**From Brooklyn to “Brooklyn”**

**The Cultural Transformations of Leisure, Pleasure,**

**and Taste**

**by**

**Emily Holloway**

**Former BWRC Project Coordinator and current PhD candidate at Clark University**

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*Postcard, Hotel St. George Colorama Ballroom, circa 1920s. Courtesy Winhold Reiss collection.*

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To tell the story of Brooklyn’s complex history in hospitality and cuisine is to tell a story about the tensions of high and low culture, of the mobility of capital and residents, and of the tremendous influence yielded by macroeconomic change. A sleepy bedroom community for the eighteenth and much of the early nineteenth centuries, Brooklyn’s waterfront (both historically and today) is deeply tied to its nineteenth and twentieth-century industrial heritage. The ad hoc economies that supported factory and dock workers, included boardinghouses, saloons, brothels, food carts, and amusement parks and drew a stark contrast to those of factory and ship owners, who spent lavishly at seaside resorts, fine hotels, and restaurants. The legacy of Brooklyn’s industrial profile, visible now in the capitalized palimpsest of brick-and-paned glass warehouses converted into hotels and retail stores, is representative of a complex convergence of elite power and working-class tastes, one underwritten by dynamic patterns of immigration and cultural intersections and global economic transition. To understand the landscape of tourism, cuisine, and entertainment along Brooklyn’s waterfront today, one must look to their earliest iterations: Coney Island and Brighton Beach; Williamsburg and Brooklyn Heights; Greenpoint and Sheepshead Bay. The impact of global economic restructuring following World War II translated unevenly on the landscape of Brooklyn’s eateries and hotels, but the underlying mechanics and logics of value, consumption, and capital assimilated these variations into a powerful and global brand: The New Brooklyn.

**Mass Culture in West Brighton**

Coney Island’s first hotel, the Coney Island House, opened in 1824, catering to elite city-dwellers yearning for a more pristine seashore experience. The Island, which abutted the burgeoning elite recreation areas of Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach, reflected the emerging class tensions characteristic of the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The growing pleasure industries that sprouted up along Brooklyn’s south shore were fed initially by causeways extending across the Coney Island Creek (at first accessible only at low tide), carrying tourists from Manhattan and Northwest Brooklyn, limiting the clientele until the New York & Manhattan Beach Railway was constructed in 1876 and the later Prospect Park & Coney Island Railroad. Express trains from the Brooklyn Bridge were rumored to reach the gates of Luna Park in under 35 minutes—a speed that rivals or perhaps surpasses today’s F train. Coney Island quickly became the playground of the “multitude:” ballrooms, amusement parks, bathing areas, and beer halls, catering to the middle and working class, were intentionally sited near railway stops to dissuade patrons from the secluded elite resorts in Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach. Iron piers were erected along the shore to accommodate steamships from Manhattan and New Jersey, and by the mid-1880s, over 100,000 summer daytrippers descended on Coney Island daily.[[1]](#endnote-1) The explosion of unlicensed saloons, gambling dens, and brothels developed Coney Island’s new reputation as “Sodom by the Sea,” a lucrative opportunity for canny entrepreneurs with a knack for the spectacular.[[2]](#endnote-2)

A group of people riding on the back of a horse

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*Coney Island, 1872. Courtesy NYPL*

Following the completion of the rail lines, Andrew Culver relocated the 300-foot Iron Tower, originally exhibited at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876, to the new Culver Plaza. Enormous restaurants and hotels were constructed around the Plaza, including the Sea Beach Palace, opened in 1879, and the West Brighton Hotel, which claimed to serve 8,000 diners daily. Among the more ostentatious institutions, the Elephant Hotel, which was constructed in 1882, featured an enormous wood and tin sculpture of an elephant, complete with a cigar store, shopping mall, observatory, and hotel rooms within its body. A can’t-miss attraction for Coney Island tourists, the phrase “seeing the elephant” took on new euphemistic meanings for guests patronizing the hotel at hourly rates.[[3]](#endnote-3)

George Tilyou, a local resident and real estate impresario, was captivated by the unveiling of the first Ferris Wheel at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Unable to purchase the structure outright, he commissioned a smaller replica and installed it in Coney Island the following year. Tilyou plowed forward, reinventing his beachside entertainments at a breakneck pace until the turn of the century. His most acclaimed installation, Steeplechase Park, opened in 1897. Tilyou aggressively pursued new rides and attractions for the Park, but his ambition quickly fell victim to a new competitor after a season of bad weather: Luna Park. Luna, inspired by the architectural and aesthetic achievements of the Beaux-Arts and the City Beautiful movements, transformed the scope and scale of amusement parks in America. Not a mere assemblage of rides and shows, Luna Park captivated the public’s imagination through a theatrical choreography and an extravaganza of illumination.

