BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

A Dying Waterfront Transformed

Joanne Witty
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Joanne Witty and Henrik Krogius

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PREFACE

Brooklyn Bridge Park is one of the largest and most significant public projects to be built in New York in a generation. It transformed a working industrial waterfront that had served New York's commercial needs for nearly three centuries into a new public use for the twenty-first century.

When we first thought about writing this book, construction of the park was well underway but far from complete. We both have a long history with the park. One of us spent sixteen years as a key player helping to bring the park about, and the other covered the unfolding saga from its inception in the mid-1980s as a journalist and supportive member of the community. We thought it was an interesting and important story to chronicle while it was still fresh in our minds and those of the other significant players, and we set about interviewing as many of those players as we could.

The more we talked to participants in the park's development, the more we realized that the story was much more than a chronology of events. It was a story of grassroots organizing and community planning to form a consensus around a common vision for the park. It was also a story about the difficulty of maintaining that consensus against the forces that threatened it and the controversies and criticism that seem to accompany every major public undertaking. It was the story of government at its worst and its best, the conflicts among public officials and public agencies and the impact of politics, but also the merits of excellent design and talented people. Perhaps most of all, it was the story of hard work and perseverance over more than three decades.

To tell that story properly, we had to tell it in detail and to weave all its elements into a tale that would be comprehensive and accurate. Fortunately, we were present at many of the events and meetings we describe. We used our own memories, of course, but we mainly relied on contemporaneous notes and documents, and an archive of newspaper articles and blog posts that captured every twist and turn in the story and served as real-time bulletin boards for participants. When possible, we consulted others who could confirm or deny our impressions. We interviewed more than sixty people. The aim was to document, fully and accurately, the level of participation and energy around the creation of Brooklyn Bridge Park by so many individuals over so many years.

Still, the story was complex and not easy to tell. Despite its broad and growing appeal, the park's creation was lengthy, messy, and often contentious. Legitimate issues were raised along the way, and even now that it is successful the park has its critics. The height and bulk of new buildings on the park's periphery was

always an issue, as were the crowds that are drawn to the park and flow through Brooklyn Heights on warm-weather weekends. Feelings about gentrification, commercialization, development, class, race, and government ebbed, flowed, and sometimes boiled over. We have tried to present these issues accurately and fairly.

Some would argue that, during the long process, individual voices were sometimes drowned out. But those knowledgeable about how cities are made would probably agree that we have come a long way from the days of the formidable and imperious Robert Moses. The route by which the park was created, however rocky and circuitous, began with public advocacy and advanced through public planning. Allowing a community's voice to be heard while grappling with economic and political reality is a challenge. The story of the creation of Brooklyn Bridge Park suggests ways to address this challenge.

And New York City is not alone. There are many shorelines in need of a makeover, and cities around the world are struggling to reimagine, enliven, modernize, and monetize ailing or abandoned waterfronts. Although each situation is unique, elements of the Brooklyn Bridge Park story can be applied to important economic and planning issues elsewhere.

To preserve the history and tease out its lessons, we have tried to be comprehensive, to chronicle the inside deliberations as well as the public actions. Although we have tried to be complete and factual, we are not entirely neutral. We are reminded again and again that the alternatives would have been far worse. Had no public project arisen on the site, it might now be occupied by a wall of luxury high-rise housing or other commercial structures. It is hard to dispute the fact that a sweeping waterfront park that offers jaw-dropping views of a great skyline is a boon to a congested city—that sweet-smelling air, the bracing scent of the sea, and the seductive sound of water lapping at the shoreline provide moments of calm and respite. The economic boom that the park reflects and reinforces is a benefit to the whole region.

We like the park; we are glad it is there. We like it especially because it reflects the multitude of hands and minds that were applied to its creation. It is not precisely the park that any one person would have made, nor could it be. When we walk through the park, we do not see the things we might have done differently. Instead, we are struck by its utility, its beauty, and the continuing marvel of its very existence.

