

A HISTORY OF BOERUM HILL

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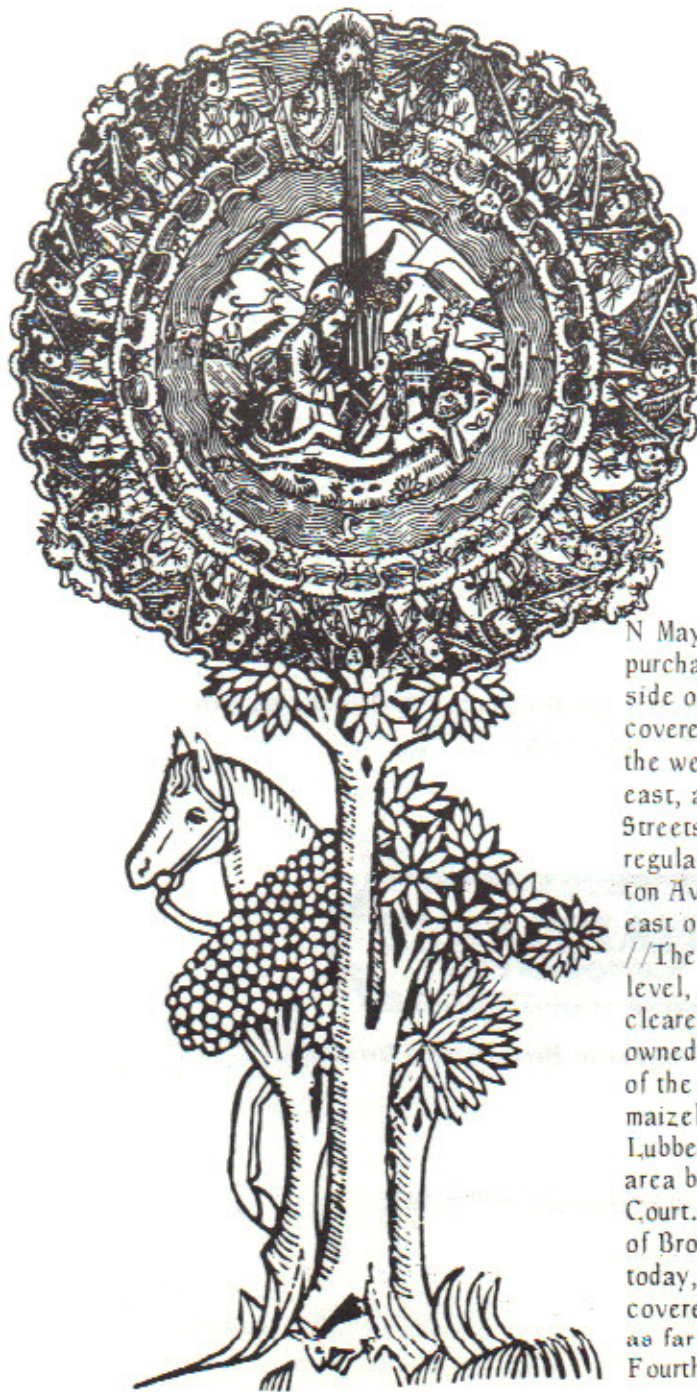
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Real Estate Brokers in Brownstone Brooklyn

