

A *new*

BOERUM HILL,

A

New York

"Community."

by

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## Introduction

Boerum Hill is that vaguest of political entities, a New York "community."

Its geographical boundaries are unmarked. Its population mixed and largely transient. Its political structure confused. Its past recorded only in snatches and perhaps unlamented. Even its hill is really only a gentle incline leading down from the eminence of Brooklyn Heights to where, a century and a half ago, the salt meadows of Gowanus reached towards the Atlantic.

But a community it is, a community that is in many ways a microcosm of the greater New York that it has followed through the centuries from Indian raid to narcotics raid, from the anti-slavery thundering of a Henry Ward Beecher to the subtle racism of conservative politicians of the 1970's.

For the purposes of this study, Boerum Hill, a name invented in the late 1950's and promptly seized upon by real estate agents to replace the earlier, less salubrious title of North Gowanus, is that section of the borough of Brooklyn lying between Court Street on the west, Flatbush and 4th Avenue on the east, State Street on the north and Wyckoff Street on the South. Its eastern and western boundaries are easily identifiable by two of Brooklyn's larger white elephants, the Williamsburg Savings Bank tower and the riot-ridden Kings County jail respectively.

### The Indians

The great Algonkian Indian race, united in language but divided in customs, stretched in a giant arc across the northern half of North America, across the northern rim of the prairies from the Western Canadian provinces and through the lakes and woods of Ontario and Quebec to the shores of the Atlantic in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and then down the coast to Long Island and beyond.

On the western tip of Long Island lived a comparatively minor tribe of the Algonkian race, the Canarsies. They were a settled people, fishermen and farmers, and of course hunters. And as Indians valued wealth, they were comparatively wealthy for in their territory were gathered the shells which were manufactured into wampum, the currency for many Indian tribes. 1

Their principal village was located near where the present Brooklyn Borough Hall now stands but there were others at Indian Pond at the Bay Parkway and at Fort Hamilton, and on the southwestern limits of the present-day Boerum Hill. 2

That settlement, called Worpus, was scattered along Hoyt Street, near Baltic Avenue, and provided easy access to the shallow waters of the Gowanus Creek where vast oyster beds, sometimes yielding shellfish up to a foot across, were located. The village was also convenient to the corn lands that lay between Worpus and the principal village at Borough Hall, roughly between the present -day Pacific and Dean Streets.

Connecting Worpus and the other villages was a series of trails whose routes can be followed along several of Brooklyn's better-known streets today. The principal trail started at the foot of the present Fulton Street, on the East River, ran up to the present Nevins Street, then slightly east of Flatbush to the high land near Prospect Park. Then it ran through the present park and so on south to Flatbush and Flatlands.

But this principal route, had several arteries. The first came off near the start of the main trail and ran the short distance to the site of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The second, the one serving Worpus, part from the main trail at the Borough Hall village, ran along Red Hook Lane (Court Street) to De Graw Street and then veered to Erie Basin. A third, short branch left the main stem at about Lawrence and Jay Streets and ran approximately to Hoyt Street, where approximately on the site of the Abraham and Straus store was the Canarsie burial ground. A fourth branch parted from the main road roughly at Hanson Place and then itself broke into two new branches; one led to Bedford, Bushwick and Newtown Creek, the other along the present 4th Avenue to Gowanus.

As a glance at the map (Fig. 1) shows, the net effect of all these trails was to surround the site of the present Boerum Hill, and to give it an important place in inter-tribal communications.

The Canarsies were not the itinerant raiders of the western plains like their cousins the Blackfeet and the Cheyenne. They were sedentary, living in great lodges that varied from 15 to 20 feet in width and sometimes reached a length of 180 feet, a sort of

lateral apartment building with the longhouses being split up into family dwelling units. The houses were constructed by placing two parallel rows of poles in the ground, bending them over to form a peaked roof, tying them together and then thatching the framework thus created with a covering of bark and rushes.<sup>3</sup>

As a maritime people they were also expert boat builders. Their most frequent vessel was a simple dugout of dory size but they also occasionally built craft 60 feet long, capable of carrying as many as 80 people.

They lived generally at peace with the <sup>of</sup>Algonkian neighbors to the east on Long Island, but like all the minor tribes of the area, after the formation of the Iroquois Confederacy in the 15th century they lived in dread of the Hudson Valley warriors, particularly of the fierce and implacable Mohawks.

But even though they paid tribute to the Iroquois, they were still living largely at peace at the time of Henry Hudson's 1609 voyage and after the arrival of the first Dutch settlers, they continued their lives much as they had done for centuries. The only difference was that they now had a new outlet for wampum and for the rich harvest they derived from the sea and from their corn lands.

Nevertheless there arose the inevitable ~~of~~ contention. And, as in almost all conflicts between Europeans and native peoples, the bone of contention was land.. In the case of the Cananities, the land at stake was the forested hills and open salt meadows of Gowanus and the corn growing land of what is now Boerum Hill.

Matters came to a head in 1643. The Dutch were living in anxiety, if not terror. The Mohawks had come down the river and were again enforcing tribute from the downstream tribes. The Mohawks, already fierce, were now armed mostly with muskets traded to them by unscrupulous Europeans. Unfortunately for the Canarsies, the stricter policing closer to the director's domain in New Amsterdam prevented them from sharing the same advantages.

Trouble had been brewing for some time, in fact two years earlier Indians had attacked white settlements on Staten Island and the Dutch had been divided on whether or not to declare all-out war on the Indians. The leader of the Dutch colony, William Kieft was blamed for his indecision and for having provoked the problem by failing to help the downriver Indians against the predatory Mohawks. Several times, when the downriver Indians, including the Canarsies attacked outlying settlements, he gave orders that expeditions be sent against them, but nothing concrete was really done.

Thus 1643 came around. The downriver Indians, fleeing the Mohawks, sought refuge as close to the Dutch settlement as they could at "Corlaer's Bouwery", on Manhattan opposite Brooklyn. Some of the Dutch, angry at the attacks on their settlements, persuaded Kieft to permit an attack on the refugees. Two secret expeditions set out ~~on~~<sup>on</sup> the night of Feb. 25, 1643, 80 of the unsuspecting refugees were massacred.<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch settlers on Long Island, instead of being repelled by the massacre, instead were eager to copy it. And in a petition to Kieft 5 sought his support for an attack on the Canarsies. Responding to cooler heads, he refused permission and the Dutch ~~settlers~~ <sup>settlers</sup> were forced to take matters into their own hands. A secret expedition plundered two wagon loads of corn belonging to the Indians and when the natives came to the rescue of their property, three of them were killed. The upshot was all-out war between the once-peacable Canarsies and the Dutch. 6

Kieft again sought peace and sent a message to the Long Island Indians but when the message carrier talked off the former friendships, the Indians replied: "Are you our friends? You are merely corn thieves."

But eventually matters simmered down and a peace parley was held at Rockaway between the envoys of Kieft and the Indians, headed by their one-eyed chief Panhawitz. 7

The scene was strange. After a midnight feast of beans and corn and fish and oysters the two white envoys were allowed to sleep in Panhawitz's lodge. But at the break of day he awoke them and led them into a forest nearby. There they were seated on the ground and quickly surrounded by a circle of 16 chiefs from other Long Island Indian tribes. One of the Indians arose, holding in his hands a bundle of small sticks. Then the Indian began to berate the white men for having abused the friendships the Canarsies and other Long Island tribes had shown them. As he listed each fault he laid down a small stick, one for being ungrateful, one for having dishonored Indian women and so on.

The white men were properly humble <sup>and</sup> invited the Indians to return to New Amsterdam where peace could be made. One of the Indians angrily suggested that the Indians should have no truck with Kieft and the others who had murdered their fellows. But eventually a delegation did set out for Manhattan. There a treaty was made <sup>but</sup> it was not long before new troubles broke out, again involving one-eyed Penhawitz and the Canarsies. Early in 1644 an expedition was sent from New Amsterdam against the Canarsies and the end of the once-peaceable tribe was finally settled. By the time the shooting ended, the tribe had been practically destroyed and even Penhawitz, who had been involved in many peaceful transactions as well as in battle with the Dutch, appears no more on the scene.

Kieft was recalled to the Netherlands before the peace was finally brought about in 1645 and died when the ship taking him home foundered in the English Channel. Behind him he had left a tiny settlement, numbering not much more than 500 persons in New Amsterdam itself and with practically all the outlying settlements destroyed in the Indian wars.

The first house in Brooklyn, for example, that built by William Adriance Bennett, just across the Gowanus Creek from Boerum Hill on the grant of land he shared with another Englishman, Jacques Bentin (or Bentyne), was destroyed by the Indians in 1643.