A sign on the side of a building

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*I’ve Made my Plans for the Summer,” by John Philip Sousa, 1907. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

Not to be outdone, William Reynolds’s Dreamland Park, a striking caricature of Luna Park opened in 1904 directly across the street. Dreamland boasted a lighted tower visible from 50 miles offshore. The building frenzy along the shores of Coney Island reflected a burgeoning cultural consciousness that catered to heterogenous middle- and working-class sensibilities aspiring to Gilded Age ostentation—a new mass consumer geography with broad appeal. Luna Park’s manager Frederic Thompson boasted that at Coney Island, entertainments and spectacles were “amusing the million.” The tremendous diversity of Coney Island patrons was a direct symptom of New York’s increasingly diverse demography: between 1880 and 1900, nearly one million immigrants arrived in New York City. An additional 942,000 would enter the city between 1900 and 1910 as a dense mixture of Russian and Eastern European Jews, Italians, Germans, and Irish emigrants. The cultural and linguistic diversity of immigrants changed the tone and tenor of entertainment and cuisine across the city, but Coney Island continued to embody a distinctly American ethos that promised visitors assimilation, possibility, and transformation.

Nathan Handwerker opened a hot dog stand in Coney Island, at the corner of Surf and Stillwell Avenues in 1916. Nathan's, however, was not the first hot dog vendor in Coney Island: Charles Feltman, a German butcher, is widely considered the originator of the "hot dog on a bun," and started his business as a pushcart vendor in 1867. Feltman's enterprise expanded over the next decades, eventually incorporating a city block filled with restaurants, amusement park rides, a hotel, a beer garden, and a movie theater. Known as Feltman's Ocean Pavilion, the campus was considered to be the largest restaurant in the world, serving more than five million customers every year and over 40,000 hot dogs a day. Known once as "Coney Island red hots," Feltman's hot dogs were apparently innovated to avoid plates and cutlery.

Handwerker was an employee of Feltman's, working the grilling and roll-slicing stations. The legend holds that Handwerker saved his pay for a year to open Nathan's Famous, down the block at Surf Avenue in 1916. He charged five cents, half the price of Feltman's dogs. Although Nathan's did present stiff competition for Feltman's, the two operations were distinct enough (with Feltman's catering to more elite tastes and Nathan's to working-class beach-goers) to coexist until 1954, when Feltman's closed.[[4]](#endnote-4)

A black and white photo of a city street

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*Nathan’s Famous, 1930s. Courtesy NYPL*.

Visitors to Coney Island were representative of the mostly immigrant laborers working in Brooklyn’s behemoth industrial plants and garment factories that dotted the northwestern shores of the borough. Victorian-era social norms originally restricted beach access by gender, but by the late 1880s, clothed in comparatively scandalous bathing attire, swimmers mingled freely. This revolutionary sociality, coupled with a burgeoning class of unwed young workers and a bevy of vaudeville entertainments, changing fashions, the pleasures of sand and sea, and plentiful saloons, contributed to a “looser” sense of decorum that came to characterize Coney Island in the public imagination. Courtship, once a highly structured and tightly regulated custom mediated and brokered by families, entered into the public sphere. Radical new theatrical pageants (freak shows, striptease, fortune-telling, roller coasters, and more) descended on the boardwalk, synthesizing newly colliding cultural traditions for a modest admission fee. Coney Island was in the lucrative business of fantasy, escape, and release. The imposition of tightly-managed and grueling industrial work schedules on the working class of New York City required a wholly modern outlet for recreation, one which could ingeniously attract single young men and women and families through affordable, thrilling, and intoxicating amusements. An era of mass production came hand in hand with an era of mass consumption. Upon visiting Coney Island in 1906, Russian writer and early Soviet Maxim Gorky commented, “Life is made for the people to work six days in the week, sin on the seventh, and pay for their sins, confess for their sins, and pay for the confession.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