The park is a marvel but not a miracle. People imagined it, and people built it, sometimes in conflict but often in harmony. In this book we tell their story. It is said that if you like sausage you should not watch it being made. But if you do not, you will miss the chance to look behind the curtain, to see people with their sleeves rolled up and hard at work, to learn something we think you will find interesting and amusing and important.

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BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

John Street (residential)

Environmental Center

Jane's Carousel

Empire Stores

Tobacco Warehouse

Fulton Ferry Landing

Pierhouse (hotel)

Pier 1

Pierhouse (residential)

Pier 2- sport courts, roller rink, swings and multi use field

Pier 3

Pier 4 Beach

Marina

Picnic Peninsula

Pier 5- multi sport fields and fishing

360 Furman (residential)

Pier 6 Development Sites

Pier 6- playgrounds, beach volleyball and flower field

INTRODUCTION

Stretching 1.3 miles along the East River waterfront, Brooklyn Bridge Park is a dog-leg right, moving from south to north and turning sharply east, with the massive Brooklyn tower of the bridge standing at the bend. The site is narrow, hugging the shore, and much of it is squeezed between the waters of New York Harbor and the steep bluffs of Brooklyn Heights. To add to the challenge of creating a park on the site, a roaring two-level expressway is cantilevered off the bluffs adjacent to the park site and washes it in sound eighteen hours a day. On the waterside, the shoreline is punctuated by five irregularly spaced piers jutting into the harbor like an enormous, gap-toothed smile, a sixth pier having collapsed into the river in 2008 (see Figure 0-1). These piers offered a broad canvas but a serious challenge to the park's designers—featureless, flat, and, as park planners would discover, largely unable to support structures or even significant plantings.

These piers and the shoreline under the bridge had a long history as a focus of commercial activity followed by a sharp decline into obsolescence and decrepitude. In their final years as a maritime center, the Brooklyn piers were modernized and enlarged in an effort to keep up with the times, but the flow of commerce moved on to other, more modern venues. The site was left without its historical purpose or even its historic charm, and it was not at all prepared for its future.

The piers under the Brooklyn Bridge were not the only waterfront sites that needed a new purpose. By the 1970s and 1980s, most of New York's working piers had ceased working. The same could be said for waterfronts in many large cities. Historically, waterfront sites grew up without much planning; when they grew old, however, they became a planning challenge.

In the case of the Brooklyn shoreline, the government planners who controlled the site did not start out by thinking about a park. Instead, mesmerized by the views of and the proximity to Manhattan, they thought about development—a conference center, perhaps, a trade center or office buildings, but primarily housing. New York is a city of apartment houses, and the demand for housing always seems to exceed the supply. The owners of the piers and the adjacent upland were mostly public agencies—instruments of the city and state government—but they thought that the highest and best use of the site would be a sale to private developers. There was little doubt the developers would fill the site with luxury condominiums and co-ops.

The planners who were thinking about commercial and residential development on the shoreline had plenty of precedent in New York. Already, twin residential towers had risen on the Manhattan side of the East River at Thirty-Fourth

Figure 0-1 (opposite). Brooklyn Bridge Park Plan, 2015.
(Brooklyn Bridge Park Corporation.)

Street, literally and accurately called Waterside. The quaintly named South Street Seaport, actually a mall designed to attract tourists, had been developed at a pier head just across the river from the Brooklyn piers, and Battery Park City, a dense mixture of high-rise housing and commerce based on the "new town" model, was rising on landfill in the Hudson River. There had even been an ambitious plan to build a convention center supported by piling and extending hundreds of feet into the Hudson River near Forty-Second Street until questions of cost and practicality forced the choice of a more conventional site.

When commercial development of the Brooklyn piers was first suggested in the 1980s, the residents of Brooklyn Heights mobilized to oppose it. The principal engine of opposition was the Brooklyn Heights Association, universally known as the BHA, a savvy, well-funded, and well-regarded representative of the neighborhood. Looking for less-intensive uses of the property, the BHA ultimately came to the idea of a park. The public planners, primarily the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which controlled most of the piers, saw the idea of a park as a giveaway of valuable public land, as did the once-powerful longshoremen's union, desperate to hold onto jobs.