But if the Dutch had been dispersed by the war, the Canarsies were even worse off. Their once prosperous villages had been levelled. Their corn fields were laid waste. Their fishing grounds were abandoned. Their proud, independent way of life was over and

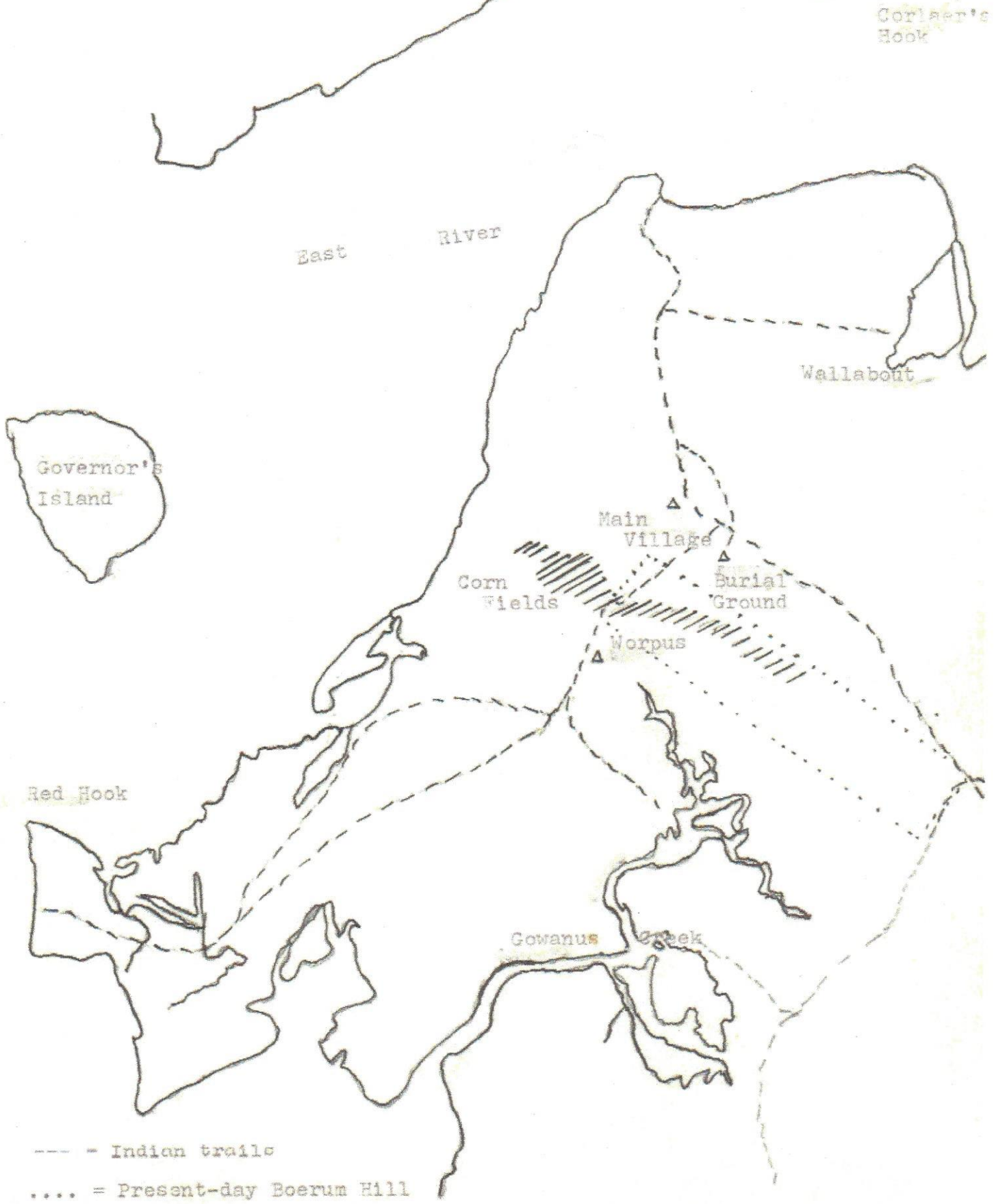


they became, almost inexorably drawn by the force of history, the pathetic camp followers of the worst parts of white civilization.

Drunkenness and disease took their inevitable toll until, a century and a half later, the Canarsies passed from history. The final pathetic note was cast, when in a shroud stitched by the wife of a Dutch settler, Mrs Anthony Remsen, the last Canarsie was buried in 1832.<sup>9</sup>

FIG. 1

The Indians in Boerum Hill



### The Dutch

As the Indians declined, as was only natural, the Dutch settlers gained ascendancy.

From the arrival of the Dutch West India Company settlers in New Netherland in 1623, until the years immediately after the Algonkian-Iroquois War, the European settlement of all Brooklyn, and Boerum Hill in particular, was tentative. Bennett and Bentin had tried to establish a farm at Gowanus and others had settled at Midwout, Flatbush and the Wallabout (Navy Yard). At the latter place, one of the earliest settlers was a Norwegian, Hans Hansen Bergen, or Bergen as his name is frequently spelled on early records. His last name, denoting that he came originally from the Norwegian city of Bergen, later became the family name of one of Brooklyn's more famous and prolific families.<sup>1</sup>

His first home was built not far from the main Indian trail, near the present intersection of Fulton and Prospect Streets <sup>2</sup> and it was built, according to one of his descendants <sup>3</sup> not long after he arrived in America ~~soon after his arrival~~ in America in the company with the colony's second director-general, Wouter Van Twiller, from Holland in 1633. Six years later he married Sarah Rapalje, reputed to be the first white child born in the Dutch settlements in America.

But in Bergen's early years, the whites were still allowed to farm in Brooklyn, largely on sufferance of the Indians. And Bergen seems to have been one of those who resented this and to have eyed the fertile corn lands of Boerum Hill enviously.<sup>4</sup>

There is a family legend that illustrates his problems with the Indians.

During one period of hostility with the Indians, Bergen was caught unawares by a band of marauding <sup>natives</sup> ~~Indians~~. Seeking to escape them, he climbed into a large tree. But this ruse did not escape the notice of the wily warriors. They formed a circle around the base of the tree and began to taunt the terrified white man. Thinking that his last moment had come, Bergen, well-known for his knowledge of music and his melodic voice, began to sing as loud as he could, all the hymns he could recall. After a while, the story goes, the Indians became enchanted with the music, and desisted from tormenting their erstwhile quarry. In fact, after hearing some more songs, they allowed him to come down from the tree and return unmolested to his home.<sup>5</sup>

Bergen's farm was situated to the north of the present-day Boerum Hill and the first European <sup>actually</sup> to occupy land in what is now that community was the Dutchman, Frederick Lubbertse.

In a grant from the Dutch West India Company dated May 27, 1640, Lubbertse was granted a large tract of land " on Long Island at Merekawickrigh near to Werpos, extending in breadth from the kil and marsh coming from Gouwanus, northwest by north and from the beach on the East River with a course southeast by east 1700 paces of 3 feet to a pace, and in the length from the end of the said kil northeast by east and southwest by west to the Red Hook, with the express condition that whenever the Indians shall be willing to part with their maize land lying next to the aforesaid land then Frederick Lubbertse shall " have it.<sup>6</sup>

The area covered by this grant would now include some of Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, ~~and~~<sup>part</sup> of Boerum Hill, Carroll Gardens, plus part of Gowanus and part of Flatbush. Only to a prominent citizen would such a large tract be given.

He seems to have been one of the earliest settlers to have come to the new colony, and was probably originally a sailor, since in 1638 he was chief boatswain to Governor Kieft. At that time he was living in New Amsterdam. In 1641 he was one of the Twelve chosen by the settlers to deal with the Governor and, contrary to the more covetous suggestions of Bergen and other Brooklyn settlers, advised against declaring war on the Indians. In actual fact, however, he did not move to Brooklyn until well after the Indian wars, arriving here in 1653. That year he was a magistrate for Brooklyn, serving again the following two years and again in 1664 and 1673. He unsuccessfully sought office as burgomaster on one occasion but otherwise played a leading role in the politics of the community.

Before dying in 1680 he had been married twice, possibly to sisters. His first wife Styntie bore him three daughters, one of whom Elsjie, married Bergen's son Jacob Hansen Bergen. This Bergen and his wife were to play a prominent role in the early history of what is now Boerum Hill. Lubbertse's second wife, Tryntie, was a widow with three sons when she married him but these men soon left for other areas.<sup>7</sup>

The corn land mentioned in the Lubbertse patent remained in Indian hands until 1642 when it is mentioned in another grant as belonging to an Indian named Sassinan but by 1645 it is mentioned in still other patents as "Frederick Lubbertsen's corn land."