Founded in Boerum Hill in 1973



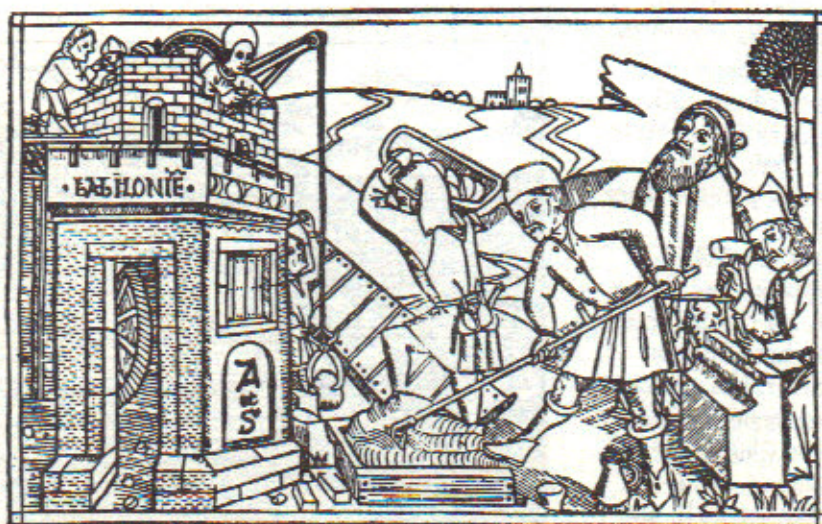
N May 27, 1640, Frederick Lubbertsen purchased a large tract of land on the north side of Gowanus Cove. The original patent covered an area bounded by the Harbor on the west, today's Gowanus Canal on the east, a line drawn between Kane and Degraw Streets in the north, and on the south an irregular line approximately following Hamilton Avenue and the portion of Warren Street east of Court.

//The land was well-drained and reasonably level, and it had been at least partially cleared by the Merecheweik Indians, who owned extensive cornfields in the area. One of the largest of these, called "Sassian's maizeland," was immediately adjacent to Lubbertsen's land and covered most of the area between Atlantic and Baltic east of Court. At that time the shape of the coast of Brooklyn was different from what it is today, and the Gowanus Kil and its fens covered wide areas, major branches reaching as far as Hoyt and Wyckoff in the north and Fourth Avenue and Warren Street on the east.

(Near the head of the Kil was a place known for many years as Werpos, from the Dutch "warbase" or "warpoos," meaning "hare," and probably indicating the site of a large warren that was there in Lubbertsen's day.) //The settlement of Brooklyn had begun four years before the granting of Lubbertsen the patent—in 1636, when William Adriaense Bennet and Jaques Bentyen purchased 930 acres near Gowanus Bay in the vicinity of 27th Street; a farmhouse was in existence by 1642, and the land was under cultivation—"the first step," says historian Stiles, "in the settlement of the City of Brooklyn." They were followed by Thomas Bescher in 1639, who took out a patent for a tobacco plantation in the area (the tobacco of Brooklyn, especially of Gowanus and Wallabout, was thought very good in its time), and within a few years the hamlet of Cujanes (Gowanus) was a well-established locality, although the placename now applies to all those areas on the shores of the Bay or near the creek, causing a certain amount of latter-day confusion.

//An Indian War broke out in 1643, largely due to the treacherous stupidity of the Dutch on Manhattan, and lasted until 1645, during the course of which the western end of Long Island was nearly depopulated of Europeans and the cornlands of the Merechewiek were spoiled and siezed. Lubbertsen profited from the disturbances to the extent that he was able to exercise his right of first refusal (a curious provision of his patent) over Sassian's maizeland.

//What became of Sassian is not recorded, but a minor land rush into the area occurred immediately after the return of peace. In July 1645 Jan Evertse Bout took out a patent for land in "Mereckawiek, on the Kil of Gowanus." In 1646 he was followed by Huyck Aertsen van Rossum, who purchased the land between Fulton and Douglass, Nevins and Fourth Avenue; Jacob Stoffelsen, the Dutch West India Company's overseer of Negros, who patented all the land between Bond and Smith, Fulton and the marshes; Pieter Cornelissen; and Joris Dirksen. In 1647



Constructing the first building in Boerum Hill on Fulton Street, with Brooklyn Heights over the hill, in background. Historian E J Korvette claims this illustration has been doctored, but Dr. Abraham Straus denies this, Dave Preiss hereby states that all illustrations are infallible, as they were extracted from an old Brooklyn Bible

Gerrit Wolphersen van Couwenhoven bought lands between Court and Smith, from Fulton to the marsh.

//Although Frederick Lubbertsen had erected a dwelling approximately where Warren joins Hoyt today, the new settlers followed the advice of the Company and formed a village for their protection, "as the English are in the habit of doing." They built their houses along the old road that led from Flatbush (Midwout) to the Ferry, the center of the settlement being approximately the block of Fulton Street between Smith and Hoyt, where Abraham & Straus department store is located today.