The battle was waged inconclusively for over a decade. Neighboring communities joined the BHA and formed a coalition to oppose development and advocate a park. Local opposition to the Port Authority was vigorous and effective, but a practical park plan and a way to fund it proved elusive. The Port Authority was prevented from developing the site, but the park did not move forward.

Then, local elected officials joined with members of the local communities to form a new organization called a Local Development Corporation (LDC) to explore whether and how the Port Authority might be induced to shed its money-losing waterfront piers in favor of a park.

The LDC in turn reached out to Brooklyn communities and carried out an open process of public planning, a democratic process that became a model for other public projects but that was unusual in its day. That process produced a plan—a more active, more varied, and more modern park than earlier plans—and that plan ultimately produced a park. The park is thus a rare example of private citizens initiating, planning, and achieving an important public purpose.

The plan created by the community was necessary but not sufficient to move the park forward. The local communities could not fund the park or carry out its construction. Those tasks required government support in a time of fiscal austerity. In government, as in all other walks of life, there is no deal until someone writes a

check. Making that happen relied heavily on pluck and luck, on political skill to seize a rare political opportunity. Obtaining a commitment of significant funding from the city and the state was the true turning point for the park, and we will tell the story of how that happened in Chapter 8. After that, the park became a practical project, not just a pipe dream.

The path forward from that point was neither short nor straight. Even after a general consensus was reached, there followed more than a decade of wrangling over control of the project, over estimates of maintenance costs, over the actual size of the park, over how many activities should be provided, over the roles of two sets of community-based advocates in directing the park's development, over the competing desires and visions of different parts of the community, and over the park's governance. Many side issues were raised, and the courts were kept busy.

Over much of this period the project drifted as larger events preoccupied City Hall and Albany. Simply put, the park was not a sure thing. When Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor, the state and the city finally agreed on a vehicle to spend the available money and begin to build the park. Then they agreed on another vehicle to give the park a permanent home in the city government and a promise of new funding to accelerate its progress.

But the story of Brooklyn Bridge Park is far more complicated, nuanced, and interesting than that bare description suggests. Underlying the simple truth that in many respects the community achieved its dream are the dynamics and tensions of real life—of a community that never spoke with a single voice; of a community that is actually a multitude of neighborhoods, more often divided from their neighbors by geography and history than united by a common interest, much less a common vision; of groups within those neighborhoods that often focused on the things that were missing from a plan rather than the virtue of carrying it out.

In huge, complicated cities like New York, controversy goes with the territory. A former mayor of New York once said that giving out $100 bills in Times Square would provoke at least five different objections. Fortunately for the park's supporters, most of the arguments about the park that seemed very loud in Brooklyn were harder to hear across the water at City Hall.

On the government side, too, the story is about conflict and competition, but in the end it also became a rare example of cooperation between the city and the state. Because this story is about New York, it played out amid the constant tension between governors and mayors and the people who report to them. Because this story is about elected officials, it is also about elections, term limits, legacies, and

personalities. All these elements played a role, often hidden, in moving the park forward, backward, and sideways, and their influence continues to be felt.

There were also local elected officials—state and federal legislators, council members, the borough presidents—whose crucial role in the early years moved the park plan past the starting line. Then the cast of characters changed, and a new group of officials played a very different role in the endgame. Once again, to the park's good fortune, by the time new local legislators wanted to change or delay the project Mayors Bloomberg and de Blasio and Borough Presidents Markowitz and Adams had become committed to it, but how this part of the story will end is not clear.

The park also represents a rare example of using a guaranteed source of private funding to maintain a public work. A condition of government support for building the park was an understanding that it pay for its own upkeep by generating revenue from the site, what we have called the Grand Bargain, which turned out to be housing. Some people steadfastly maintained that the public nature of the park would be compromised by having private development within its perimeter (actually, on its periphery). Others saw in the arrangement not only the necessary requirement for getting the park built but also a model for how to create and maintain other parks in a time when tax-supported public funding had become scarce. This controversy, too, continued long after it seemed to be resolved.