After his arrival in Brooklyn in 165<sup>3</sup>, Lubbertse built himself a house in the Dutch colonial style with a peaked, shingled roof and wide porches, just south of Boerum Hill near the junction of Hoyt and Warren Streets. This would have been at about the site of the former Indian village of Worpus. There he lived until his death.

In his will he deeded the land to two of his daughters, Elsje and Aeltje. After some years they divided the property and Elsje and her husband Jacob Hansen Bergen took over the northern section of it, including the Lubbertse family home.

In turn, this property, over 200 acres in all, was willed to their eldest son Hans Jacobse Bergen in 1732 and he took up residence in the Lubbertse-Bergen home. He died in 1749 and by a will made six years earlier passed on the title to his own son, Jacob Bergen who eventually sold off most of it to others.<sup>8</sup>

Like all the other Dutch settlements on Long Island, Brooklyn<sup>9</sup> (the one on which Boerum Hill was centered) endured a precarious existence through most of its first century. It prospered and declined with the fortunes of the Dutch and the Netherlands itself. It became alternately Dutch and then British and then Dutch again and then finally British.

Its people were hardworking, industrious and conservative. Religion was important to them and we find the names <sup>of Boerum Hill residents among</sup> the leaders of the Dutch church in the colony.

As elsewhere on the island, their farms became smaller and smaller with each succeeding generation, until they were really only

large market gardens. And, under the considerable English influx from the five English settlements farther out on Long Island and elsewhere in Britain and the American colonies, increasingly owned by persons with English names.

Thus, in the period just prior to the Revolutionary War, the entire extent of present-day Boerum Hill was owned by not one but seven farmers: I. Cornell, Samuel J. Garritson, George Martense, George Powers, Mary Powers, J. Reid and the Schermerhorn family. It is interesting to note that the nearest Boerums at this time, had two small properties immediately south of Boerum Hill, on the lowland bordering on the Gowanus Creek.<sup>10</sup>

The farms grew grain, which was ground either at Brewer's Mill, at the head of the Gowanus, about where 4th Avenue now is, or at Sebring's Mill, roughly at the foot of Atlantic Avenue. In addition the farms provided other produce, butter, eggs and meat, especially pork, which was sold either at the "fly markets" on the shoreline at the foot of Brooklyn's Fulton Street or ferried directly to customers in Manhattan.<sup>11</sup>

As the colonial era drew to a close, the more rural Boerum Hill residents became increasingly dominated by the more moneyed, sophisticated residents of Brooklyn proper, the Livingstons and the Raplejes and by the more distant and again wealthier residents of Manhattan.

But like those other communities, the tide of politics caught up Boerum Hill. As dissatisfaction with the rule of King George III became more evident, the community like its neighbors was split into Whigs and Tories.

The Raplejes became the leading Tory family and eventually largely disappeared from the scene.

The Boerums, whose founding father in America had been Willem Jacobson Van Boerum who had reached these shores in 1649 and had then taken up land at New Lots, where he died in 1688, became leading Whigs. One of them Simon Boerum, born in 1724, became a member of the Provincial Assembly, and in such a capacity attended the first Continental Congress in 1774. He later signed the Articles of Association but died in 1775 before complete independence was realized.<sup>12</sup>

But generally, the patriot cause in Brooklyn was not overwhelmingly predominant. One story is told that illustrates this Tory viewpoint. According to the tale, a meeting of Whigs was held in Brooklyn but just two men came. One was Boerum, the other a friend. The friend was named clerk of the meeting and he then "unanimously" named Boerum a delegate to the Patriot conference.

This Tory-inspired tale, is of course apocryphal. The Boerums were not alone in their sympathies. The Livingstons and others played a leading role in the Patriot cause.

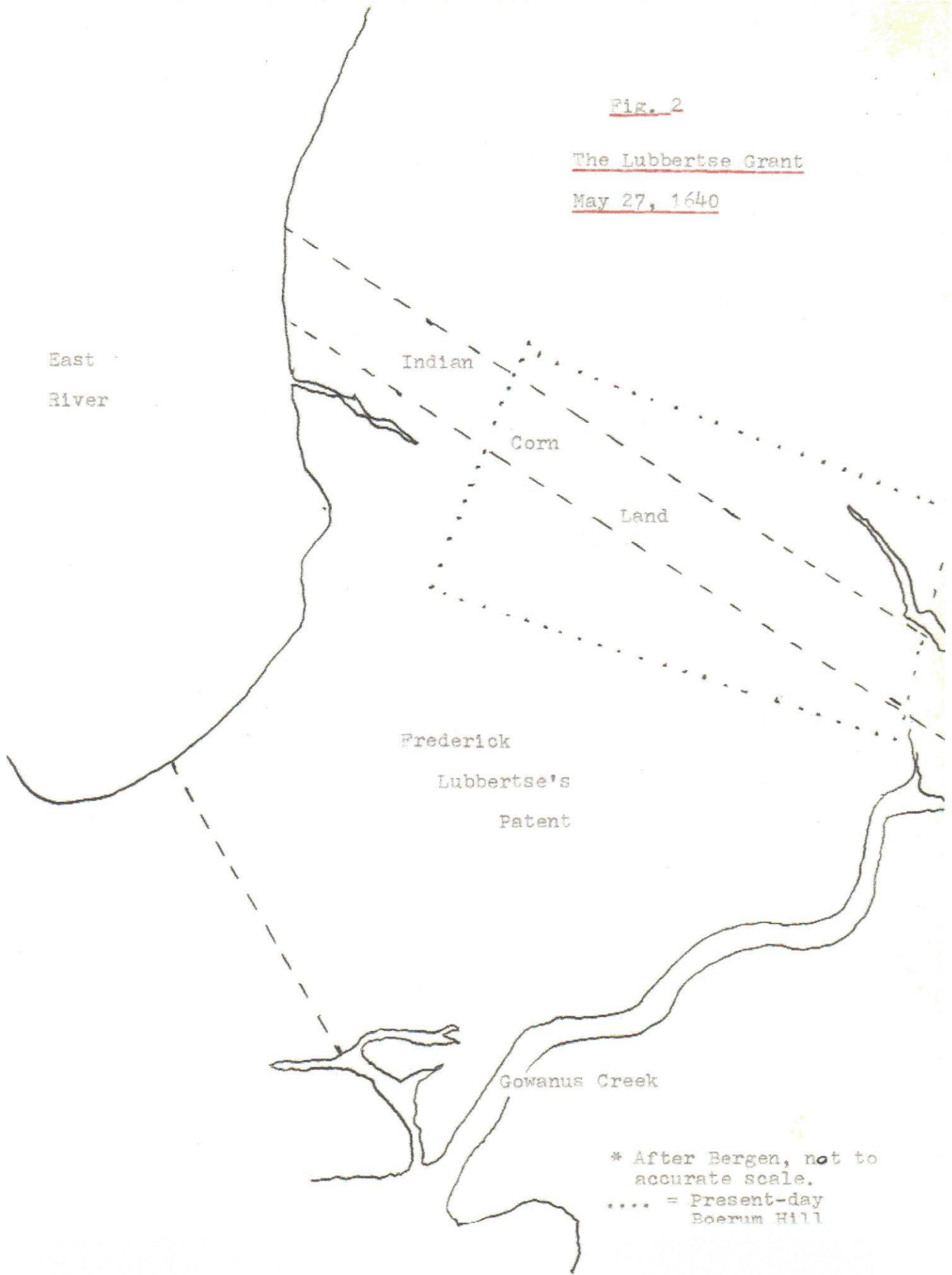
Events moved ahead at a pace. The Revolutionary War was launched and 1776 became a benchmark in history of a nation, if not of the world. And, of course, it became a benchmark in the history of Boerum Hill too.



Fig. 2

The Lubbertse Grant

May 27, 1640



East  
River

Indian

Corn

Land

Frederick

Lubbertse's

Patent

Gowanus Creek

\* After Bergen, not to  
accurate scale.

..... = Present-day  
Boerum Hill

### The Revolution

Lexington and Concord, Ticonderoga, the second Continental Congress, the Battle of Bunker Hill came and went. George Washington, a rich Virginian, became commander of the American armies. Boston was besieged and evacuated. A young man named Thomas Jefferson was instructed to draw up a Declaration of Independence. That Declaration was signed in the summer of 1776. The two opposing armies, the Americans led by Washington, the British under Sir William Howe, prepared for a showdown.

Following the British evacuation of Boston, Washington had been forced to move south too, to counter a threat posed by Sir William Howe and his brother, Admiral Lord Howe.

Finally, the maneuvering came to an end one broiling summer day, Aug. 27, 1776, in what has variously been called the Battle of Long Island or the Battle of Brooklyn Heights. It might ~~better~~<sup>also</sup> be called the Battle of Boerum Hill, for it was fought largely over and around that community.

