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BROWNSTONE BROOKLYN'S RESIDENT EXPERTS

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## Schermerhorn Street, Brooklyn Heights

Former "rope walk" and home to shipping magnates.

The community of Brooklyn Heights has a long and storied history. In the eighteen century, wealthy merchants and financiers, whose houses and lands overlooked the East River and New York Bay, began to shape a prosperous city built upon the riches to be found in its ports and warehouses.

As the nineteenth century progressed, those merchants and landowners also gave their names to the streets themselves, as Brooklyn Heights grew. The Schermerhorn family, like so many Brooklyn families, came to America from Holland in the late 1600s.

The family traces the Brooklyn line to Simon Schermerhorn, who was in the shipping business. Simon, and the generations that would follow, were successful ship owners, chandlers, and sea captains who plied their vessels on the Hudson and along the eastern seaboard between Charleston and New York. During the Revolutionary war, they helped move supplies, and aided the war effort.

In 1795, Peter Schermerhorn and his brother Simon bought the old Bennett farm in Gowanus, one of Brooklyn's oldest homesteads, for use as a summer home. They also had land and stockrooms down by the piers. By the early 1800s the name "Peter Schermerhorn and Sons" was a familiar one at both the Brooklyn and South Street seaports. They were ship chandlers, supplying vessels with everything needed to provide upkeep of the ship, including pitch, turpentine, tallow, tar, tools, lanterns, caulking, hemp, paper and rope.

Rope making for ships involves twisting the hemp and other fibers into thick, unbreakable lengths, without kinking it. A long path is needed for the required length of rope to be "walked" while it is twisted.



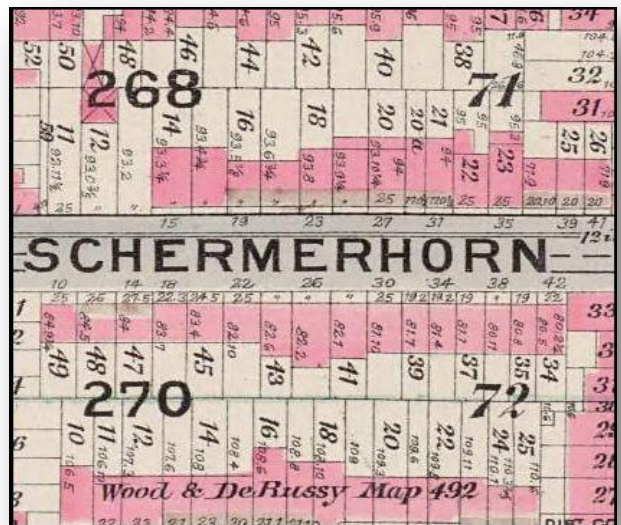
Schermerhorn Street, where it once extended down to the East River, was once a rope walk for the Schermerhorn family rope business.

After the Civil War, Brooklyn saw some of its greatest growth as a city. Produce and farm products were coming in from the further reaches of Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island. All kinds of foodstuffs, goods and merchandise were coming in on ships to the many piers along the river, and going in and out of the vast storehouses built to hold them. The Navy Yard, which had grown rapidly during the war, was booming. Manufacturing was strong in Williamsburg and Greenpoint, and Brooklyn Heights and downtown Brooklyn were now major centers for banking, commerce, entertainment and shopping.

Many of the Heights' streets were being built up with large houses on 25' lots, and churches and civic buildings abounded. The clapboard Federal-era homes of the Heights were rapidly being replaced by brownstone and brick row houses. The posh streets—Remsen, Pierrepont, Joralemon, Columbia Heights and others— housed the Heights elite. They were home to the bankers, ship owners, lawyers and wealthy merchants who worked in lower Manhattan and in the counting houses near the piers and warehouses below. More modest homes—but still impressive— were built on the other Heights streets.

There was also a strong tradition of letting out rooms, especially in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taking in borders—the many middle income workers who made all this commerce run—was a booming business in the Heights, and most blocks were full of homes that let out at least one room. A look at the classified section of the *Brooklyn Eagle* during this period shows hundreds of Heights rooms for let.