Once the government took over, things inevitably changed. The benefits of government commitment to the park were many—a focus of time and resources, fidelity to the master plan, and insistence on standards of excellence in design and execution. But, in government hands, the pace of decisions quickened and by their nature they were made with much less community participation than before. This was not an easy transition for the community to make, although it was a necessary condition to getting a park.

For those who study city planning or follow community activism, there is a profound irony here. In the beginning the government and the community were at loggerheads, with the government proposing a major private development with a little park and the community, represented by the Brooklyn Heights Association, countering with a major park and a little private development. Ultimately, the community won the battle—a great park came to occupy more than 90 percent of the site—but many felt they had lost the war. The government agreed to build and help fund the park, but that meant it became a public project. Even though the park was housed in a novel not-for-profit corporation that existed and operated outside of

normal government channels, and even though community members sat on its board, the park in its final incarnation was answerable to the mayor, not the community or the BHA.

Two successive mayors were willing to build the park largely in accord with the master plan the community had developed, but they had issues of their own. The administration of Mayor Bloomberg felt strongly that the community had to hold up its end of the bargain to permit private development that would pay for the park's upkeep. That meant housing, some of it occupying tall buildings. Tall buildings and controversy go hand in hand; opponents would wage a two-front war, at the ballot box and the courthouse.

Bill de Blasio, who followed Mayor Bloomberg, upped the ante by adding a requirement for affordable housing. Even though the final pair of buildings on Pier 6 would be shorter and include more public amenities than called for in earlier plans, opposition from some quarters only grew. There was also confusion and consternation about the height of buildings on Pier 1 after Superstorm Sandy.

All of this put the Brooklyn Heights Association in a difficult position. The BHA was the author of the park idea and had been a staunch supporter, but some of its members were furious. A community organization can rarely stand above the fray, and the BHA joined a series of lawsuits against its own creation.

In a sense, David (the Brooklyn Heights Association) had defeated Goliath (the government, originally in the form of the Port Authority), but somehow that victory left Goliath (in the form of governors and mayors) in charge of the battlefield.

But the "battlefield," after all, had become a park. If it was not entirely the tranquil, sylvan park that often commemorates an actual battle (and that had been in the mind's eye of many early advocates of the park), it was an active, ambitious, award-winning, and well-used urban park, an amenity for the communities around it, and a symbol of Brooklyn's resurgence. It has taken its place among the great parks of New York and, to judge by its many foreign visitors, the world.

If well maintained, the park may last forever, but it is not finished as we write; if it is like other great parks, it never will be. Consider what follows the first chapter of its life story.

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ONE
THE STAGE

> The docks are covered with long rows of barrels of sugar and molasses while the ground is almost sticky with the spilled sweets.
>
> —*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1873

For much of its history, the working waterfront in Brooklyn was one of the busiest in New York, which, by the twentieth century, made it one of the busiest in the world. The piers lying just south of the Brooklyn Bridge were once at the heart of this great commercial activity, but their importance declined over time, and a serious problem arose when the ships and their cargoes grew too big. The Port of New York Authority (later renamed the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey) had acquired narrow "finger" piers from the New York Dock Company in 1955 and replaced them with wider piers whose sheds could accommodate greater loads.[1] For about a quarter of a century these would suffice. Then they, too, would be rendered obsolete.

The coming of containerships and the vast agglomeration of large boxes they carried finally put an unsustainable strain on these piers. Modern containerized shipping needed both large expanses of land to stack those boxes and easy access to roads and rail to move them. Wedged against the bluff that gave Brooklyn Heights its name, the piers in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge could offer neither. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, it was clear that something would have to fill the space when the ships were gone.

The residential community of Brooklyn Heights was laid out into twenty-five-foot row house plots in the early decades of the nineteenth century to attract commuters from Manhattan as well as those engaged in commerce on the bustling Brooklyn waterfront, and the neighborhood retains the low-rise, low-density character of its origins. It was not only New York's first suburban subdivision but also its first historic district.