The English had high hopes about the outcome of the battle; they expected it to be decisive and the one that would subdue the rebellious colonials for all time. Lord Howe had originally left Boston and moved against New York because the better communications in New York and the Hudson Valley would allow him to drive a wedge between the colonial forces -- in the Boston area to the north, and in the colonies to the south -- thus allowing him to divide and conquer. Howe also hoped for aid from the longtime British allies and scourge of the lower Hudson, the Mohawks and the other Iroquois.

To prevent his thus being outflanked, Washington himself had turned back to New York and after consolidating his position on Manhattan, sent a portion of his troops across the East River to Brooklyn. To Washington, too, the coming engagement was crucial. He knew that another British force, headed by Sir Guy Carleton was moving south from Canada by way of Lake Champlain and if the British pincers was to be completed, the cause of the patriots seemed certainly doomed.

The Howe brother themselves reached New York some time after Washington and collected their forces on Staten Island. Altogether they mustered about 30,000 men. \*

The Americans had long been preparing the defenses of New York to combat the expected British attack. As early as February, Gen. Charles Lee, later to be ostracized as a traitor, had posted 400 Pennsylvanian troops in Brooklyn. They were entrenched in a line running approximately from the present Navy Yard, across the eastern limit of Boerum Hill, to Gowanus. They were given accommodations among loyal patriot homes and the citizens were paid seven shillings a week for boarding officers, one shilling and fourpence for privates. Early in March, Lee was superseded by General Stirling, who confused historians by laying claim to a British peerage and called himself Lord Stirling.

Over the spring months more and more American troops reached the area and new fortifications were erected all over the western tip of Long Island, including one on Governor's Island too. Old ships were sunk between Governor's Island and the Battery to impede British naval attacks.

After Washington arrived late in April, the commands were divided with General Putnam commanding the forces in Manhattan and General Nathanael Greene in command of the Brooklyn fortifications. But Greene fell victim to bilious fever about the middle of August and had to turn his command over to General John Sullivan.

But as summer rolled around the patriot cause came under attack from a new quarter. 2 The settlers of the western tip of Long Island, particularly the Dutch, voiced considerable unhappiness about being forced to contribute manpower to the American cause. This provoked a threat from the American Congress that unless aid was given, the troops would be forced "to lay the whole county waste."

On his arrival, Washington found these fortifications in place in Brooklyn:

A five-gun redoubt, called Fort Putnam (later to be called Fort Greene) on a wooded hill overlooking the present Navy Yard. The trees were cleared away to give the guns command of the East River and the roads to the interior of Long Island.

A line of trenches leading down to the water at the site of the Navy Yard.

A zigzag line of trenches running southward across the present Fulton Street and between the present Bond and Nevins Streets to the head of Gowanus Creek at about the present Bond and Warren Streets.

A small redoubt, at about the present intersection of DeKalb Avenue and Hudson Street.

Another redoubt, called Fort Box, between Smith and Court Streets, near Carroll Street. The hill on which this was erected was known at the time as Bergen's Hill.

Another small fort, mounting five guns, was built roughly between the present Atlantic and Pacific Streets and Bond and Nevins Streets. It was the original Fort Greene.

And at the intersection of the present Atlantic Avenue and Court Street, on a steep little hill known as Ponkiesberg, or Cobble Hill, a three-gun fort. Its trenches ascended spirally to the top of the peak and the troops quickly gave it the nickname of Fort Corkscrew. It commanded practically the whole sweep of the American fortifications, being higher even than Fort Stirling, which had been built on Brooklyn Heights.

At dawn on Aug. 22, the Howes finally moved. They ferried 20,000 of their troops across the Narrows and landed them at Gravesend Bay. The result was panic among the Long Island settlers. One eyewitness 3, then a young girl, recalled being awakened at dawn at New Lots, where she lived and on looking out the window found the road blocked up with cows, horses and sheep which had been driven there during the night supposedly to escape confiscation by the British.

By noon, the British transfer was complete and they far outnumbered a small American force which had watched the operation from a small hill. Fearful of being overtaken by the overwhelming British forces, these American riflemen fell back towards the security of the Boerum Hill fortifications. But there was some shooting that day as the British sent some cannon fire after the retreating riflemen.

On Aug. 23, General Howe issued a proclamation soliciting support from Loyalist residents but the cautious Long Islanders, now waiting to see which side would conquer before showing allegiance, largely ignored Howe's solicitations.

Washington himself finally arrived on Long Island on Aug. 25 and to his shock found everything at "loose ends." The unruly American forces, instead of withholding their gunpowder were skirmishing in the most disorganized way with the enemy. Others were little better than bandits, sacking the homes and property of friend and foe alike. What Washington saw was enough to make him withdraw the command from Sullivan and replace him with General Putnam. Sullivan and Stirling as second in command were placed over the forces outside the line of trenches, the shock troops expected to absorb and deflect any initial British attack.

At about 9 o'clock on the evening of Aug. 26, the British made their move. With the exact route of the march known only to a few senior officers, and leaving their tents standing and their fires burning, in silent column they moved out of their camp at Gravesend. Sweeping everyone they met into their maw, they advanced that night to the vicinity of the present East New York. By 2 A.M. they had reached a tavern known as Howard's Halfway House, in present-day Williamsburg. There, impressing the tavern keeper and his son into service as guides, they moved on through the Greenwood cemetery area to the vicinity of Bedford. There they paused for breakfast.

In the meantime, another British force had opened a frontal attack on the American defenses, allowing the British flanking movement to march undetected until they were now in a position to trap and encircle the outlying American troops. Sullivan, preoccupied with the British frontal assault, had neglected to send out any scouts to keep watch on his left flank.

Eventually the American command learned of the flanking movement and. They set out to repulse the British and , Lord Stirling was given the task of trying to stem the tide. At the head of a Maryland regiment , plus some other troops, Stirling eventually tangled with the British in what is now Greenwood Cemetery. The details of this skirmish have given rise to some local legends but it seems likely that the Americans had hidden themselves in sniper positions and opened the firing by shooting at the advancing British column first. But the Americans were hopelessly outnumbered and again were forced to fall back.

The battle was now raging all throughout the district. British ships had opened fire upon the American fort at Red Hook. Sullivan , hearing of the plight of the Maryland troops, hastily sent them reinforcements, leaving his left flank still further exposed. The British finally discarded their secret advance tactics and in a full-scale bayonet charge on an open plain near Bedford routed the less-disciplined patriots. The British troops, Hessians and Highlanders, gave no quarter. They surrounded parties of fleeing Americans and dispatched them with the bayonets.

Before midday, the terrible rout was over. The British had formed a line directly across the neck of Brooklyn and the Americans, those of them who had survived, were withdrawn behind the line of fortifications at the eastern rim of Boerum Hill.

Washington himself had seen the rout. He had been in the saddle since daybreak and, after a period of waiting for a British naval attack, inspected the Brooklyn defenses. Eventually he and his other senior officers gathered at the Cobble Hill fort, the highest in the area, to watch the outcome of the battle.

One part of the retreat was particularly harrowing to the American commander. From his vantage point, he watched helplessly as Stirling and some Maryland troops tried to stave off the British advance near the head of Gowanus Creek. As the remorseless British cannonade cut down the Marylanders, Washington gasped: "Good God, what brave fellows I must this day lose." Finally the Marylanders were completely routed, and at the point of British bayonets they plunged headlong into the Gowanus marshes, where some were trapped in the mud and eventually drowned by the incoming tide. Stirling himself was captured and sent to the British flagship, where on his arrival, he found Sullivan and many others also prisoners of war. Altogether 256 of the Marylanders, many of them sons of the state's most prominent families, were slain in this battle.

As Washington and Putnam waited behind the Boerum Hill defenses, Howe, profiting by his experiences at Bunker Hill, restrained from attacking the fortifications directly.



The lull in the battle continued through the afternoon, and as heavy storm clouds gathered, night fell on the scene. The 28th dawned to find the skies still gloomy and in the mist which was gathering, too, Washington made a complete tour of the fortifications.

The British had not been idle during the night. They had hastily erected a redoubt of their own, on the land of George Powers, between the present 3rd and 4th Avenues. In addition, under cover of the fog they had moved a portion of their fleet into Flushing Bay, suggesting a new flanking movement to attack Manhattan and thus isolate Washington in his precarious fort in Brooklyn. On the evening of Aug. 29, Washington called a council and after a brief discussion, it was decided to abandon the Brooklyn position. Thus about 9 or 10 o'clock that night, with Washington standing at the top of the ferry landing to personally supervise the operation, the Americans left Long Island as quietly as the British had come. The original plan had been to leave a small force behind to delay the British but a mixup in orders resulted in a complete withdrawal.

