

The Land That Became Our 10th Street Block

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Thanks to Betsey McGee and Brownstone Detectives

First People. The Native American tribe that lived in Brooklyn is known today by the name Canarsie, and this tribe was part of the larger Lenape confederation of Algonquin peoples. European explorers, conquerors, and settlers came in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Dutch began to buy land in 1636. A deal between the Dutch government and the Natives encompassed most of Brooklyn. Many of those "patents" were legitimate, but many, also, were manipulated, stolen, etc. In most cases, the indigenous people did not intend for the Dutch to own the land outright. Their understanding was more of a "sharing" of the land, but then they started putting up fences. By 1680, the indigenous people had lost all claims to the forested landscape. We need to see what more we can find out about the native people in our part of Brooklyn and their interactions and sales to Dutch.

European land acquisition. The Staat family (1710—1786) are the earliest recorded owners of the property that became our block. The property ran from around where the park is today -- likely including some of it, as well -- all the way down to and through, in some cases the Gowanus Creek.

Brooklyn develops as a city. In the 1830s, the old farm lands began to be broken up. The city of Brooklyn had just laid out the city on a grid system (which didn't fully come fully into existence everywhere for many years), and speculators, investors, and generally people with expendable income, expecting Brooklyn to quickly become a suburb of New York (which it eventually did), began to speculate in Brooklyn lands.

After the Staats' ownership, nine other owners held the land that eventually was developed as our block. Between 1786 and sometime in the mid-1880s, the land turned over nine times. Seven owners held the land they'd purchased for just a few years. The last owner was Isaac Henderson, 1869—1880s.

The Litchfields ended up owning a lot of Park Slope, but their ownership changed as land was added, sold, lost to tax arrears, and such. The Litchfield name comes up in the history of the land on Tenth Street for a few years in the 1850s when the family appear for a short period to either attempt to purchase the land, rent it, mortgage it, or provide a quit claim on it. Probably they did not have any controlling interest in it. The Litchfield brothers owned the Veicht-Cortelyou farm which ran from approximately where their villa was (now on Prospect Park property) down through the playground/park on 5th Avenue and all the way to the Gowanus Creek. A 1886 map puts the names of the major estate/farm owners atop the land they had owned (from 1st to 5th Streets) as well as the land owned by others. Atop the land associated with both sides of Tenth Street is Adriance Van Brunt, the owner from 1830--1853

It took quite a long time before the land in our area of Brooklyn produced rows of brownstone houses. This was due to a variety of factors, one being the land speculation bubble bursting in the 1830s and 1840s which created a deep recession. Other economic troubles took place between then and the 1880s when houses finally began to be built on 10th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues. Thus economic challenges slowed the development of "brownstone Brooklyn." For instance, for almost the entire period of the 1870s, very little housing was produced due to the economic depression.

Isaac Henderson likely did not sell until the 1880s because he was waiting on real estate prices to return to the level they were at when he paid for the swath of land that covered Tenth Street, but other factors were involved. Transportation was the major one. A ferry or two operated between NYC and Brooklyn before the East River bridges went up in the early 1880s. Brooklyn retained a bucolic air. Those who lived in Brooklyn tended to live either in its downtown area, on large extensive estates, or on farms belonging to merchant farmers who sold their produce in Manhattan.

What brought buyers to Brooklyn and finally increased the prices of houses here was the Brooklyn Bridge, completed in 1883. In the 1880s, a house-building mania began and lasted the entire decade until the economic panic of the 1890s.

This is the context in which speculators were determining whether and when to buy or sell. Sometimes, there was a personal economic reason (such as taxes) that made a landowner sell. Sometimes, it was a trade with another landowner

that was beneficial to both parties. Other times, owners needed the money for another purchase, or they were tired of waiting for prices to go up at a speed that they expected, or they simply lost interest, or they died.

It is said that speculating on Brooklyn land in these years, that is, to make money in Brooklyn real estate, you merely had to buy it, hold it for two years, and then sell it at a profit. Of course, this strategy didn't always work, but maybe this was the approach of the speculators who bought the land that is now the park-block of 10th Street in the 1850s/60s.

Building on properties was also delayed because the streets, although laid out on paper maps, did not actually exist until they were "opened" by the "city council" (which was followed by paving, sewers, gas lines, etc.). Until these steps were taken, there was no financial incentive to build houses on the land that became our block.

Block lots are sold to developers. Henderson's eventual sales of his land on the blocks of Tenth Street led to land conveyances from him to - eventually - the owners who built the individual rows of brownstones in the late 1880s. And there may be other individual buyers of plots of land between Henderson and the builders. The lots were sold either by Henderson directly to the builders, or he was selling them to "middle men" or to small-time speculators who were doing the legwork of breaking up the land into individual buildable lots and then selling them to builders. We know who built the rows of houses on 10th Street: the Browns, primarily, and then Thatcher, Reynolds, Assip & Buckely, and McClaren.

Knowing that we have more than 10 lines of conveyance (which end with a builder who builds a row of 4-7 houses), research on each could take from a few mins (if the conveyance goes, say, from Henderson directly to a builder in 1888), to 15-20 mins or more if the lineage involves several others owners who purchased the property for the same reasons that Henderson originally bought his land - speculation. This is the point where the land really starts getting broken up and sold as parcels of building lots, and for the block this means following more than 10 strings of conveyances.

For each property, the majority of conveyances are located on one or two pages at the Dept of Finance property books.