

South Brooklyn Waterfront and Neighborhood Resource Map

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South Brooklyn Waterfront and Neighborhood Resource Map Gowanus Dredgers Canoe Club 718 243 0849 www.waterfrontmuseum.org/dredger

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Not your typical urban neighborhoods

When you visit Red Hook and Gowanus, two Brooklyn neighborhoods whose tough reputations often precede them, you're in for many surprises. Right off, you'll notice two things highly prized in the citylight and space-thanks to the low-rise homes and century-old warehouses that line the quiet streets. Instead of tall buildings punctuating the open sky, you'll see unusual industrial structures-a grain terminal in Red Hook and iron drawbridges over the Gowanus Canal. You may even see people paddling canoes on the canal, playing soccer next to the grain terminal, or gardening around the warehouses. Walk past the old buildings to the end of the cobblestone streets for still more surprises. Up close to the water in Red Hook, you'll come upon breathtaking views of New York Harbor and, in Gowanus, along the banks of the long-dead canal you'll see signs of new life.

Pristine beginnings

Centuries before pollution took hold, Red Hook and Gowanus were lush wetlands, washed by tides, natural ponds and creeks. The Gowanus was not yet a canal but a pristine creek that ran into New York Bay. The earliest name for the area is Ihepetonga, a Native American word for a high, sandy bank. In 1969, when Henry Hudson sailed through the Narrows, the point of the Red Hook peninsula must have been within his sight. The Dutch settlers called it Roode Hoek, or red point. (Yellow Hook was the name for the settlement to the south in today's Bay Ridge.)

The name Gowanus has different tales of origin. Some historians trace it to a Native American, Gowane, a leader of the Canarsees who lived throughout Brooklyn. Others believe it comes from the Dutch word gouwee, meaning bay. Whether or not they gave their name to the area, Native Americans were a major presence along the banks of the Gowanus, and the creek's bounty sustained them. In his 1679 journal, a Dutch visitor, Jasper Danckaert, described Native Americans catching foot-long oysters in a fishing

camp at the creek's mouth on Gowanus Bay. Pickled by the Dutch and shipped out of the port of New Amsterdam, the oysters were "Brooklyn's first export," according to John Muir, a contemporary historian whose Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment is a strong advocate for cleaning up the canal

By the mid-17th century, the Dutch had taken over all the Native American land in Red Hook and Gowanus and were shaping it to their needs. They filled in many wetland areas to create farm fields, and they built mills powered by the ebb and flow of the tides. Following the Dutch tradition of canal building, they cut the first canal from Red Hook to the Gowanus Creek. This narrow route was a way to avoid the rough passage by rowboat around the Red Hook peninsula to the rest of Brooklyn. The waters between Red Hook today's Governors Island were so rough that they churned the milk that farmers brought by boat from Bay Ridge dairy farms, leading to the name Buttermilk Channel.



#### Joined in battle...and baseball

The first battle of the Revolutionary War, the Battle of Brooklyn, when General George Washington and his forces narrowly escaped advancing British troops, is an historic link between Red Hook and Gowanus. In August 1776, the British armada, the largest naval force of the day, was moving up New York Bay, bound for the East River. Fort Defiance, which once stood in Red Hook on today's Beard Street, fired on the first British ship coming into the Upper Bay. The attack, coupled with strong winds, discouraged the British from proceeding up the East River. They turned their ships around and disembarked their troops further south at Gravesend to proceed into Brooklyn by land. If the Royal Navy, more than 100 ships strong, had been able to sail past Red Hook, its forces would, no doubt, have stopped Washington and his retreating army from slipping away in rowboats at Old Fulton Street near today's Brooklyn Bridge.

The Gowanus stage of the Battle was fought at the Old Stone House, built in 1699 by Dutch farmer Nicholas Vechte on a site Bordering today's neighborhoods of Park Slope and Gowanus. British forces, armed with a cannon, occupied the house while 400 Maryland soldiers made six charges against it, finally clearing the house. The Marylanders' losses were so great that they were forced to surrender. But the soldiers' valiant effort allowed Washington and his troops to cross Gowanus Creek and follow Red Hook Lane to Old Fulton Street and their East River escape



n the 1880s, the site became a ball field for the team that would later become the Brooklyn Dodgers. Street grading for the development of the new Park Slope neighborhood has raised the level of the area so that only the second story of the house, which the ballplayers used as a clubhouse, was now above ground level. Historian John Gallagher, author of the Battle of Brooklyn, explains that "the ballplayers entered by jumping through a second story window." The building was destroyed in 1895, but the Parks Department rebuilt it with the original stones in 1935 and restored it again in 1996. The first Battle Revival Alliance offers an exhibit and lectures on the historic events that took place on the site. The house is ocated on Third Street between Fourth and Fifth avenues in James J. Byrne Park, named for the owner of the original Dodgers team.