The British eventually got word of the retreat, however. The source of their information was apparently a Mrs. John Rapleje who sent her Negro slave to General Howe's headquarters with the word. Howe sent a scouting party to check the story which advanced to the ferry landing just in time to see the last heavily-laden American boat disappearing into the fog.

Mrs Rapleje was not alone in her sympathies with the British. Even the militia, officers and men alike, had failed to play more than a minor role in the battle. There were even reports that the commander of the Brooklyn militia had actually been in communications with the British during the battle and had withheld his troops on purpose. Though at one stage he was brought before the Committee of Public Safety in New York, he was never actually brought to trial. Later, a judicious loan to Major Wyckoff, the new militia commander, apparently convinced his doubting fellow citizens of his loyalty to the patriot cause and he lived out his life as a prominent judge. 4

Following the battle, the British garrisoned many of their troops in the area and Tory stalwarts, among them Isaac Cornell, who owned 90 acres at the western extremity of Boerum Hill made considerable money supplying them with produce and meat. 5

Others in the area were not so fortunate. Many of the property owners lost heavily. Valuable wood lots were chopped down to provide fuel for the British garrisons. Some farmers had their cattle confiscated. Others had driven off their livestock in advance of the occupation. And the overpowering presence in Wallabout Bay (the Navy Yard) of the British prison hulks, where hundreds of starving, disease-ridden prisoners were to die miserably, hung over even Boerum Hill on the other side of the neck of Brooklyn.

Eventually, however, the war came to an end and independence was secured. Then the residents of Boerum Hill joined the rest of Brooklyn in the dual activities of wreaking vengeance on the Tories and setting up the new government under which they would now live.

For a generation things seemed quiet. But as the second decade of the 19th century opened, new worries arose. The seizure by British warships of vessels in New York harbor and the impressment of sailors from them into the British Navy, caused a flurry of activity in strengthening the old defenses which had fallen into disrepair since the time of Washington and Howe.

In time, however, America's expansionary fever was at least temporarily slated by the confiscation of the Indian lands in Indiana, Ohio and Michigan, with the consequent destruction of Tecumseh's peaceable dream of an Indian United States, and the British found other areas to occupy their attention. Boerum Hill, like the rest of Brooklyn, settled down to a new period of bucolic contentment. In 1800 the population had been 3,298 inside Brooklyn village. Within a decade it had grown by 25 per cent to 4,402 and by the time 1820 came around it had almost doubled again to 7,175. 6

And as space was filled up in Brooklyn, particularly in Brooklyn Heights where Hezekiah Pierrepont was subdividing his land and enticing well-to-do merchants from Manhattan to make their homes, more and more pressure was placed on the open land in the western end of Boerum Hill.

The first to be broken up into residential lots, earlier even than in neighboring Cobble Hill, was the former Cornell farm between what was then Red Hook Lane and is now Court Street and Smith Street. By 1827, more than a score of homes had been built in this area and to take care of educating the children of

these newcomers, who lived on the first two blocks of Wyckoff, Bergen, Dean and Cornell (Atlantic Avenue) streets, a school was built between Smith Street and Boerum Place on the north side of Cornell -- the area's first place of education. 7

Apart from the sizeable farm holdings now belonging to the Nevins family, among others farther east in the district, the most sizeable blockage to the eastward expansion of this new settlement was the natural barrier of a high bank that ran along the present line of Dean Street and the salt marshes that lay south of Dean Street and the Gowanus Creek. Dean, Bergen and Wyckoff Streets all ended abruptly at the rim of the marshes. 8

But eventually, even these barriers were to go, and Boerum Hill began to take its present shape.

Fig. 3

The Battle

of Brooklyn, 1776



### The Boom

Over the intervening decades, a picture has become fixed in the minds of many New Yorkers that their predecessors in the first part of the 19th century were dour, Calvinistic, money grubbers. Such was not really the case, especially in Boerum Hill.

It has been estimated that in Brooklyn, and South Brooklyn, as Boerum Hill was then known, there was one tavern for each 32 adult males. In addition, many stores were licensed to sell liquor by the gallon, to be consumed off the premises. \*

One such tavern was located in a lonely, but beautiful spot just at the southwesterly limits of Boerum Hill, where Red Hook Lane (Court Street) and Carroll <sup>Street</sup> intersect. But to get to it, the young men of Brooklyn had to <sup>ride</sup> ~~go~~, usually at night, past a deserted house near the intersection of Court and Pacific Streets, a house that local legend said was haunted.

One night, early in the century, a group of youths had gathered in the tavern and were having a fine old time dining on oysters and drinking brandy. But, just as the party reached its height, the brandy supply gave out. To get a new supply meant a hurried ride to the foot of Fulton Street, past the haunted house on Red Hook Lane. None of those present relished the idea of the midnight journey but at length, a young man named Boerum volunteered. Climbing on his horse, he started for the brandy. But after an hour, when he had not returned, his companions began to feel uneasy.. And after some hesitation, they too mounted and set after him. As they approached the haunted house, the story goes, they found

young Boerum's horse standing against a fence. Not far away, they found their friend, prostrate on the ground and in agony. Hurriedly they took him back to the tavern, where for three days he lingered in a coma, and eventually died without regaining consciousness. 2

Eventually the haunted house was razed when Charles Hoyt pushed streets through the area as he subdivided it around 1826.

This was the year that saw the first extension of Brooklyn into the Boerum Hill area.

Whereas when Lieut. B. Ratzer, of His Majesty's 60th or Royal American Regiment surveyed the area in 1766 and 1767, there were fewer than a dozen substantial houses, including the Lubbertse home, in all of Boerum Hill, by 1827 a pattern of streets, with close-nestling houses was beginning to develop in the western end of the community.

Charles<sup>5</sup> Hoyt was the leader in the expansion boom and he rode rough-shod over any opposition, plenty of which he encountered. One of his principal opponents was the venerable Tunis Joralemon, a leader of the Dutch church, who ran a dairy farm and market garden on the property roughly alongside the route of the street which bears his name. Hoyt and Joralemon crossed swords when Hoyt wanted to run Henry Street, just west of Boerum Hill, through the Joralemon estate. Eventually, with the help of George Wood, a fellow native of New Jersey, Hoyt succeeded, although he had to pay for the land taken up by the street. Joralemon similarly opposed Hezekiah Pierrepont's plan to extend Clinton Street along the same line but again he lost. And with these extensions completed, it was only a short time before the grid street pattern was being extended eastward through

Boerum Hill itself.<sup>3</sup>

But, as has been pointed out earlier, there were some obstacles in the way. There were the natural barriers, already mentioned too. And there were the large property owners who made a lucrative living providing milk and produce for Manhattan and the fast growing Brooklyn village.

From east to west, the first large property belonged to George Powers, who had been a butcher at the Fulton Street fly market since 1774. He was a controversial figure, having at one time been popularly accused of having been a deserting Hessian mercenary. But subsequently this was disproved.<sup>4</sup> However, he did return early from service with the Revolutionary Army and this enabled him to make a considerable fortune selling supplies to the British troops who were still garrisoned in New York. Just beyond his property on the present line of Hanson Place and just west of St Felix Place, roughly the site of the Williamsburg bank building at the eastern limit of Boerum Hill, stood a toll gate. To avoid using this toll gate, residents, particularly those going to Gowanus, used to make a detour across what is today Times Plaza and thus continue down the line of 4th Avenue to their destination. Powers Street was the original name of the present 3rd Avenue.<sup>5</sup>

Next came the farm of George Martense, between the present Nevins and Bond Streets. He was related by marriage to one of Brooklyn's more prominent families, the Lefferts.<sup>6</sup>



Next came the land of Samuel J. Garritson, the largest in the district 7 and then the Cornell land, which was the first to be subdivided.

But, spurred on by the example of Hoyt, these large blocks were quickly subdivided and by 1840, the first great building boom in Boerum Hill was getting under way. Dean Street, which was named for Captain and later Colonel Joseph Dean, a Brooklyn hero of the Revolutionary War, <sup>at</sup> the southern <sup>extremity</sup> of the high land, was one of the first to be built up. In the early 1840's <sup>Boerum Hill east</sup> ~~it~~ moved ~~west~~ward from Hoyt Street as groups of town-houses were erected by speculators. State Street, too was built up, first on the block nearest the Heights and then on the Hoyt-Bond block. Pacific Street did not really come into its own until the 1850's but once started, it quickly was taken up. 8

There remained the less desirable land along Bergen and Wyckoff, much of it swampy and marshy and filled with innumerable springs, from which little creeks ran down into the larger Gowanus. In the beginning of settlement in Brooklyn, the tidal ponds had frequently been dammed and used to operate mills of various kinds, but as industry in the New York area progressed beyond the primitive developments of the 18th century, more and more pressure arose for the industrial development of the Gowanus area.

