historic housing stock. With neither private developers nor the government stepping in, there were no guidelines or rules available to protect that which made those neighborhoods attractive in the first place. There needed to be a law....

Up Next:

Chapter Three: The Landmarks Preservation Law, Brooklyn Heights, and the early giants of New York's preservation movement.

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