For many years the Heights existed comfortably above the piers that lined its waterfront, protected by the bluff and later by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway from the rougher life of the dockworkers below. But the demise of shipping presented an unforeseen threat. The land was too valuable, the view of Manhattan and the New York Harbor too spectacular, to suppose that it could lie empty. How would redevelopment on the piers be connected to the community? How would it affect its character? And who would decide?

Brooklyn Heights was not a historic district by accident; its residents had campaigned for the designation because they were proud of their unique commu-

nity and energetic in its preservation. When the specter of change appeared, they mobilized quickly to investigate and influence it. As it turned out, the Port Authority that controlled the piers was just as conscious of its own unique status and just as determined to carry out its mission. A conflict over the use of the piers developed quickly and persisted for years. To many in the Heights, the Port Authority seemed an irresistible force bent on mischief. To many at the Port Authority, Brooklyn Heights seemed an immovable object, opposed to progress and indifferent to commercial reality.

Of course, nothing really stands still, and the waterfront stretch that became Brooklyn Bridge Park had been undergoing change since the early days of its settlement by Europeans. Originally a beach between Wallabout and Red Hook, it became the site in 1642 of Brooklyn's first ferry service. A Dutch farmer named Cornelius Dircksen provided rowboats for Long Island farmers to transport wheat, tobacco, and cattle to the Manhattan market across the East River.[2] In the colonial period, a small rural town grew up around the landing consisting of houses, inns and taverns, distilleries, and other small commercial enterprises.[3]

Later, this particular patch of waterfront played a key role in the Revolutionary War. After defeating the British in Boston, General George Washington brought a large force to New York. His goal was to prevent the British from controlling the New York Harbor, and he occupied the commanding bluffs that would later become the residential communities of Brooklyn Heights and Cobble Hill. The British, moving their own force from Boston to Staten Island and then to southern Brooklyn, outflanked Washington, defeating him in one of the largest engagements of the war.

Rather than pressing their advantage, the British prepared for a siege of Washington's forces, by then backed into the northwest corner of the bluffs. On the night of August 29, 1776, Washington saved his army and perhaps the American cause in a daring and stealthy evacuation, moving his forces down to the ferry landing at the foot of Brooklyn Heights and thence across the narrow stretch of water to Manhattan. The battle and its aftermath are little remembered in Brooklyn, but the circumstances that gave rise to them—the view of the harbor and the proximity to Manhattan—play a key role in our story.

Big changes came to the Brooklyn waterfront in the early nineteenth century. In 1814 Robert Fulton, developer of the first practical steamboat, brought steam ferry service from Fulton Street in Brooklyn to Fulton Street in Manhattan.[4] This quick, cheap, and reliable transportation opened the way for greater development of Brooklyn as a place to live and work as well as a place from which to commute, and greatly facilitated the development of Brooklyn Heights.

Slips along the Brooklyn waterfront were filled with boats loading and unloading cargo. Henry Stiles recorded in A History of the City of Brooklyn that in 1824, "On the 1st of July, there were lying at the wharves of the village, 8 ships, 6 hermaphrodite brigs, 10 brigs, 20 schooners, 12 sloops. Total 56, being 17 more than on July 1, 1823."[5]

The trade increasingly involved the production of spirits. Statistics for 1850, Stiles wrote, "show that 6 distilleries, rectifying establishments and a brewery, employing altogether 179 persons, and consuming grain and fuel to the value of $993,300 annually, produced during the same period 5,459,300 gallons of whisky, valued at $1,364,925, besides $40,000 worth of slops and swill."[6]

To facilitate these operations and their attendant shipping, wharf construction and some landfill was required. In an 1832 letter preserved in the Pierrepont Family Papers at the Brooklyn Historical Society, a contractor agrees to "specification for building two lines of wharf. Front line will be Eight feet high. Seven feet wide with Blocks for Receiving Stone every Forty feet apart. Said blocks to be seven feet running back fourteen feet from the line."[7] These wharves were among the many constructed in this period, along with warehouses needed as the Manhattan shore became more crowded.