//In 1646 the settlers petitioned the governor for permission to "found a town at their own expense." The response was prompt, and in June of that year the governor and Council extended formal recognition, confirming the election (held in May) of Jan Evertse Bout and Huyck Aertsen as schepens (Justices of the Peace). The new town was called Breuckelen, after a little town near Amsterdam.

//By 1660 it could report a population of 31 families, totaling 134 people, a substantial enough group to warrant a pastor of their own. Previously, Breuckelen had shared Rev. Theodorus Polyhemus with Flatbush. Now Rev. Henricus Selyns answered the call. Having no church, the congregation continued to meet in a barn until 1666, when a structure was erected near the present junction of Fulton and Lawrence.

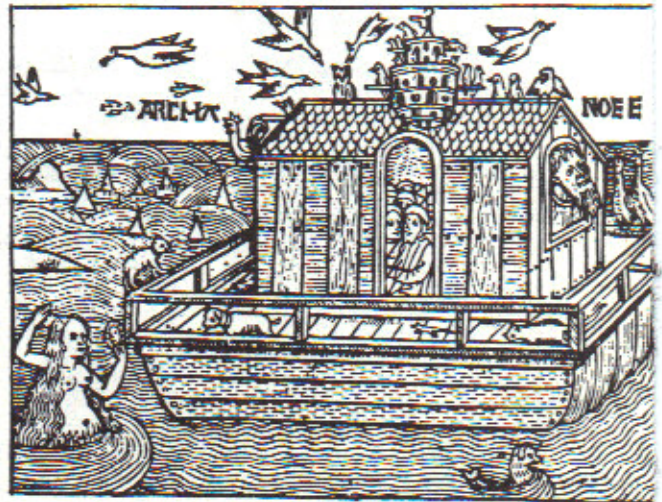
//Next came a schoolmaster. On July 4, 1661, the citizens of Breuckelen engaged a certain Carel de Beauvois, a French Protestant who may, in fact, have been born in Leyden, as their schoolmaster. His duties were multiple: "to serve summons... also to conduct the service of the Church, and to sing on Sundays; to take charge of the school, dig graves, etc., ring the Bell, and

perform whatever else may be required..."

In exchange he received a free house and 150 florins a year, supplemented by an additional 50 guilders of wampum appropriated by the Council at New Amsterdam. He prospered, although it is difficult to imagine how, and eventually founded a family and purchased a portion of Jan Evertse Bout's land in the vicinity of Hoyt and Dean Streets.

//Once the pioneering was over, the facts concerning the area become inevitably dry as deed paper. No structures exist in Boerum Hill from the Dutch period, although Jacob Bergen's house (somewhere in the vicinity of Bond Street and Hamilton Avenue) survived until 1857. Nearby, however, in Brower Park between Third and Fourth Streets near Fifth Avenue, there still stands the old Vechter-Cortelyou House, dated 1699, that with its corbie-stepped facades and gambrel roof remains to this day a perfectly preserved example of a typical stone farmhouse and a tribute to the builder's art of Colonial times.

//The years preceeding the Revolution are remarkable principally for the Bergen family's purchase of virtually the whole of the area south of the village. Jacob Bergen, who al-



ready owned substantial properties in the area of the modern Fort Greene district, was also Frederick Lubbertsen's only grandson and inherited the whole of his property (1732). He promptly moved into the old house and lived in it until he died in 1749. His son Jacob built a somewhat more substantial house further south (see above). Michael Bergen, another member of the extensive family, built a house on Fulton Street somewhere between Bond and Third Avenue. (He broke his heart for the love of "Miss Cowenhoven, of Bedford," and moved to Nova Scotia after the Revolution.) The house was later owned by George Powers, after whom Powers Street (now Third Avenue) was named. At the corner of Pacific and Court Streets there stood a famous haunted house, where "a young man named Boerum" went hopelessly mad one night while on his way to Brooklyn ferry for more wine for a party.