A group of people standing in front of a building

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*Surf Avenue, Coney Island, 1910s. Courtesy NYPL.*

The three main parks in Coney Island began to decline not long after the consolidation of New York City in 1898: Dreamland was taken out by an electrical fire in 1911, while Luna Park’s founding partners died in 1907 and 1919. Luna eventually succumbed in 1940 to a series of fires, shrinking crowds, and constantly changing popular entertainment trends (namely, radio and later television). Some historians also believe that the extension of the New York City subway system to the far reaches of Coney Island in the 1920s posed an existential challenge to its distinctive allure. More accessible and popular than ever, Coney Island was no longer a different, more dangerous world—it was simply part of the city.[[6]](#endnote-6)

A close up of a map

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*Map of West Brighton and Brighton Beach establishments, 1879. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

**Gilded Age Hospitality**

Their elite and middle-class neighbors to the east, genteel and “respectable” patrons of Brighton Beach resorts, gawked at the masses of laborers crowding the beaches and saloons, theaters and boardwalks, simultaneously pathologizing urban life and developing a crude fascination with the growing working class. Ocean Parkway served as the implicit boundary between Coney Island’s tawdry West Brighton and the more decorous Brighton Beach. East of the divide, visitors would find grand hotels, resorts, orchestras, and bandstands—a stark contrast to the roller coasters, co-ed bathing areas, and bearded ladies of Coney Island’s boardwalk. Brighton Beach was first assembled as a contiguous and privately-owned area by William A. Engeman, who constructed the Brighton Beach Bathing Pavilion in 1877 and then the Brighton Beach Racetrack in 1882.[[7]](#endnote-7) As Brighton’s property values climbed, wealthy speculators and influential politicians moved in, purchasing Engeman’s property and erecting the Brighton Beach Hotel (opened in 1877) and the networks of railroad lines (today’s F, N, and B/Q lines) that connected the shore to north Brooklyn. The most spectacular and ostentatious hotels, however, were found a few miles east: The Manhattan Beach Hotel and the Oriental Hotel, both constructed by railroad magnate and banking tycoon Austin Corbin. The Manhattan Beach Hotel opened on the Fourth of July, 1877, with President Ulysses S. Grant attending the grand opening ceremonies.

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*Postcard, Brighton Beach Bathing Pavilion, 1879. Courtesy NYPL.*

Illustrious guests paraded through the hotels throughout the Gilded Age, serenaded by live bands and crowds of hangers-on. One mid-August evening in 1880, New York Senator Roscoe Conkling and then Vice Presidential candidate Chester A. Arthur were both guests of a fully-booked Oriental,[[8]](#endnote-8) possibly dining on a menu of sole meuniere, lamb’s fries au sauternes, truffled capon, and apples charlotte—a far cry from the hot dogs, cotton candy, and lager being served downshore.

A picture containing grass, sky

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*Postcard, Manhattan Beach Hotel and Promenade, 1900. Courtesy NYPL.*

Corbin, a profoundly bigoted anti-Semite and high-profile entrepreneur, was described at the time as both belonging to “that tribe of human monsters who prey upon poor men, who combine the natures of hog and shark...who are never more pleased than when they are bleeding those who are brought within reach of their ‘devil-fish’ grasp”[[9]](#endnote-9) and asa “long-headed magician.”[[10]](#endnote-10) The three grand resort hotels, separated from the teeming crowds of West Brighton by geography and by edict (Corbin banned Jews from his establishments), existed in a closed ecosystem of elite consumption and recreation habits: patrons could dine and relax on the verandas of the hotels, then travel a short distance to the wildly popular and lucrative racetracks at Brighton Beach and later in Sheepshead Bay. The Coney Island Jockey Club Race Track opened at Sheepshead Bay in 1880, just a few weeks before the Oriental Hotel. Following the prohibition of off-track gambling in 1887, the proximate expansion of Coney Island's working-class amusement parks, and the increased residential development of South Brooklyn, the grand resorts and hotels gradually shuttered and were torn down between 1910 and 1926. Today this section is known as Brighton Beach and Manhattan Beach, where Kingsborough Community College now stands close to the site of the former Oriental Hotel.