The idea of draining or filling in the marshland of Gowanus seemed natural as a solution for the problem. It appears to have first occurred to a Colonel Daniel Richards who had come to Brooklyn to live during a major outbreak of cholera in New York in 1832.<sup>9</sup> Like many others who were to follow in his wake he quickly became interested in the real estate possibilities of the area, particularly in what is now the southern section of Boerum Hill and Carroll Gardens.

Eventually he was elected a member of the Brooklyn Common Council and while serving in that office in 1848~~x~~<sup>49</sup> he came up with a project for building a Gowanus Canal, which would drain all the marshland and creek land that then drained into the Gowanus Creek. The other members of the council agreed and Richards went off to Albany to enlist the support of the state legislature. The legislature endorsed his plan but trouble lay ahead.

His plan called for erection of a wide pier across the mouth of Gowanus Creek, which would become a large basin for mooring ships. Altogether about 200 acres of water would be thus cleared. With the material dredged from the creek so that sufficient depth could be had for larger vessels to moor, the remaining marshland would be filled in.

Richards' plan was ambitious but his dreams of a thriving port in South Brooklyn came to nought because the property owners then in possession of the waterfront marshland saw their present advantages being forced to give way to unknown interlopers. For this reason they somewhat selfishly put up strenuous opposition to the scheme and it was dropped. <sup>10</sup>

But with the withdrawal of Richards' plan, there did not come an end to activity in the area. Pressure was just too great. And adding to the pressure was the fact that some land at the head of Gowanus Creek had been set aside many years previously as a public landing. Therefore it was natural that moves would be made from time to time to deepen the channel and to arrange better passage for vessels seeking to use those landings.

However, it was not until the arrival on the scene of Edwin Clark Litchfield, a lawyer made wealthy by handling and dealing in railroad bond issues, that real progress -- some would doubt that word -- was made. 11

Litchfield had bought his first acreage in Brooklyn in 1852.<sup>12</sup> It was a huge tract, almost a square mile in area and covered almost the entire area from the present Greenwood cemetery, through Park Slope to Gowanus. Litchfield's first interests, after he had built himself a magnificent mansion on part of the acreage, was to run streets through the property and sell the building lots thus provided. But eventually he ran out of high ground suitable for housing and he turned his attention to the marshland that he also had acquired.

He came up with a scheme which would widen and deepen the upper reaches of Gowanus Creek, providing more than a mile of dock front where only waste land had been before. His method of producing this bonanza -- for New York by this time was becoming increasingly short of useable land directly available to ships -- was interesting.

Sturdy piles would be driven 18 feet into the bottom of the marsh, spaced 11 feet apart. On top of the grid thus laid out in straight lines, a railroad would be built. On the rails would operate steam shovels which would scoop out the muck and transfer it to spaces between the rail lines, thus deepening the channels and filling in the marsh at one stroke. Since the muck taken from the creek would not provide enough fill for the whole job, some of the high banks bordering the marsh area would be scraped down to provide the lacking ingredients.<sup>13</sup>

The scheme was ingenious but it would require an immense amount of capital. This created some delay, a delay added to by the intervention of the Civil War which provoked strong feelings in Boerum Hill as it did in the rest of Brooklyn.

A central figure in the anti-slavery movement had come to Brooklyn's Plymouth Church on October 10, 1847. He was the dynamic and controversial Henry Ward Beecher, one of the most celebrated orators of an age of rhetoric. The presence of Beecher and the equally celebrated Dr. Richard Storrs at the Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn gave discussions of slavery great prominence in an area where slave-owning had been a tradition since the earliest times. Frederick Lubbertse, for instance, Boerum Hill's first landowner, appears to have had at least two slaves.<sup>14</sup> And added to the harangues of Beecher and Storrs was the presence on frequent visits to Boerum Hill, where he had friends, of William Cullen Bryant, a poet, editor of the New York ~~Evening~~ <sup>Evening</sup> Post, and abolitionist.<sup>15</sup>

When War actually came, Brooklyn's militia units were quick to join the Union cause. One of them, the Fourteenth Regiment or Brooklyn Chasseurs first tasted what was to be its share of blood at the battle of Manassas Junction but later earned the nickname "Red Devils" in engagements at Bull Run, Binn's Hill, Spottsylvania Court House, Rappahannock Station, Gettysburg, the Wilderness and altogether 22 major battles.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, Brooklyn families, including of course those in Boerum Hill, felt both the agony and the glory of the war.

But when it was over, they were equally eager to get on where they had left off. The war had brought great industrial prosperity to the northeastern United States and Brooklyn was to share in that prosperity.

For this reason, it was natural that when the demand for industrial land was so great that Litchfield's Gowanus Canal scheme should again be brought up.

In 1866, therefore, to raise the enormous sum of money needed, he chartered the Brooklyn Improvement Company which took over his land in Brooklyn and purchased some other <sup>properties</sup>. It laid the groundwork for the Gowanus Canal scheme and as the result of a \$1-million bond issue floated in 1871 actually began work. <sup>17</sup>

It wasn't long before coastal vessels were busily plying the Gowanus waters and delivering cargoes of coal and lumber to the busy factories that sprang up in the Gowanus area. One of the factories claimed to be the largest lumber company in the east.

The industrial boom on the land immediately adjacent to the waterfront also triggered a new housing boom in the areas between the earlier subdivisions in the northern section of Boerum Hill and Gowanus proper. It was in this time that Bergen and Wyckoff Streets and Nevins and Bond Streets were built up.

But with the boom came another problem, a problem that has continued until almost exactly a century later. The Gowanus canal was polluted. Dr. Charles Ferchland, who lived on 3rd Avenue wrote in September 1888: "The canal as a disease-breeder occupies the first place in the minds of South Brooklynites." <sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that this criticism of industrial pollution brought the reply from the factory owners that the problem was merely temporary and would be remedied as soon as new pollution-free machinery was installed.

Sea traffic was not the only means of communication which helped the rise of Boerum Hill. As early as 1832, the Brooklyn and Jamaica Railroad had been chartered to operate a line from Brooklyn to Queens, along Atlantic Avenue. It did build a line but eventually sold out to the Long Island Rail Road in 1836, shortly after placing its first locomotive in service. Another member of the Litchfield family of promoters, Electus B. Litchfield was prominent in these affairs. He also operated street railway lines, including one that ran in 1866 on Bond and Nevins Streets. <sup>19</sup>

It was to serve this quickly increasing rail traffic that a tunnel was built under Atlantic Avenue from the East River frontage to the present Flatbush terminal in ~~1836~~ <sup>1858</sup> although it has not been used since. Nevertheless, some of the existing buildings on Atlantic Avenue have access to the tunnel from special sub-basements.

All this development had stirred its share of controversy. And to get across the points of view of the various proponents, it was natural that newspapers would arise. Boerum Hill had its share of the host of newspapers published in Brooklyn in the middle of the 19th century. The most prominent and lasting was The Brooklyn Daily Times, which had begun its career in 1848 as ~~as~~ The Williamsburgh Daily Times. It was founded by George C. Bennett and Aaron Smith but when Williamsburgh and Brooklyn merged, <sup>in 1854,</sup> it was shifted to Brooklyn under the sole ownership of Bennett and its name changed. Originally it had been independent of party alliances but gradually drifted into Republicanism.<sup>20</sup>

Another shorter-lived Republican sheet was the Brooklyn Daily Transcript which lasted just long enough to get across their abolitionist views in the election campaign of 1859-60.<sup>21</sup>

By this time, the late 19th century, Boerum Hill had physically taken pretty much its present shape. It endured, with the rest of the world, the great depressions of the final quarter of the century. And it grasped at whatever straws of prosperity came its way.

The population, which had been predomi<sup>n</sup>antly Dutch at the beginning of the century had given way to English domination and by the middle of the century was starting to have a considerable Irish admixture. <sup>T</sup>his influx changed the area in several ways, not least in religious matters. Whereas in the first quarter of the century most citizens were members of various Protestant sects, by the time the century was threequarters over, it was largely Catholic.

It had changed the area politically too. In the first part of the century, the area had been a Republican stronghold. But in the latter half, the strength of the Democracy was overpowering.

But by the time Queen Victoria and all she stood for had departed this life, Boerum Hill was getting ready to undergo another series of changes, changes that would doom the elegant townhouses of Dean and State Streets to new careers as rooming houses for Irish laborers, that would see the first influx of Syrians, Lebanese and other Middle Easterners into the western extremity of the district, along Atlantic Avenue, and would see another influx, this time of Scandinavians at the other end of Atlantic Avenue.