//During the Revolution the main line of fortifications for the Battle of Long Island ran directly through Boerum Hill. There are certain reasons for this: The shape of the coast has changed now, but in 1776 Wallabout Bay came as far south as Myrtle Avenue

and was dominated by the hill where the Ship Martyrs' monument now stands, and a crest of land zigzagged, south between Nevins and Bond Streets to old Freck's Mill on Gowanus Creek at the corner of Bond and Warren, closing the narrow neck of land. It was an admirable defensive position to protect what was then Brooklyn.

//In the summer of 1776 Generals Greene and Stirling fortified the hill as the anchor of their line (Fort Putnam) and had earthworks thrown up along the crest of the ridge. On the land of Johannes Debevoise and Rutgers Van Brunt, in the eastern end of the block now bounded by Atlantic and Pacific, Nevins and Bond (or Pacific and Dean) a redoubt of five guns was constructed and named Fort Greene. Strong though the position was, it was occupied by a defeated army on August 27, 1776.

//The big battles had been fought in the area of Prospect Park and the hills of Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the fortifications were only a place for the Continentals to rest before another retreat. The only major action occurred in front of Cortelyou House, which Cornwallis had occupied as a redoubt, where Smallwood's Maryland regiment was virtually wiped out covering the rout of the formations on their flanks. On August 29, General Washington ordered the lines abandoned.

//They were occupied again in 1814, under the threat of renewed British occupation. The old walls were repaired by relays of citizens from Brooklyn and the surrounding area, including all the fire companies and fraternal orders and "twelve hundred patriotic Irishmen who were "distinguished by uncommon and well-directed industry."

//Fort Putnam was renamed Fort Greene, the old redoubt Fort Greene in Boerum Hill was christened Fort Fireman, and 750 Masons, under direction of their Grand Master DeWitt Clinton, built Redoubt Masonic on State



Rare view of historic Brooklyn Ferry. It is well that the young Boerum went berserk (see text in column above) on the way to buying wine at the Ferry, for this sight doubtless would have had an even more debilitating effect. Ominously, Brooklyn Ferry is also where elder statesman Simon Boerum met his death (July 11th, 1775, after two hours' illness of a bilious disorder) shortly before he was to have signed the Declaration of Independence



Dedication ceremony in foreground of work camp constructing the Brooklyn Academy of Music, on eastern edge of Boerum Hill. Judging from adverse "M-o-o" flag and the obviously absent audience, Academy received a hostile reception

Street between Nevins and Bond. The parole of the day was, "The Grand Master expects every Mason to do his duty!" The fortifications were not needed, and enormous quantities of gunpowder remained stored in the major structures to bedevil the sleep of the surrounding countryside for the next twenty years.

//It was not until after 1835 that Boerum Hill began to be heavily built up, although names appear on Dean Street and Bergen's Lane (indicating that portions of them were open) as early as 1829. A map published in 1838, probably dating from about the time of Brooklyn's incorporation as a City in 1835, designates Boerum Hill's present area as the Sixth Ward and shows the streets much as they exist today between Fulton and Degraw and Court and William Street (Fourth Avenue), the area being the first grid system laid out by the city fathers east of Court Street. There is good reason to believe that the southern streets had not been opened at this time, nor were Bond and Wyckoff Streets even in existence. Most of the buildings then in the

area were at the foot of Boerum Place along Bergen and Dean, where several structures from the period survive to this day. There was located Jeremia Lott's spruce beer factory and a stone yard. The Schermerhorn Brothers had a large ropewalk (burned in 1841) on the block of Smith Street between State and Schermerhorn.

//The 1840 City Directory has an advertisement for the Brooklyn Boarding School for Boys, situated on Powers St. (Third Avenue) between Atlantic and Fulton "in the spacious four-storey brick building... about twenty minutes walk from either ferry" in a "retired and healthy situation." It was subsequently renamed the Busby School. The principal was the Rev. E. Fairchild, and tuition was \$200 a year. It is possible that the portion of the old public school on the corner of Third Avenue and State, bearing a weathered brownstone tablet dated some time in the 1850's, is the same building. In any event it is built on the same site. The 1850 City Directory bears an advertisement for the South Brooklyn Academy for Young Ladies

at 98 Dean Street (old numbering), a structure that no longer exists.