A black and white photo of a building

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*Oriental Hotel, 1880. Courtesy NYPL.*

**“A City within a City:” The Hotel St. George**

Northwest of Brooklyn’s sandy beaches, a different brand of hospitality had emerged between Brooklyn Heights and the Navy Yard, another pair of sites appealing to different social mores. Originally the site of an inn during the Revolutionary War (St. George's Tavern), the Hotel St. George was founded and built in 1885 by Captain William Tumbridge, a sailor and Civil War veteran. The hotel gradually expanded from its original 10-story tower with 130 rooms to five separate buildings with over 2,500 rooms by 1924. By the early 1930s, the Hotel St. George was the largest hotel in the United States.[[11]](#endnote-11) Also among one of New York's first hotels to be fully powered by electricity, the Hotel St. George had its own power plant and a custom air conditioning apparatus designed by William Tumbridge himself.

A close up of a building

Description automatically generatedThe hotel was truly a product of its time, a Gilded Age exemplar lavishly appointed in marble and bronze. The 1893 addition, designed by architect Montrose Morris, introduced a swimming pool, bowling alleys, shuffleboard, and Turkish baths to the hotel amenities. The hotel was sold by the Tumbridge family in 1922 to the real estate development firm, Bing & Bing for $3 million. The new owners set to work expanding the hotel and selected architect Emery Roth, an alumnus of the firm Burnham & Root, to design further additions to the complex. The most visible contribution is the St. George Tower, which, at 31 stories, was the second tallest building in Brooklyn Heights at the time. Acclaimed German artist and Art Deco designer Winold Reiss (designer of the Cincinnati Union Terminal) produced extensive designs for the St. George’s interior public spaces in the 1930s, including the swimming pool, the largest hotel ballroom in the world, and sixteen additional salons. For the writer Tom Wolfe, the ballroom was “the single most startling interior public space of the time in New York...as completed, with its myriad of colored lights articulating every facet, the ballroom was a brilliant tour-de-force, a real life version of movie-modern, a last blaring wail of jazz-age stylishness at its very best.” At its peak, the St. George represented a “city within a city,” among the crowning achievements of Reiss’s career.[[12]](#endnote-12)

*Postcard, Hotel St. George Colorama Ballroom, circa 1920s. Courtesy Winhold Reiss collection.*

The Navy Yard's proximity to the Hotel St. George was enormously beneficial during World War II. Personnel and soldiers, as well as their families, occupied many of the vacant rooms and suites at the hotel. Over the next twenty-odd years, the hotel reemerged as a destination for celebrities and locals alike, blue-blood and blue-collar families swimming in the pool, hosting events in the ballrooms, and taking up residence in one of the thousands of units in the complex. The most storied addition, started in 1929, was the salt-water Olympic-sized swimming pool designed by Willy Pogany, an engineering feat that required the hotel to drill six 110-foot deep wells into the bedrock to tap the bay water. Complete with mirrored ceilings and Art Deco-inspired mosaic work, along with a floor-to-ceiling waterfall, the pool presented a stark contradiction to the deepening crisis of the Depression.

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*Postcard, Hotel St. George Swimming Pool, circa 1930. Courtesy NYPL.*

Despite its many attractions (which included the Colorama Ballroom, featuring a color organ that coordinated music to a light show), the hotel went into foreclosure in 1933. A few relics of the St. George’s glory years still linger, including an Art Deco mailbox dating to the 1920s and a neon sign advertising Town Wine & Spirits (opened in 1934) on the ground floor. The federal disinvestment, industrial decline, and white flight that so dramatically affected New York City didn't spare the Hotel St. George. The famous pool was drained in 1974. Ten years later, the tower was converted into luxury co-ops. A major fire in 1995 destroyed much of the original hotel. The remaining structures have largely been converted to student housing.