So numerous were the Scandinavians, principally Swedes, that this section of Atlantic was known as "Swedish Broadway."<sup>22</sup> They had come to the area originally because of its closeness to the bustling Brooklyn docks but having arrived, they liked what they saw and established businesses. Practically the only sign of their passage through the area, however, since most of the families have long since moved to other areas, notably Bay Ridge, is what is perhaps the district's finest church, the Swedish Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church at Pacific Street and 3rd Avenue. The present building was erected in 1894 but the congregation was organized as early as 1874.<sup>23</sup>

The history of this church sheds considerable light on the history of the whole area, for like its fellow citizens at this time it was transitory, moving from place to place as its membership grew and changed.



The congregation had its beginnings when services were held in a small chapel on Bergen Street near Sixth Avenue, just outside the eastern limits of Boerum Hill. After three months there in 1874, it moved to a downtown location on Hudson Avenue between Myrtle and Willoughby Streets. There, through lack of attendance, it faltered. However, it was soon revived and began services again in the German Lutheran Church which then stood on Schermerhorn Street between Court Street and Boerum Place, at the western end of Boerum Hill. Finally on April 15, 1874, the congregation was officially organized and held its first services in a rented hall at 386 Atlantic Avenue. It continued to hold services there until 1882, when it purchased the former Clinton Street Presbyterian Church on Pacific Street between Hoyt and Smith Streets. Just before this move, the congregation had bought a lot on Bergen Street, between 3rd and 4th Avenues, with the intention of building there, but with the move to Pacific Street, this plan was shelved. ~~But~~ eventually, the congregation, swelling with the influx of more Swedes, moved again, this time to the site of its present massive Romanesque cathedral.<sup>24</sup>

As a sidelight to this moveable feast of scripture, it is interesting to examine the history of the Clinton Street Presbyterian Church which the Lutherans bought in 1882. It began life as a Presbyterian Church and then was taken over by the Lutherans who in turn sold it to the Wesleyan Methodist congregation, now in Bedford-Stuyvesant, who in turn sold it to the Syrian Orthodox church which consecrated it as a cathedral and buried a bishop there, before selling it to a Spanish Baptist congregation.<sup>25</sup>

But new changes were ahead. The world was getting smaller. Communications were improving. The pace of life in the Brooklyn dominated by The Brooklyn Eagle and the aristocracy of Brooklyn Heights was about to vanish. The effects on Boerum Hill, although not noticeable for some years, were to prove catastrophic. 26

### Downfall

There seemed little hint of trouble ahead when the new century dawned. There had been of course the flurry of excitement in Teddy Roosevelt's "splendid little war" but the great events in Europe were not to be imagined.

Boerum Hill was busy. The industry that lay between it and the Gowanus Canal provided plenty of employment, as did the docks along the rest of Brooklyn's waterfront.

True, Brooklyn had seen some changes, but the Brooklyn Academy was still home to many of the world's great opera and stage stars, Gage and Tollner's was still serving succulent chops and seafood and the Brooklyn Dodgers were everybody's favorite baseball team. But the old homes of Boerum Hill were residences increasingly, not for one family but for a family and a collection of roomers.

These new Brooklynites were mostly lower class, Irish and, as the years went by, Italian laboring men. To service their entertainment needs, Smith Street, which had been from its earliest days a shopping center for the district, now began to boast an increasing number of Irish saloons. In the street itself, however, Italian barrow boys ~~still~~ hawked their fruit and other wares.

Life was hard for most of the newcomers but they were normally peaceable and the community continued. Even the advent of World War I and America's first great foray as an admitted world power, did little to disrupt their way of existence.

But the war was hardly over when a major social upheaval struck the nation and most directly, Boerum Hill. This was the passage of the Volstead Act, the legislation that put the administrative bite into the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution: Prohibition had arrived.

To the saloons of Smith Street, it spelled calamity. To the hard-working, hard-drinking Irish and Italians it was death.

However, they soon found a remedy. As elsewhere in the nation and in New York City, speakeasies quickly replaced the open-door saloons. Bathtub gin and raw alcohhl replaced the quiet beers, formerly the favorite drink. And with the speakeasies came trouble in another form.

Boerum Hill was not far from Red Hook, which already was falling increasingly under the grip of a group of Sicilian gangsters. The word Mafia and the name Black Hand gang began to be heard with increasing frequency in the area. There were imitators too. For example, some of the speaks in the eastern end of the community paid protection to a group of thugs calling themselves the White Hand gang.<sup>2</sup>

The Roaring Twenties had caught up with Boerum Hill with a vengeance.

And they were hardly on the wane before an even worse event was to spring on the community.

Brooklyn, especially the area of Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Boerum Hill and Fort Greene, had come into existence for the reason that they were in close proximity to the financial districts of lower Manhattan.

So, when Wall Street sneezed, Brooklyn caught pneumonia. When Wall Street caught pneumonia, Brooklyn, including Boerum Hill was given up for dead.

Life-long savings evaporated quickly. Houses were sold when mortgages were foreclosed or when tax arrears piled up beyond the value of the house. Families that had lived in the area for decades found they were out in the street. Others, in desperate moves to make ends meet, crowded more and more roomers into the old high-ceilinged rooms.

Times were tough and by the end of the '930's they showed little sign of recovering. It was only when defense orders began to pour into the Navy Yard and other industries that things began to improve. But this improvement was financial and not social.

The already crowded rooming houses were forced to admit even more paying guests as the homeowners sought to make up for lost time.

With the outbreak of war with Japan in 1941, the downfall of the district seemed beyond repair. High-paying war jobs and the influx of sailors to the Navy Yard as vessels were rushed in and out brought a new menace to the area. Prostitutes plied the bars in the area, particularly in the ~~western~~<sup>eastern</sup> end of the district and as residents moved out to avoid the vice, the vice spread in to fill the vacuum.

By the end of the war Boerum Hill was well on its way to becoming a slum.

Then yet another complication arose.

Spurred by endemically low economic conditions on their native island and lured by tales of the fabulous wages to be earned in New York, thousands of Puerto Ricans descended on the city. A great many of them moved into Boerum Hill, attracted by its convenience and of course by its low rents.

A glance at immigration figures gives some idea of the flood:

1945, 14,000; 1946, 40,000; 1947, 25,000; 1948, 33,000; 1949, 26,000; 1950, 35,000; 1951, 50,000; 1952, 60,000; 1953, 70,000; 1954, 21,000; 1955, 46,000; 1956, 60,000.<sup>3</sup>

There were several reasons for this inflow. Travel by air had become cheap and quick. Their island, in addition to being poverty-ridden and economically inhospitable, was overcrowded. Even at that time it housed more than 660 persons per square miles.

Not that conditions in New York were much better. In 1950 it was reported that 22 per cent of all Puerto Rican homes lacked a private bath, compared with 10 per cent of other nationalities. Ten per cent of Puerto Rican homes housed more than 1.5 persons per room, compared with 4 per cent of whites. In addition, for their poorer living quarters, Puerto Ricans handicapped by their language barrier, tended to pay higher rents.<sup>4</sup>

Those were the average conditions in New York. In Boerum Hill, if anything, conditions were worse. In one house on Dean Street, for example, a family of a man, wife and three young children crowded into one room without bath or plumbing. ~~There were~~

In the adjoining room were two men. On the floor above, two large rooms each housed two more men. A small hall room, with room only for a bed, housed a single man. On the fourth floor, the rear room housed three men beneath a leaking roof. A large closet had been converted into a room that froze in winter and roasted in summer, but housed two men. The front room housed two more men and a hall room one more. The only persons with any degree of comfort were the family in the ground floor: a grandfather and grandmother, a husband, wife and child. They owned the house that was home for 25 people. It had originally been built in 1842 for a rich doctor and though it had endured some hard times after 1890 when it became an Irish rooming house, it had really been in good condition until it was sold to ~~the~~ Puerto Rican who ~~was~~<sup>was</sup> forced to cram his countrymen in to meet the payments on the mortgage he had acquired.

In the face of this overpowering influx, the former Irish and Italian and other families fled to the suburbs.

Another factor added to the overcrowding in the district. Immediately south of Boerum Hill, in Gowanus, large tracts of former row housing was torn down to make way for high rise housing projects. This brought, for the first time, large numbers of blacks to the area. It was ironic that the district which had trumpeted so eagerly for an end to slavery, a century later was to recoil in horror when the blacks arrived in force. 5

Crime, notably prostitution was already a considerable problem in the area. With the increase in population and the disintegration of the old housing, it became worse. The hydra-headed <sup>^</sup>monster of drug addiction and distribution <sup>also</sup> appeared. By comparison, the days of the Mafia and the White Hand gang seemed romantic interludes.