Hezekiah B. Pierrepont, a successful distillery owner, was the leading developer of Brooklyn Heights. He saw clear business advantage in increasing ferry traffic to and from Manhattan. While there were ferry terminals at either end of the Heights, his interests were concentrated off Montague Street in the center of the neighborhood. He had the idea of cutting through the Brooklyn Heights bluff to create a ramp connection to the wharves below, accompanied by an arch to allow unimpeded passage along the Heights. Foreshadowing the future, delays and litigation attended Pierrepont's project.[8] Pierrepont died in 1838, but the incline was not completed until 1849 and the stone arch overpass was finished in 1853.[9]

Pierrepont did not live to see it, but his plan achieved its purpose. New ferry service began in 1853 from Montague Street to Wall Street in Manhattan, made possible by the new ramp down to the landing (see Figure 1-1). Later, cable cars ran up the ramp and continued on Montague Street to Brooklyn Borough Hall (see Figure 1-2). This access to the waterfront was continuous for more than one hundred years, only ending when demolition for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway began in 1946.[10]

Figure 1-1. The Wall Street Ferry Company operated its service between Montague Street and Wall Street. The Pierrepont Stores are to the right in this pre-1884 lantern slide with passengers and goods on their way to the ferry by horse and buggy. (Brooklyn Museum Archives. Lantern Slide Collection [S10]: Views: Brooklyn, Long Island, Staten Island; buildings. View 24: Montague Street. Wall Street Ferry from Montague Terrace.)

After the Civil War, business in Brooklyn was booming and a string of new brick warehouses was built along both sides of Furman Street. Stiles notes that Martin's and Harbeck's Stores, handling coffee, hides, molasses, and East India goods, were completed and occupied as of May 1, 1867;[11] like the Montague Street incline, all these buildings are now gone.

Some nineteenth-century structures did survive. In what is now the DUMBO neighborhood, running along the waterfront between the Brooklyn Bridge and the Manhattan Bridge, the Tobacco Inspection Warehouse was built on Water Street to store tobacco arriving from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Midwest. And, by 1868, Nesmith & Sons, a Manhattan-based firm, had begun to build the Empire Stores warehouse complex on land between Plymouth, Main, Water, and Dock Streets. The Empire Stores held a wide variety of merchandise, including sugar and molasses from Puerto Rico, animal hides and wool from Argentina, palm oil from Liberia and Sierra Leone, rubber from Belize, and American manufactures awaiting shipment to England and Mexico. Schooners and three-masted barks lined the Plymouth Street shore while workers loaded and unloaded them.[12] These structures, battered by the passage of time, would remain standing until the modern era and play a part in our story.

Workmen moved, stored, and inventoried freight arriving from all over the world. "The docks are covered with long rows of barrels of sugar and molasses while the ground is almost sticky with the spilled sweets," a *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reporter observed in 1873.[13] "Through the low doors of the warehouses you catch glimpses of piles of boxes, tiers of hogsheads and bales of goods." Fifteen years later the *Eagle* recorded a ship's cargo of live animals from South America: "100 parrots, 123 mon-

Figure 1-2. By 1900 a rail terminal abutted the ferry terminal and would function there for 75 years. The Brooklyn Bridge did not kill ferry service; the subways would do that.

Figure 1-3 (below). Warehouses along Furman Street on the waterfront were in active use when this photograph was taken in 1924, with longshoremen busy hauling sacks of cargo. (Brooklyn Historical Society.)

keys, 2 catch-a camels, a mountain hog, a sloth and several armadillos."[14] Another report the following year told how crowds were watching the unloading of a ship at the Empire Stores said to have African boa constrictors as cargo that escaped and ate some of the other cargo of monkeys. Officials joked about the duty payable on the eaten monkeys.[15]