*Advertisement, St. George Hotel, 1885. Courtesy* The Brooklyn DailyEagle *Archives.*

Just a few blocks southwest of the Hotel St. George, the Bossert Hotel, once considered the "Waldorf-Astoria of Brooklyn," is another famed early twentieth-century institution. Built in 1909 by Louis Bossert, a lumber magnate, the 14-story building was a favorite lodging for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1950s, and the site for the Dodgers’ World Series victory party in 1955. [[13]](#endnote-13) The Bossert was a more modest counterpart to the Hotel St. George, and dedicated most of its units to apartments. Much like the Hotel St. George, the hotel fell into serious disrepair during New York's economic low tide in the 1960s and 70s.[[14]](#endnote-14)

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*Menu Cover, Bossert Hotel, World Series celebration, 1955. Courtesy NYPL.*

**The Phoenix of Brooklyn: Gage & Tollner**

In nearby Downtown Brooklyn, the restaurant Gage & Tollner also became an important fixture in Brooklyn dining. In 1879, Charles M. Gage opened an oyster restaurant on Fulton Street. Not long after, Eugene Tollner became a partner in the venture, which was moved to 372 Fulton Street. The partners worked together for nearly 40 years before selling the business to Cunningham and Ingalls in 1911. Less than a decade later, Brad Dewey bought the restaurant under the conditions that he make no significant changes to the business. Dewey operated Gage & Tollner for 20 years, through prohibition and the Great Depression, until his death in 1938. Dewey's son, Edward, and his wife, Trudy, took over the family business in 1948. The family hired John Simmons as general manager in 1973, and the team led Gage & Tollner through the newly-implemented landmarks preservation process. Gage & Tollner was landmarked in 1975, one of the first interiors to receive the designation in the city.

The restaurant was sold again to Peter Aschkenasy in 1988. Aschkenasy selected acclaimed Southern chef Edna Lewis to lead Gage & Tollner's kitchen. Lewis transformed the menu, updating the staid classics to reflect her heritage and distinctively Southern sensibility. A 1989 *New York Times* review noted, "Befitting her culinary tradition, Mrs. Lewis cooks with full-throttle gusto. Subtlety—whether in salt, sugar or herbs—is not in the Southern vocabulary."[[15]](#endnote-15) The restaurant's revival, however, coincided with the economic decline of Downtown Brooklyn adversely affecting Gage & Tollner's prospects. Aschkenasy sold the restaurant to Joe Chirico, a Brooklyn restauranteur, in 1995. Chirico revitalized the facade and interior of the building (per the Landmarks Conservancy standards). The menu retained most of the classic dishes of yesteryear: Lobster Newburg, Clam Bellies, and Crabmeat Virginia. Chirico ran Gage & Tollner until closing in 2004. A rotating cast of occupants followed, starting with TGI Friday's until 2007; Arby's for less than a year; and a chain jewelry store.

A group of people standing in front of a building

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*Interior, Gage & Tollner, circa 1960. Courtesy* The Brooklyn Daily Eagle *Archives*

Until the outbreak of the pandemic, the restaurant was scheduled to reopen on March 15. It is hoped that it will now open later in 2020 under a new management team of Sohui Kim, Ben Schneider, and St. John Frizell. These Brooklyn restauranteurs will inaugurate a new era that celebrates Gage and Tollner’s storied history and menu mainstays, including soft-shell crabs, mutton chops, and a pork pot pie.[[16]](#endnote-16) To fulfill the buildings Landmarks designation, the interior will receive only functional updates. During the rehabilitation, workers discovered a trove of century-old artifacts: menus, customer notes, order slips, and even a check signed by a Brooklyn Dodgers player.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**The Ties of Work & Pleasure: Brooklyn’s Waterfront Manufacturing Districts**

The predominance of heavy manufacturing along the northern reaches of the Brooklyn waterfront precluded most casual visitors, but the vast shipping docks, factories, and dense population of single workers cultivated an informal working-class network of saloons and boarding houses that were a mainstay of Williamsburg, the Navy Yard, and Red Hook. The 65-mile long Brooklyn waterfront, geographically endowed with deep-water ports proximate to both Manhattan and the Atlantic Ocean, fostered the growth and global dominance of Brooklyn-based industry and shipping for over a century. Complex ecosystems of intermediary producers emerged, manufacturing over $250 million of goods and employing 110,000 workers by the end of the nineteenth century.[[18]](#endnote-18) Products included everything from ships, refined sugar, books, pencils, bread, garments, clocks, glass, wrought iron, oil, porcelain, paper, rope, leather, penicillin, glue, whiskey and gin, beer, paint, and shoes. Sugar and oil refining, however, dominated industry in Brooklyn, thanks to the powerful monopolies of the American Sugar Trust and Standard Oil, respectively.[[19]](#endnote-19) A curious and toxic blend of odors emanated from the plants, and much of the work, particularly at the sugar refineries, was dangerous, grueling work. By the early 1950s, Brooklyn hosted nearly 8,000 manufacturing firms, primarily concentrated along the western waterfront.

