

CITY LORE



In the 1910's, Smith Street, left, was known as furniture row. Decay eventually set in, but by 1985, below, the city was investing money in redevelopment.

Photographs from South Brooklyn Local Development Corporation

Smith St.: A Hot Strip With a Storied Past

The Road Had 23 Taverns in the 19th Century; in the 20's, It Was Wall-to-Wall Shops

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By HOPE REEVES

SMITH STREET, Brooklyn's restaurant row, has been called the hottest new hot spot in New York. Newspapers and magazines have been filled with articles about the street in Boerum Hill, as if the strip had sat there its whole life gathering dust until the young and hip arrived a few years ago and put the place on the map. Truth be told, the 14-block artery has a vibrant history and has long been the center of many people's universe.

1820's-1840's The property of big-time land owner and soon-to-be mayor of Brooklyn, Samuel Smith, Smith Street is laid out from the mouth of the Gowanus Canal to Downtown Brooklyn, becoming one of the only north-south streets in an area designed for commercial use. Buildings arise with living quarters above work space. The first businesses produce soap, ceramics, glassware and furniture. The street is cobblestoned and a sidewalk, unusual for the time, is laid.

1840's-1860's The newly arrived Irish build the Red Hook docks. Germans and Norwegians follow. In 1848, gaslight comes to Brooklyn and soon gasworks arrive. In 1860, the small companies are absorbed by Citizens Gas Company, which builds a plant between Smith Street and the canal. Foul fumes hover above southern Brooklyn.

1860's-1880's In 1866, a horse-drawn trolley comes to Smith Street, and soon hundreds of row houses and low-rent apartment houses are built for men working on the docks and in the local gas factory. The area becomes known as the Gas-house District. Rowdy seamen and longshoremen frequent the 23 taverns along Smith; barroom brawls are a nightly affair; gashouse gangs develop; street crime booms. Creekers and Pointers, as the two gangs are known, fight with fists and slingshots made from old shoe tops.

1880's-1890's Italians arrive and build extensively on Smith Street. In 1886, a gas tank is struck by lightning and explodes; almost every storefront is blown in. In 1893, horsecars are replaced by electric trolleys.

TURN OF THE CENTURY The street still caters to seamen and laborers who have no time or money to do more than throw back 10-cent glasses of suds. Cafes selling cheap food predominate, surrounded by butcher shops, pharmacies, groceries,



barbershops and a bowling alley.

1910's Smith Street becomes known as furniture row. The street is clogged with delivery trucks and collectors, young men in straw hats who go house to house collecting payments for furniture bought on the installment plan, sometimes as little as 25 cents an item.

1920's Populated by German, Irish and Jewish immigrants, Smith Street is brimming with shops catering to families: Nutting's clothing store, the Bijou Theater and Hotel, Sangerbund's dance hall, Fred Figge's smoked meat shop, Kleselbach's paint store, Dr. Mary Eccles's pharmacy, Bleumenau's real estate, Liddle's bakery, Ryan's pawnshop, Cheap Ben's and Kelly's stationery stores, and Mrs. Donovan's candy store, which sells bags of broken chocolate for a penny. At the Dreamland Motion Picture Theater, people pay 5 cents to see cowboys and Indians.

1930's-1940's Puerto Rican families arrive, and the street, especially the stretch between Atlantic Avenue and Baltic Street, becomes dominated by specialty shops catering to the new population. Many signs for bodegas, delis and social clubs are only in Spanish. On the street's southern half, working-class Italian and Irish families live above their stores.

1950's-1960's With the growth of containerized shipping in New Jersey, businesses and jobs are diverted from Brooklyn, and soon the docks and gas companies close. In the 1960's, many people leave in search of work.

1970's-1980's The furniture stores start to close

and decay sets in. By 1984, a fourth of the stores are empty, and those in business lose money.

1984 Efforts by local activists pay off when the city grants over \$12 million during 12 years to help merchants improve their properties, hang awnings and restore original details on buildings. "Many shop owners still sold their stuff out of boxes," said Bette Stoltz, president of the South Brooklyn Local Development Corporation. "The first step was getting them to literally take their merchandise out and display it."

1996 The street and sidewalk are repaved, period street lights are installed and a ribbon-cutting ceremony celebrates the end of the 12-year reconstruction project. Many storefronts are still empty, but the hope is that they will attract new and innovative businesses. Success comes in May, with the arrival of AstroTurf, a boutique selling 50's bric-a-brac, at No. 290, near Union Street.

1997 All is quiet until December, when an intimate French bistro called Patois opens two blocks away, at No. 255, near Degraw Street, the street's first upscale restaurant.

1998 A wave of openings follows across the street, including Montgomery Antiques in June; an antique paper, poster and magazine shop, Main Street Ephemera, in July; Hoyt & Bond baby boutique in September; and Refinery, for handmade handbags and furniture, in November.

1999 A total of 15 small, trendy, upscale businesses arrive, including six restaurants, a bar catering to young professionals, a boutique selling handmade clothing, a mother and baby clothing store, a 70's antiques shop-record store/cafe and a home hardware-sculptures-crafts shop.

2000 Nineteen more businesses open. All survive. Newcomers include the first upscale hair salon, four bars, a crepe shop, a vintage clothing store, an art gallery and a furniture rental center.

2001 In the first half of the year, six businesses open: a bar, two more French bistros, a sushi bar, an Asian fusion restaurant and a performance space-art gallery. Between Atlantic Avenue and First Place, the vacancy rate is zero. Mrs. Stoltz, still in charge of local development on Smith Street, hopes the flood will continue. "But I'd like to see normal services, like dry cleaners, delis and shoe repair shops, stay open too," she said. "That is what Smith Street has always been about, a healthy mix."