By the late nineteenth century Brooklyn had become the country's coffee and sugar capital. This was facilitated by Arbuckle Brothers, located since 1871 on John Street, which conceived a process of importing, roasting, and grinding coffee beans that were packaged into one-pound bags and distributed throughout the country. Other coffee processors could be found along the Brooklyn waterfront, but "by 1907 about two-thirds of New York's incoming coffee was stored in New York Dock Company's warehouses" on what is now part of Brooklyn Bridge Park (see Figure 1-3).[16]

Over time ownership of Brooklyn's commercial waterfront was consolidated, leaving only a few big players. In a foreclosure sale, the New York Dock Company acquired the assets of the Brooklyn Wharf and Warehouse Company, which had been owned by many of the old Brooklyn merchant families, and took control of all the warehouses stretching from the Empire Stores south to Red Hook's Erie Basin.[17] The ferries survived the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, but not the start of subway service in the early 1900s. Freight shipping thrived into the late 1970s. At its peak, the New York Dock Company was the world's largest private freight terminal. It built a ten-story, million-square-foot warehouse that dominated the site; the building, later known as 360 Furman Street and eventually One Brooklyn Bridge Park, would be converted to condominium housing as the park was being built.

Meanwhile, famed city planner Robert Moses finalized plans for the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in 1943, having at first created a scare that it would cut through the heart of Brooklyn Heights. For reasons both practical and financial,

Figure 1-4. Construction of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway's triple cantilever section with the Promenade on top was underway in 1948. The Promenade would be completed to its full length in 1951, and the expressway would open in 1954, dramatically changing the edge of Brooklyn Heights and cutting off Montague Street's access to the waterfront. (J. Brunelli / Brooklyn Historical Society.)

Moses ultimately opted for a highly engineered, three-tiered, and cantilevered structure built into the side of the bluff supporting the Heights, for which construction began in 1946. Atop the cantilever, in response to pleas that he place a "cover" on the highway on which private rear gardens could be restored, he instead built the planted Promenade overlooking the harbor, not for private use but open to the public (see Figure 1-4).[18] Its splendid views, stretching from the Brooklyn Bridge to the Statue of Liberty and beyond, soon attracted locals and visitors alike.

As the twentieth century progressed, maritime activity in Brooklyn declined but endured. As long as the ships carried what was known as "break bulk" cargo (individual items, bags, barrels, and crates), the piers below Brooklyn Heights could be adapted to handle the volume.

While the expressway was under construction, the Port Authority acquired the Brooklyn piers from the New York Dock Company.[19] As a bistate agency, the Port Authority was careful about balancing its projects between New York and New Jersey. Since it was developing substantial maritime facilities in New Jersey, the move to Brooklyn was probably designed to demonstrate its commitment to the New York side of the harbor. The Port Authority turned the Furman Street waterfront into part of its Brooklyn Marine Terminal and replaced most of the narrow, "finger" piers with wider ones (see Figures 1-5, 1-6, and 1-7). These larger piers could even deal with the early containerships (see Figure 1-8). However, as containerships grew in size and the number of containers multiplied, the Port Authority found itself compelled to shut down Piers 1–5, the Heights piers, closing them to normal cargo operations by 1983.

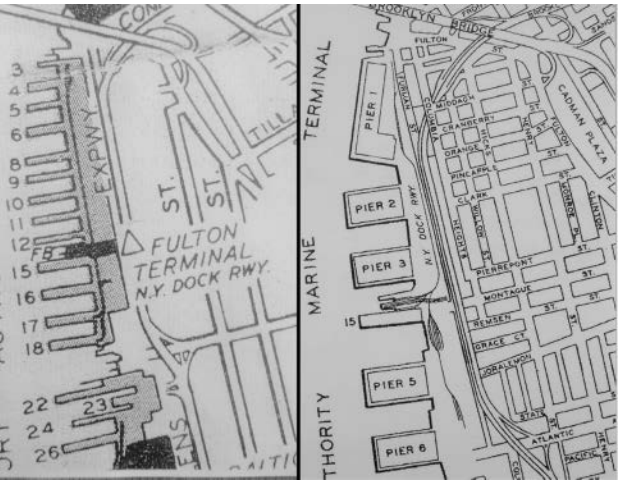

Figure 1-5. Port Authority maps from 1956 and 1969 show the change from many narrow, "finger" piers to fewer wider piers. Pier 15, not altered because it rested over a subway line, is renumbered Pier 4, with the railway platform remaining beside it. (Wolf Spille.)