The canal was developed after the New York State Legislature authorized funds in 1848 to widen the creek into a mile and-a-half-long commercial waterway from Gowanus Bay to Butler Street. The project, one of Brooklyn's few publicly funded port facilities of the 19th century, brought more business to both Gowanus and Red Hook. Erie Canal barges often waited at the mouth of the Gowanus Canal for their turn to unload goods at the Atlantic Docks. William Beard, an Irish immigrant and railroad contractor, seized the opportunity to build more docks and warehouses in Red Hook. In 1869, he completed the Erie Basin, much larger than the Atlantic Basin and he did it without spending his own money. Ships arriving in New York from overseas carried rocks in their cargo holds as ballast. Beard charged shipowners 50 cents a cubic yard to dump the rocks around the basin, emptying their holds for cargo bound for the return trip. Built up with rocks from all over the world, the hook-shaped breakwater, called the long dock, still gives Red Hook its unique profile.

Growing neighborhoods...battling boys

Together, the Atlantic Docks, Gowanus Canal and Erie Basin led to the development of the neighborhoods themselves. As German, Irish and Scandinavian immigrants were hired to build and work on the docks and the canal, thousands of homes were constructed to house them and their families. In a single year, from 1848 to 1849, some 800 homes, boarding houses, warehouses and factories were built in Red Hook.

The growing neighborhoods also bustled with seamen and longshoremen who lived in boarding houses and frequented the many bars near the waterfront. Smith Street alone had 23 taverns in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and soon earned a reputation for rowdiness and crime synonymous with its nickname, the gashouse district, taken from the nearby gasworks on the canal. Groups of young men who preyed on the sailors became known as gashouse gangs. But many fights were simply turf battles between boys from different parts of the neighborhood. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, 'the Pointers" lived near the northwest tip of the Red Hook peninsula, while "the Creekers" came from the other side of Richards Street, closer to Gowanus Creek. Half a century later, in letters to



The Brooklyn Eagle of 1945, veteran Creekers and Pointers were still recalling the days when they battled each other with their "fists and slingshots made from old shoe tops.

Bigger developments, which would change the face of Red Hook even more, were also in the works. When it opened in the late 1930s, Red Hook Houses was the largest federally funded public housing project of its time. (Today it is the second largest in the city, after Queensbridge Houses.) In contrast to the public housing towers built later in the city and throughout the country, Red Hook Houses were low-rise buildings surrounded by landscaped open space. Architectural critic Lewis Mumford called them "Versailles for the millions." First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the development in June 1940 and was impressed with the "well-planned apartments, attractive landscaping, playgrounds for children...and one of the best swimming pools I have ever seen."



A "terrible trio" of pollution in Gowanus

In the early 1960s, the propeller in the Gowanus Canal's flushing tunnel, which had been pulling polluted water out of the canal since the beginning of the century broke down. It would take nearly 40 years to get it working again in 1999. While the canal became stagnant and its waters putrid during this time, its environmental problems had been brewing long before the flushing tunnel stopped running. John Muir of the Brooklyn Center for the Urban Environment cites a "terrible trio" of pollution that had besieged the Gowanus neighborhood from all sides. In the Center's newsletters about the environmental history of the canal, Muir explains that the pollution came from many sources the elevated Gowanus Expressway that spewed auto exhaust into the surrounding air and soil, the contaminated brown-fields (abandoned industrial sites), and "that stinking stew of story and legend, the Gowanus Canal itself.



# Bringing the Gowanus back to life

The Red Hook sewage treatment plant finally opened in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1989. While raw sewage no longer flowed into it, the Gowanus Canal was saturated with a century's worth of noxious sediment, and the water still looked and smelled as if it had come from a sewer. And in spite of Buddy Scotto's constant But the Gowanus Canal Community Development advocacy, the flushing tunnel was still broken. Corporation, founded by Scotto and other local residents, didn't give up. By 1998, success was close at hand. That year, as a first step to reactivating the tunnel, the city's Department of Environmental Protection dredged 2,000 tons of contaminated mud from the canal. A diver in a head-to-toe protective suit performed the final operation vacuuming a thick ooze of oil from the canal bottom. Finally, in May 1999, the broken propeller was repaired and began to pull 300 million gallons of cleaner water from Buttermilk Channel into the canal each day. This time, the flushing action followed the original flow of the canal, pulling harbor water into the tunnel

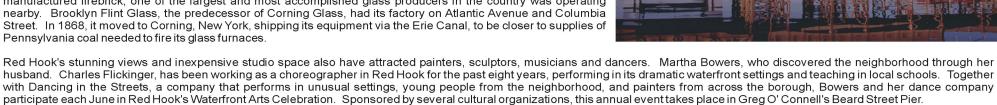
and pushing the canal water out to Gowanus Bay. The results were apparent almost immediately. Only two months after it started up again, the flushing tunnel had increased the level of oxygen in the once-dead canal enough to attract crabs, fish and microscopic marine life. And the foul smell was gone