[Atlas of Brooklyn, Hyde & Co. 1898-1899](#)

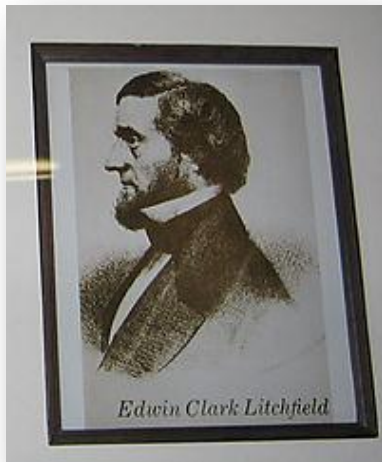


Most of the lots in the Heights are a wide 25'. This allows for gracious sized rooms in the large four and five story brownstones that fill the area. Schermerhorn Street, between Court and Clinton, was typical of a more upper middle class street, not as fancy as say, Remsen, but certainly home to people of means. Most of the block was built in the 1870's. Two buildings, numbers 29 and 31, were built as speculative housing by Brooklyn builders Litchfield and Dickinson in 1877.

**SCHERMERHORN st., n. s., abt. 200 w. Court st., two four-story brown stone dwellings, 17x55; owners, Litchfield & Dickinson, 42 Smith st.; architect, Robert Dixon.**

[Real Estate Record and Building Guide, April 8, 1876.](#)

Robert Dixon was the architect. Dixon is a well-known figure for those familiar with Brownstone Brooklyn's architecture. Although not much is known about him personally, we do know that he was one busy man, working in Brooklyn from 1876-1903. He often partnered with other architects, but was known to work alone, as well. He built in just about every brownstone neighborhood, with documented homes in Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Fort Greene, Bedford Stuyvesant, Stuyvesant Heights, Prospect Heights and Park Slope. He built in the idiom of the day, and in his early days designed homes in the Italianate, Neo-Grec, and Anglo-Italianate fashion.



The two Schermerhorn houses are early Dixon, built only a year after he opened a practice. The twin brownstone houses are in the Italianate style, with heavy arched pediments over the doorways, ornate entryways, high stoops, and heavy lintels and sills. Interestingly enough, Litchfield and Dickinson built two 17' x 55' wide, five-story houses on these two lots, instead of one very large home. Such narrow houses are not common in Brooklyn Heights, although they are widely seen in other neighborhoods.

The "Litchfield" in Litchfield and Dickinson may be the well-known railroad magnate, lawyer, developer and builder of the Gowanus Canal, Edwin C. Litchfield. He was very active in real estate at this time, although no other information was given in the listing. Edwin Litchfield owned most of the land between the Gowanus Creek and Prospect Park. He built Grace Hall in 1854, now called Litchfield Villa, as his family estate, enlisting the talent of Alexander Jackson Davis, one of America's pre-eminent architects of the day. Today that building, at the

edge of Prospect Park, is the Brooklyn headquarters of the NYC Parks Dept.



## The People

The families that lived on Schermerhorn Street were well-to-do in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. From the 1880 census, we see families like George and Mary West, both born in England, both fifty years old. George owned a millinery business. They lived in the house with their servant, fifty-five year old Ellen, from Ireland. In the 1890s there was the Payne family, which included a husband, wife and son. Walter K. Payne was born in Dublin, Ireland, and came to the United States as a child, spending almost all of his life in Brooklyn. He served in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Regiment during the Civil War, and then worked in the insurance business and eventually formed a new company.

By the 1930s, Brooklyn Heights was changing. While some of the wealthy families who had called the neighborhood home for generations were still in evidence, many of the fine homes had been broken up into apartments and rooms for let. The Great Depression was forcing people to make hard choices and

sacrifices. A great majority of the homeowners were renting at least one room to tenants to help pay the mortgage, and the area was home to more and more middle class and working class people.

The 1930 census showed Irish-born James Tracy, his wife, and American-born children among the people living on Schermerhorn Street. James had no occupation and was either out of work or retired. His wife, Ellen, was listed as a housekeeper of furnished rooms. Their eldest child, Mary was a clerical worker at a linen house; son Peter, a clerk at a bank; and youngest daughter Agnes, a clerical worker at Brooklyn Edison. They also had a boarder, German-born Ernest Loephertz, a designer for the Navy Yard.

View of Brooklyn Heights from the  
Temple Bar Building on Court Street.  
1926.



Today, Schermerhorn Street continues to maintain its historic character, with many of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century brownstones remaining. Many of the properties have been converted back from multi-family to single-family homes, returning to their originally intended use. Schermerhorn Street remains an attractive and interesting part of the historic Brooklyn Heights neighborhood.