Not everyone accepted the proposition that maritime use of the piers had ended. Local 1814 of the International Longshoremen's Association, which represented the dockworkers in Brooklyn, opposed any disposition of the piers that would permanently preclude their maritime use. The union's political power was waning, but it had not disappeared en-

Figure 1-6 (top). Freighters lay along the "finger" piers below Brooklyn Heights in the spring of 1953. The sun would soon go down on those piers, as their replacement by wider piers would begin later in the decade. Figure 1-7 (bottom). A photo of a wider Pier 3 shows a Manhattan skyline that has begun to change from the "classic" tapering silhouette that preceded it.

tirely, and the Port Authority was unlikely to act without considering the union's interest.[20]

Even so, once the Port Authority concluded that the Brooklyn piers were obsolete, the agency began planning for their disposition. First, Port Authority staff contacted city officials and created a working group, the Brooklyn Piers Task Force.[21] Relations between the Port Authority and the city were often strained, but on this issue the agency would need help from the city if the eventual plan called for private development of the piers.

In 1984 the Port Authority also reached out to residents who were active in the influential Brooklyn Heights Association. Rita Schwartz, a Heights resident and the Port Authority's director of government and community relations for New York, made the contact. In Schwartz's recollection, she asked Tony Manheim, then president of the Brooklyn Heights Association, to put together a group to discuss the piers over dinner with the expectation that the event would mark the beginning of a dialogue about their future use.

Here the stories begin to diverge. Schwartz remembered the initial dinner as extremely contentious; the residents Manheim had assembled questioned her and her agency's motives, made many demands, and showed little interest in an exchange of ideas. Schwartz said subsequent attempts to engage her neighbors—

there were at least three meetings—had similar results.[22] She was treated as an outsider, she said, not to be trusted, rather than a member of the community who sent her children to the same local private school they did.

Otis Pratt Pearsall, a litigator and noted preservationist from an old and distinguished Brooklyn family, had lived in Brooklyn Heights since the 1950s and was deeply involved in its civic life. Perhaps due to his role as orchestrator of the campaign that led to the Heights being designated the city's first historic district in 1965, he was invited to the meetings arranged by Manheim. Pearsall remembered them differently, describing them as offering simply the "appearance of community outreach." According to Pearsall, he and his allies outlined four goals: "Safeguarding the world-famous views from the Promenade, maximizing park and recreation, avoiding a direct link through Montague Street to anticipated Downtown development that might endanger [our] fragile historic district,[23] and promoting maritime activities and facilities such as the docking, repair and servicing of tug, fire, and police boats and other water craft."[24]

Fred Bland, a young architect with the well-regarded preservationist firm of Beyer Blinder Belle who would later serve as president of the Brooklyn Heights Association and as a member of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission,[25] was also present and described the process this way: "We all went around the table. My memory of all of this was that almost everybody said, 'It shouldn't be residential.' I didn't have such a strong thought as that. Of course, nobody said it should be a park; that was not at all in the offing at this point."[26]

Whatever the tone, there was clearly no meeting of the minds. After these meetings, the Port Authority staff came away believing that Brooklyn Heights residents wanted only to talk and not to listen. The Heights representatives felt similarly about the Port Authority. With disposition of the piers seemingly inevitable, the agency moved on with the work of the Brooklyn Piers Task Force, whose report was due by the end of 1985.

With Piers 1–5 no longer viable for maritime trade, with the Port Authority determined to dispose of them, and with residents of Brooklyn Heights equally determined to play a decisive role, the real story of this book begins.

Figure 1-8. Containers were stacked along the upland in 1979 during the brief period that Piers 1–6 had container shipping business. By the early 1980s the ships had grown too big, the containers too numerous, and the space too limited.