The Navy Yard and its environs were particularly fertile areas for longshoremen and workers to socialize after hours during Brooklyn’s ascendance to domination in manufacturing and shipping. Due to the strict gender norms in place for heavy industrial and longshoring work, auxiliary leisure activities were highly divided by gender. Saloons, doubling as informal theaters, were dubbed “free and easies,” venues for bar owners to sing or tell stories to patrons a few nights a week.[[20]](#endnote-20) The cramped and oppressive conditions of tenement housing and boarding houses in the mid-nineteenth century incentivized male laborers to look to their neighborhoods for amusement and relaxation. Saloons were a key locus for homosocial bonding, particularly for working single men who had lost ties to family, homeland, and the rhythms of preindustrial life. By 1896, a mere two years before the consolidation of New York City, Brooklyn had over 3,600 bars and saloons.[[21]](#endnote-21) Sands Street, by the Brooklyn Navy Yard, was a notoriously permissive locale for queer men to mingle and socialize. By the 1920s and 1930s, Sands Street’s reputation of sexual freedom and illicit activity crossed class lines, attracting middle- and upper-middle class young people eager to go “slumming” for authenticity and excitement.[[22]](#endnote-22) One acclaimed cabaret, Tony’s Square Bar, was just down Sands Street from the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Tony’s was a popular nightspot for sailors and their admirers during the decades leading up to and immediately following World War II, leading one *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* columnist to call Sands Street “The Navy’s Broadway.” The journalist went on to note that “when the navy was in town, the bar’s orchestra started going at noon and went all night.”[[23]](#endnote-23) A few hundred yards downshore, Tony Bonner’s Heights Supper Club was another popular night spot and was, by modern standards, Brooklyn’s first gay bar.

A close up of text on a white surface

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*Dinner Menu, Ladies & Gents Restaurant, Sands Street, 1906. Courtesy NYPL.*

**Immigration and Economic Change**

Progressive-minded reformers had, in response to what they saw as a troubling turn for New York’s moral compass, spearheaded passage of the 1896 Raines Laws, which prohibited saloons from selling alcohol on Sundays and between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. This law, however, did not apply to establishments that also hosted at least 10 guest rooms. In response, saloons, taverns, and restaurants clamored to erect slipshod bedrooms to get a hotel license—a highly lucrative source of income for state coffers. Throughout the city, but most especially in the industrial areas of the Brooklyn waterfront, these saloons-cum-hotels were a natural hotbed for sex workers. The outraged reformers, collectivized under the moniker as the Committee of Fourteen (a particularly focused and fervid sect of the New York Anti-Saloon League), lobbied to repeal the Raines Laws and replace them with a more punitive, wide-ranging policy.

Their first target was the liquor license. The New York State Excise Department was empowered to inspect “hotels” for building compliance and revoke licenses—an utterly fruitless strategy, thanks to the deep interest of Tammany officials in maintaining Raines hotels’ profitability. The Committee of Fourteen turned then to new fee structures for licenses, mandating a $1,200 licensing fee and an additional $1,800 insurance bond to serve alcohol. In return, local breweries, mostly based in Brooklyn (which depended tremendously on saloons as retailers) developed a rentier-like relationship with saloons and taverns, covering the fees and costs, fronting capital investments like rent, beer taps, and other necessary expenses. The Committee met with insurance companies instead, pressuring them to foreclose coverage on policyholders deemed “risky.” This strategy forced 500 Raines hotels in New York to surrender their licenses practically overnight. The last step was a formal agreement with the State Brewers’ Association (SBA) in 1908, which established a system of internal audits and inspections of saloons and hotels to root out “disorderly” establishments.[[24]](#endnote-24) By the end of 1912, Brooklyn hosted a mere 300 Raines Law hotels, down from 1,600 at the law’s inception.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Progressives’ anxiety was inextricable from the rising tide of nativism and anti-immigration sentiments that periodically washed over American discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. New York City, but Brooklyn particularly, has always been a landscape of contestation for land, resources, political power, and representation. The rapid macroeconomic transformations that continually restructured waterfront industry and its induced economies (such as saloons, entertainment, housing, and restaurants) reflected the ongoing social changes that characterize the borough to this day.[[26]](#endnote-26) Irish immigration to Brooklyn peaked in the mid-nineteenth century, as migrants escaping famine and religious and political persecution fled to America. German settlers, who would go on to dominate America’s brewing industries, arrived in Williamsburg and Bushwick during the postbellum years. Southern, Central, and Eastern Europeans, as well as Norwegian emigrants, arrived in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, populating Bensonhurst and Bay Ridge (Italian), Williamsburg, Sheepshead Bay, Flatbush, and Brownsville (Russian Jews), Greenpoint (Polish), and Red Hook (Norwegians).[[27]](#endnote-27) Although some traces of these waves of settlement remain, the demographic and economic changes during the decades leading directly to and following World War II had lasting effects that radically overturned these early relations between ethnicity, industry, culture, and place.