Houses were abandoned. Industries folded up and left. Streets became infested with addicts and hookers. Garbage was strewn, uncollected, in all directions.

Boerum Hill had hit rock bottom. There was no where else to go but up. 6



### Revival

As in its beginnings, Boerum Hill's revival was triggered by Brooklyn Heights.

As New York faced a drastic housing shortage in the days just after World War II, people, particularly those working in Wall Street, turned again to the big old houses of the Heights when they were unable to get a home in Manhattan. To their surprise, after the low, cramped apartments of Manhattan, the airy old brownstones seemed like palaces. At first there was just a trickle of brave souls venturing to break the barriers of crime and decay that had affected the Heights, but eventually the demand became such that it exceeded the supply.

So the latecomers turned first to Cobble Hill, which had not decayed as much as Boerum Hill but when space filled up there too and prices rose, the still-standing houses of Boerum Hill priced as low as \$6,000 or \$7,000, with a 25-foot, 14-room brownstone available for perhaps \$15,000, looked very attractive, despite the crime and filth in the streets.

The renovators had arrived.

At first there were only a few hardy souls, some on Dean Street, a few others on State Street. But gradually there were more. At that stage, speculators, who had made a killing in the Heights and Cobble Hill moved in on the action.

They were a varied crew but their aim was the same: a quick killing.

A typical example was an Italian handyman, who called himself a carpenter. He had been born in Red Hook during the Depression so he knew the area well. His knowledge of it had been augmented during his forays with a juvenile gang, one of many which paraded through South Brooklyn during the 1950's.

From beginnings as a handyman who repaired closets and such like for the newcomers in Brooklyn Heights, he progressed to being a home repair contractor in Boerum Hill. Within a year or so he had scraped enough money together to buy his first house on Dean Street. He evicted the roomers, mostly Puerto Ricans, renovated the apartments and installed modern kitchens and bathrooms. To his surprise the apartments rented instantaneously at high rents. He was on his way. Within another year or so he was buying up whole rows of houses, as many as 10 at a time. Having bought them he would repair them at the cheapest possible manner and then either rent them or sell them.

But he, like several other of the operators, overextended himself and eventually his economic bubble burst. Today, he is back in the home repair contracting business. 1

Generally, however, a new class of people have moved into Boerum Hill. They tend to be white, middle class, professional people, with a surprisingly large number of them employed in the communications media. Others work in Wall Street for stock brokerage houses and for banks.

In politics, they tend to be liberal, much to the chagrin of the regular Democrats who have held power for generations from the sanctity of the United Manzini Democratic Clubhouse on

*Union Street.*  
~~Manzini Street.~~ 2

There have been threats again, however, to this upward revival of the area. In 1970, the State Legislature was confronted with a bill to establish the Atlantic Avenue Development Authority. Its sponsors argued that its name described its true aims, the revival of a throughfare which has fallen on bad times, not only in Boerum Hill, but eastward in Bedford-Stuyvesant and particularly in Bushwick and Brownsville. But to the residents of Boerum Hill and the other communities affected, the purpose seemed not revival but eradication in favor of a new expressway across Brooklyn. They mounted a massive campaign, complete with mass marches on Albany and blockages of the extremely busy intersection of Atlantic and Flatbush Avenues. The result: Withdrawal of the bill. 3

Other problems have continued. Drug addiction, especially among the black and Spanish communities has increased rather than abated.

New problems have arisen too. The eviction of poor Puerto Ricans from even the shabby rooming houses in which they lived to make room for the renovators has caused considerable ill will on the part of those removed and some guilt on the part of the liberals who have replaced them. There has been no major friction so far, but many residents woefully predict it will come. A major housing project, suggested for the vacant land on State Street between Smith Street and Bond Street, has already given storm warnings of future conflict.

But at the moment, no outward tension has developed.

The new home owners are busy repairing the faded glories of townhouses erected for the middle class of a century and a half ago. The Spanish-speaking residents are busy too. They are

taking the first steps on the road of upward mobility that was followed earlier by the British, Swedish, Irish, Italian and Middle Eastern people who gave Boerum Hill its past. Their travel upward has been, like many of those earlier citizens, hampered by language problems, by poverty and overcrowding. But progressing, many of them are. And with progress, it seems likely they too will move on.

### Conclusion

It is three and a half centuries since the Canarsies ruled supreme in the area that is now Boerum Hill. The corn fields that they tilled are covered with houses and schools and churches and factories. The waters that they fished are filled in or polluted.

The Dutch who supplanted them have gone too, as have most of the English who in turn replaced the Dutch. Others have come and gone too.

In the process, marsh has been turned into city street, upland into railroad or highway. Trees have been chopped down or, as along State, Pacific and Dean Streets planted again to commemorate World War I dead.<sup>1</sup>

This march of time and of events has not been entirely unique. It has been almost a mirror of the greater city of New York, of which Boerum Hill is only a tiny part. But it has also had some differences.

What other part of the city can boast for example that it gave birth to the Mack truck, to bandleader Vincent Lopez, that saw the capture of the notorious Willy Sutton? What other community can claim or would want to claim -- that it is the home of perhaps the most famous of all laxatives?<sup>2</sup>

Boerum Hill has had its poets, starting with Sidney Lanier, whom lived at 194 Dean Street in the 19th century. It has had its novelists, L.J. Davis and Paula Fox of the 1970's, and James Fenimore Cooper of an earlier time.<sup>3</sup>

It has seen gaslight replace candlelight and electricity replace gas. The livery stable that once stood on Atlantic Avenue near Hoyt, is now a garage.

It has seen politicians. William O'Dwyer donating an ambulance to Holy Family Hospital. John Rooney first supporting and then opposing the Vietnam War.

In many ways, Boerum Hill has been a mirror to New York. It has reflected the ups and downs of the great city around it, but in its latest incarnation it also offers a lesson, which unfortunately seems to be ignored.

Ten years ago, Boerum Hill was a slum, on its way to anarchy and annihilation in the same way that other Brooklyn slums such as East New York and Bushwick and Brownsville have gone down into decay. But Boerum Hill, has revived, largely due to the efforts of the brownstone renovators who have cheerfully, if not always capably, rejuvenated the old buildings. It seems a pity that this example is not copied in other areas before the city is given over again to riot and mayhem.

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- 2: Cropsey, Frances Bergen: "Indian Trails of Kings County," unpublished monograph written for the Daughters of the American Revolution, in the collection of the Long Island Historical Society. Page 9.
- 3: Stiles, Vol. 1, Page 22.
- 4: Ibid, Vol. 1, Page 36.
- 5: Ibid, Vol 1, Page 416.
- 6: Macleod, William Christie: "The Indians of Brooklyn," an unpublished manuscript compiled under the auspices of the Federal Works Agency Works Projects Administration, 1939-40, in the collection of the Long Island Historical Association. Pages are unnumbered.
- 7: Ibid.
- 8: Stiles, supra, Vol 1, Page 23. Also Brooklyn Daily Eagle, June 4, 1936, which places the site of the Bennett house on the present line of 3rd Avenue, just past 28th Street.
- 9: Cropsey, supra, Page 9.

Chapter 2

- 1: Stiles, supra, ~~Vol.~~ Vol. 1, Page 24.
- 2: Cropsey, supra, Page 2.
- 3: Bergen, Feunis G.: "The Bergen Family," Bergen and Tripp, New York, 1866. Page 15.
- 4: Stiles, supra, Vol. 1, Page 24.
- 5: Cropsey, supra, Page 2.
- 6: Bergen, supra, Pages 129-130. Also map facing page 533.
- 7: Stiles, supra, Page 63.
- 8: Ibid, Page 65.
- 9: One difficulty encountered by anyone writing a history of the Dutch times in early Brooklyn, is that of rationalizing the spelling of place and family names. The usual practice here has been to use modern style. Thus Breuckelen, Breuckelyn, Brookland and other versions are usually rendered Brooklyn. Some exceptions have been made -- as in the case of Midwout -- where the sense seemed to require it.
- 10: Stiles, supra, Vol. 1, Page 33. Also Ferris Map; see Bibliography.
- 11: Weld, supra, Page 320.
- 12: Burdge, Franklin: "The Life of a Patriot, who death deprived of the honor of signing the Declaration of Independence. Simon Boerum of Brooklyn," unpublished, in the collection of the the Long Island Historical Society, written in New York, 1876. Pages unnumbered.

Chapter 3

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- 2: Ibid, Pages 249-50.
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- 4: Ibid, Pages 296-97.
- 5: Ibid, Pages 307-308.
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- 7: Hooker's Map of the Village of Brooklyn in the year 1827, published for the Bishop's Manual of the Corporation for 1861. In the collection of the Long Island Historical Society.
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