# Red Hook's renaissance

Today, Red Hook has a community of glassworkers, including a dozen businesses and more than 20 artists who have set up their studios on or near the waterfront. Like Charles Flickinger, who shapes glass into curved windows and lighting fixtures, they are all highly specialized artisans. One of the newest arrivals, Carvart Glass, is etching custom-designed shower doors in the former Brooklyn Fire Brick Works, another historic building renovated by Greg O' Connell. Their work recalls Brooklyn 's history of glassmaking. In the mid-19th century, when Red Hook's warehouses held cargo and the firebrick works

manufactured firebrick, one of the largest and most accomplished glass producers in the country was operating nearby. Brooklyn Flint Glass, the predecessor of Corning Glass, had its factory on Atlantic Avenue and Columbia Street. In 1868, it moved to Corning, New York, shipping its equipment via the Erie Canal, to be closer to supplies of Pennsylvania coal needed to fire its glass furnaces.





# New connections to the waterfront

Inspired by the start-up of the flushing tunnel and by its positive impact on the look and smell of the canal. Owen Foote, and active member of the Gowanus Canal Community Development Corporation, has taken another plunge toward promoting the canal's use. In the summer 2000, he formed the Gowanus Dredgers, a group of intrepid urban outdoor enthusiasts who canoe and kayak on the canal. A founding member, Brian McCormick, a jazz musician who moved from Manhattan to Red Hook's Columbia Street section in 1995, regularly canoes in the canal and also swims off Red Hook's new recreational pier.

Swimming off Red Hook Point can be dangerous, but local residents have been doing it for centuries, jumping off the old piers or wading into the water from the "beaches" below. The new Louis Valentino Jr. public recreation pier, named in memory of a Red Hook fireman, replaced an old pier at the foot of Coffey Street that had been a popular swimming and fishing spot. In the summer of 2000, the Parks Department approved a permit for a public boat launch at the foot of Valentino pier. Red Hook resident David Lutz had urged the Parks Department to issue the permit so that his Red Hook "navy" of paddle boats, canoes and kayaks, as well as boaters throughout the city, could legally and safely launch small boat building group, also launches its rowing gigs here and takes neighborhood children on excursions.



A few blocks from the new pier, at the foot of Conover Street, where a floating bathhouse was moored in the early 1900s, the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge now entertains and educates local children and visitors. The restored barge is the creation of David Sharps, a man of many talents whose overriding passion is the waterfront. He developed a love for maritime history when he was ar entertainer on cruise ships. In 1985, he discovered the barge, a last-of-its-kind wooden vessel from 1944, sunk into the mudflats on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River. After spending two years digging the barge out of the muck, he restored it inside and out and, in 1994, with support from Greg O' Connell moored it to O' Connell's Conover Street dock. Filled with maritime artifacts, the barge hosts art exhibits, classroom visits and concerts of all kinds. Every Sunday in June is a Circus Sunday, when Sharps puts on his clown suit and red nose to juggle and make children laugh.

Another man with a passion, Bob Diamond, has created a trolley museum in the Beard Street warehouse and is building a trolley line along several blocks of Red Hook's waterfront. An electrical engineer by training, Diamond has developed a special transformer to power the line. Old-time residents remember a one-house trolley car that ran from Richards Street to Brooklyn Borough Hall. Diamond dreams of building a trolley line to run once again from Red Hook to Downtown Brooklyn. It could connect with the proposed Brooklyn Bridge Park, from Atlantic Avenue to the bridge, and with the old trolley tunnel under Atlantic Avenue, which Diamond discovered years ago. For now, the public can ride the trolley on most good-weather weekends along part of Red Hook's historic waterfront.



#### Islands no more

Red Hook and Gowanus often felt like islands unto themselves. Isolated physically, socially and economically from the rest of Brooklyn, they deteriorated, while communities all around them prospered. Today, the people of Red Hook and Gowanus are reconnecting to their waterfronts and building up their communities. While each community is rebuilding itself, the single most ambitious effort to reconnect them is happening all around them.

From the Verrazano Bridge to Fulton Landing, many neighborhoods are working together to tear down the Gowanus Expressway and build a tunnel to replace it. More than 50 years since it opened, the expressway has deteriorated so badly that it must be totally rebuilt. Since the early 1990s, the Gowanus Expressway Community Coalition, representing 25 neighborhoods, businesses and community groups that border the expressway, has strongly opposed the construction of a new viaduct and has urged the State Department Transportation to bury the roadway in a tunnel. The coalition chair, Jo Anne Simon, a Boerum Hill attorney, is a strong advocate for the good things a tunnel could bring to the surrounding neighborhoods: "It would eliminate the source of noise and air pollution; remove the ugly, dangerous structure that isolates disenfranchised communities such as Sunset Park and Red Hook; and create new opportunities within these communities for waterfront access and economic development.