Perhaps the most visible sign of structural change came with the shuttering of the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1966. The closure came at the tail-end of a decades-long process of “white flight,” a phenomenon stimulated by waves of South-North migration of African-Americans, discriminatory federal housing policies, deeply-rooted racism, deindustrialization and the rise of the shipping container, the advent of the personal automobile, and the rise of the suburbs. Between the 1950 and 1960 Census, Brooklyn’s total population declined for the first time since early Anglo and Dutch settlement in the eighteenth century.[[28]](#endnote-28) Between 1967 and 1976, New York lost 25 percent of its factories and over 30 percent of its manufacturing jobs.[[29]](#endnote-29) New immigration patterns enabled by the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, the imposition of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico, along with later iterations of the Great Migration radically transformed the borough’s demography in the 1970s. Chronic disinvestment, both public and private, became a determining spatial and economic factor across much of New York City following the 1975 fiscal crisis. The ascendance of a service-based economy, with a particular niche in FIRE (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate), health and human services, education, and personal services transformed the city in subsequent decades. Brooklyn, long seen as a declining and mostly residential borough (a “bedroom community” of sorts for Manhattan workers), became the center of a focused effort to transition its economy away from manufacturing and distribution and into a service-based economy. An integral component of this transformation would be the conscious design of a local entertainment, tourism, and hospitality economic ecosystem.

**A “New Brooklyn” Ascending**

Brooklyn’s economic and social restructuring was, for a time, outside the formal purview of city policymakers. A “back to the city” movement in the 1980s and 1990s, beginning with the emergence of “brownstone Brooklyn”[[30]](#endnote-30) and accelerating as artists relocated from downtown Manhattan to north Brooklyn, catalyzed interest in a borough long considered to be at the margins of New York City. New arrivals, positioning themselves as “pioneers,” claimed and reinvented deteriorating spaces and cultures in search of “authenticity.” These early phases of gentrification were contingent on a wide rent gap in Brooklyn’s newly-coveted neighborhoods (a direct consequence of the concerted disinvestment and discriminatory lending policies enacted by the state and private industry in the postwar era in minority neighborhoods), which enticed young, college-educated, (mostly) white artists and professionals to put down roots in the postindustrial streetscape. Coupled with their fetishism for “authentic” (old) architecture, many of these transplants developed a nostalgia-tinged aesthetic in food and drink.

In 1998, artist and entrepreneur Andrew Tarlow opened Diner at the mouth of the Williamsburg Bridge. The restauranteur capitalized on the gritty milieu of the then-still industrial neighborhood, which hosted a diverse but historically tense population of Orthodox Jews, Puerto Ricans, and white ethnic residents. Disembarking the J/M/Z train at Marcy Avenue, patrons had a lonely but interesting walk down Broadway to the restaurant, an experience that fed into the burgeoning “Brooklyn” aesthetic developing at the time. Carefully curated details, like reclaimed Edison light fixtures, hand-crafted dining furniture and serviceware, an austere and patinated minimalism, and locally-sourced meats, cheeses, and vegetables for a stripped-down menu gradually came to characterize what has now become a standardized and marketable aesthetic. Although the success of the “new” Brooklyn appears to be an organic convergence of timing, taste, and entrepreneurship, the structural changes enabled by public policy in the early 2000s ensured that this economic transformation would have a lasting impact on Brooklyn’s waterfront.