//The neighborhood that was built up between 1840 and 1875 was one largely intended for middle and upper-middle-income occupancy, principally of one-family houses between three and four storeys with kitchen and dining room on the basement floor, two parlors above, and one or two bedroom floors. Smith Street was named after Samuel Smith, interim mayor of Brooklyn in 1850, company director, and distinguished citizen, whose farm and dairy (until he cut it up into building lots about 1825) was in the area between Red Hook Lane and Hoyt Street, south of Fulton.

//Dean Street is probably named for Col. Joseph Dean, lawyer, town clerk, later magistrate, commander of the 64th Regiment of militia until 1823. His country seat was in Gowanus near 23rd Street, in the old hamlet of that name.

//Hoyt Street is named for Dr. Charles Hoyt, a real estate speculator who was responsible for the development of much of Cobble and

Bocum Hills in the 1830's and 40's. Wyckoff is named for a distinguished family of this period and Nevins for the Nevins farm. The other names are self-explanatory except for Bond Street, which remains something of an enigma.

//A major impetus to the growth of the area was given by the construction of Gowanus Canal, begun in 1845 under the guidance of Daniel Richards, the man who had originated the Atlantic Docks project in Red Hook. The Canal, estimated to have cost \$78,600, drained the swamps south of Warren Street and spurred the development of both Cobble Hill, to the west, and Bocum Hill, on the north. In 1848-49, fully 700 buildings, one-third of the total construction in the City of Brooklyn, occurred in the Sixth Ward. Most of those buildings are still standing today, a great many of them in the Bocum Hill area.

//All was not peace, however. The neighborhood was heavily Irish from the beginning, and it attracted the attentive wrath of the "native American" movement, the same group



Recent scene showing L. J. Davis in his other role as Parks & Trees chairman of the Boerum Hill Association. Note bag of fertilizer and special guards that come with this tree; Davis takes no chances on letting trees die here

of people who kept running Millard Fillmore for President year after year. On April 4th, 1844, a major riot occurred between the two groups on Court Street between Dean and Wyckoff Streets. Two companies of militia were required to put it down. Ten years later, in May of 1854, a curious combination of open-air revival meetings, held by the Primitive Methodists at the corner of Atlantic and Smith, and an invasion of three hundred Know-Nothings from New York led to violence, and the Know-Nothings were driven back to Manhattan.

//Bad feeling persisted, and the sermons in the open-air went on, so on June 4th a major fracas erupted in the same place, where (according to the Brooklyn Eagle) an "immense crowd" had gathered, largely hostile to being sermonized by people not of their religion. One hundred and fifty Know-Nothings appeared from New York, initially doing a great deal of countermarching back and forth, and eventually having to be told by Mayor Lambert to disperse, but not before they had enraged the crowd. The Riot Act was read by the Mayor, the military were called, rocks were thrown and shots exchanged. The incident has not been forgotten even today in Boerum Hill.

//Most of the time, though, Boerum Hill has been a pleasant, quiet place to live. For the remainder of the nineteenth century, and for

almost half of the twentieth, it pursued a stable, peaceful course, occupied by many of the same families who had moved in when the streets were first opened and the first houses put up. Italians and Iroquois Indians entered the neighborhood, followed by Arabs, Negroes and Puerto Ricans, and there has always been a large German-Scandinavian element. The Lutheran church at Pacific and Third Avenue conducts services in English, Swedish, Latvian, and Spanish, and for many years the Brooklyn Turn Verein was at 353 Atlantic Avenue.

//Although the neighborhood became steadily poorer in the years between the Second World War and 1962, in a strange way it was an architectural blessing. In an era of prosperity when Cobble Hill and Red Hook were being flooded with artificial stone facades, lowered doorways and fortress-like brownstone railing work, Boerum Hill was spared because of its poverty: simply, nobody could afford to ruin the fronts of their buildings. Following years of careful preservation, economic deterioration had the paradoxical effect of presenting to us, in the purest possible form, a perfectly preserved, mid-nineteenth-century neighborhood—a bit nibbled on the edges perhaps, but in scale with itself and presenting some of the most intact blockfronts remaining anywhere in the city.



A pleasant, quiet place to live . . . protecting the perimeter of Brooklyn Heights