This drastic shift in economic patterns in Brooklyn is the consequence of many different factors, including the 2008 economic recession, Mayor Bloomberg's wholesale rezoning of vast swaths of industrial land, and, more generally, an uptick in tourism to New York City and Brooklyn over the last 15 years. A 2005 report, *Initiative for a Competitive Brooklyn: Seizing Our Moment*, sponsored by the Brooklyn Economic Development Corporation, the Department of Small Business Services, Initiative for a Competitive Inner City, and the Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz's office, focused on four industry employment clusters primed for economic expansion and development to revitalize Brooklyn, one of which includes hospitality, tourism, and entertainment. The language invoked by the authors to boost the profile of Brooklyn is revealing. Introducing "The Case for Brooklyn" as a cultural destination, they write, "Brooklyn is a brand that is recognized nationally and internationally." Their recommendations for sustained sectoral growth in hospitality and entertainment sectors are contingent on cultivating and maintaining a specific brand image that can be broadcast to consumers around the world. This economic development platform, when considered in tandem with the Department of City Planning’s rezoning of 180 blocks in Williamsburg and Greenpoint (also in 2005), marks a wholly conscious effort to reposition the economy of Brooklyn’s waterfront away from manufacturing permanently.

The effects are striking. A closer look at employment statistics from the Brooklyn waterfront reveal the lasting impacts of these policies. Between 2003 and 2015, there was a 13.8 percent increase in all private sector jobs in the study area. In NAICS Sector 72 (Accommodation and Food Services), however, there was a 193 percent increase in jobs. The only NAICS sector to experience comparable job growth was 71 (Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation), which grew by 161 percent. In total, the Brooklyn waterfront hosts over 22,000 different food and beverage establishments and at least 45 hotels (not including Airbnb listings, which average in the thousands every night). Concomitant with this business growth has been an explosion in monthly rent prices since 2012, with an average increase of nearly 20 percent. The haphazard, ad hoc gentrification initiated in the 1970s and 1980s has given way to a full-fledged restructuring in Brooklyn, predicated largely on the emerging brand appeal and cultural cache of the borough for tourists and consumers.

Despite these radical changes, a few stalwarts remain rooted in the neighborhoods of the Brooklyn waterfront, testaments to their profiles in the community and the popular imagination. One, Toñita’s, is a Puerto Rican social club in Los Sures, South Williamsburg. Open since 1973, the club is owned by Maria Antonio Cay and still serves *sancocho* and *pernil* with BYO refreshments; hosts salsa dancing and pool games; and sponsors local youth baseball teams.[[31]](#endnote-31) Peter Luger Steakhouse, on the other side of Williamsburg, manages to capture both sides of the Brooklyn tradition. Open since 1887, known for its no-nonsense and brusque service, with a menu that hasn’t changed in decades, Peter Luger is also a major tourist stop and a glimpse into Brooklyn’s past.



*Advertisement, Peter’s Tavern (Peter Luger Steakhouse), 1910. Courtesy* The Brooklyn Daily Eagle *archives.*

Looking southward, Randazzo’s Clam Bar in Sheepshead Bay captures an old-school Italian American ambience. It’s a bit further off the beaten track for most Brooklyn tourists, but remains a beloved staple for locals. Brooklyn pizza, however, is still the top attraction for visitors, with favorites like Di Fara’s, Totonno’s, and Grimaldi’s hosting hours-long lines year-round. Old recipes, coupled with the City’s new marketing tactics, have transformed once-humble slice joints into destinations.

Despite the totalizing impact that gentrification and capital have had on the idea of Brooklyn as a global brand, there remains a diverse assortment of venues across the waterfront. A renewed public life has taken hold in areas of the waterfront that were once inaccessible for many locals and tourists alike. This accessibility and visibility, however, comes at a significant cost. Brooklyn, and many of its waterfront neighborhoods, have become deeply polarized along lines of class, race, and nationality, a reminder of the stark divisions that persisted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The economic yields of a branded Brooklyn are unevenly distributed: hotel and restaurant workers, made up mostly of non-white, non-native English speaking individuals, earn significantly less than the guests they serve. Is this polarization simply a reproduction of past patterns?

1. **Note**

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