OF CABBAGES AND KINGS COUNTY

AGRICULTURE AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN BROOKLYN

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11. CASE STUDIES IN SUBURBANIZATION

Fresh and green the fields, with an almost imperceptible slope, rolled southward, and from this, the dividing line between Flatbush and Brooklyn, the Flatbush farmers had an unbroken and beautifully cultivated expanse of farming land to the limits southward of the village. Upon this northern border of the town, which was once so fair a picture of agricultural prosperity, the change into a city suburb has begun. To the northeast fences are thrown down, the old stone wall is leveled, the sickly-looking cows of the city milkmen endeavor to graze upon the short and dried grass; pigs and dogs and goats, rough men and dirty women, scold and scream and bark in mingled confusion from the shanties of the squatters that have taken possession of the open commons. It is sad for us who have been so fond of this country life to think that this may be a precursor of the change which shall slowly creep onward in advance of the city growth.

— Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, *The Social History of Flatbush*, 1880

The sadness that Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt felt in 1880 for the agrarian life that she suspected would soon be swept away by the Brooklynization of the county towns highlights an important factor in the sell-off of Kings County farms: once urban encroachment began to undermine the traditional benefits of rural life such as hunting and homogeneous social surroundings, the younger, inheriting, generation’s resistance to abandoning agricultural pursuits and embracing the city’s cultural advantages must have been severely weakened. By the end of the 1870s, as “[c]apitalists . . . awakened to the advantages offered for investment” in rural Kings County, the Dutch farmers
must have recognized that rurality and nature were “no longer within the
domain of nature. The city has stretched out its hand, and the mark of the
beast can usually be seen.” The outstretched hands of fruit and vegetable
thieves were just one of many troubling signs of urban intrusion.¹

Closer examination of the transition reveals a gradual crumbling of the
farmers’ ancestral or communal culture that in turn made rural Kings
County lands more vulnerable to a complete takeover by urban-minded
users. Lefferts Vanderbilt was reflecting on the outward signs of this cultural
erosion in Flatbush and its eventual consequences. Reduced to a mere “in­
congruity . . . found in all our modern, legally enlarged cities,” rural Kings
County could be viewed as the comic or tragic result of “the contending
forces of city and country.”²

This process had begun much earlier in Kings County. Indeed, Lefferts
Vanderbilt’s families by birth and marriage figured prominently among the
Dutch farm owners whose attachment to the land had made the transition
from traditional to speculative, even if their willingness to treat their land as
a commodity was not associated with the kind of geographic mobility ob­
served elsewhere in the United States. But commercial modernization had,
until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, only limped along be­
cause it both met with resistance by the entrenched farming community and
its governmental representatives, and had been undercut by the advantages
that real-estate developers and their clientele had found elsewhere in the
New York metropolitan region.³

Lefferts Vanderbilt’s nostalgia for the green fields of her youth was only
one aspect of the complex process of transition: no matter how much she
and her Dutch farming neighbors may have regretted the passing of coun­
try life, as astute investors they were determined not only to profit passively
from the transformation, but to promote it themselves. In 1875, five years
before she wrote her Social History of Flatbush, Lefferts Vanderbilt herself
submitted a petition to the Flatbush Board of Improvement — which was
presided over by John A. Lott and staffed by other scions of Dutch farming
families, including her husband and her brother, whom the state legislature
had appointed — to grade, improve, and open for public travel at her own
expense East New York Avenue between Ocean and Flatbush Avenue, all the
land for which she owned. Yet five years later she bemoaned the loss at this
very location of the “noble hickories, gum-trees, and oaks, with an under­
growth of dogwood and clumps of hazel.” In 1842, she exclaimed, it had been
“the very picture of rural and pastoral life! . . . [A]s yet there was no possible
sign from which the busy future could have been predicted.” But by 1880, “the shrieking locomotives” and troops of “pleasure-seekers” created the greatest imaginable contrast to the seclusion and tranquility of her youth. Bulldozing their way to modernity, as it were, while lamenting the inexorable destruction of the past coexisted as two modes of thought and action for premodern agrarians who were eager to exploit opportunities — until they had converted the last cabbage field into suburban real estate.4

THE MERCANTILE GENTRIFICATION
OF RURAL KINGS COUNTY

There have always been those who saw Brooklyn as a “banana republic” open for colonialist exploitation.
— Elliott Willensky, When Brooklyn Was the World, 1986

As they did in other parts of Long Island, wealthy New York businessmen selected certain desirable localities in southern Kings County as their “non-agricultural country seats.” The chief property-based and spatial difference between settlement by these rich merchants in New Utrecht and Flatbush was that those in New Utrecht owned considerable acreage, whereas those in Flatbush owned only a small amount of land surrounding their expensive and stately residences. The difference is striking on farmline maps, which show large chunks of land amongst the farms of Bay Ridge owned by William Langley, John Bullocke, George Hope, and others. Figure 22 shows the numerous Van Brunt, Bennett, and Bergen family farms in a row along Shore Road overlooking New York Bay and behind them the estates of several of the mercantile elite. In New Utrecht’s Northern Drainage District alone, 14 such residents owned 277 acres in 1871, the largest holdings (51 acres) being assessed to William Langley. Langley’s land formed half of a 109-acre farm at Yellow Hook (later Bay Ridge) that Tunis J. Bergen (1759–1826) had bought from the Cropsey family in 1807. Langley owned more than 92 acres in New Utrecht in 1870; a decade later, when his holdings had declined to 71 acres, those of clothing manufacturer Archibald Young had climbed to 158 acres.5

The gentrification of Flatbush and New Utrecht had been underway for several decades, attracting many well-to-do merchants from New York, who may have initially viewed their houses in those towns or Gravesend as summer homes. New York merchants also began buying acreage in New
Utrecht earlier than in Flatbush. William Langley, for example, appeared on the New Utrecht assessment roll in 1846 as owner of a 45-acre farm, followed in 1852 by Hope and Henry C. Murphy.6

This developmental difference between the two towns finds a parallel in the fact that by the 1850s scores of New Utrecht nonresidents owned lots, whereas no such ownership pattern had yet emerged in Flatbush. William C. Langley, for example, who died at the age of 91 in 1890 one of the "richest dry goods commission merchants in the city," bequeathing his son $1,000,000, "owned a country place at Bay Ridge." As early as 1860, when his household included a black cook, black coachman, and five black servants in addition to one Irish and two English gardeners, he reported to the Census of Population that he owned real estate worth $300,000 and personalty worth $100,000. Robert Fox, who moved from Brooklyn after the middle of the century, bought a farm and farmhouse from a widow, before
selling it and buying Fisher's Island in Long Island Sound. Jonathan Longmire, a jobber and importer in the linen trade, married a granddaughter of Henry S. Ditmas and spent $100,000 on his house in Flatbush, which, together with its greenhouse, was located across the street from Prospect Park.7

The business career of Archibald Young, one of the rural towns' richest residents during the period of the Civil War income tax, described a much different path before his death at 78 in 1895. From upstate New York, he became a partner in his father's clothing manufacture business, retiring with a “fortune” by 1870. But a quarter-century earlier he had embarked on a land-buying venture that helped transform New Utrecht as he unleashed a latter-day enclosure movement in the course of gaining ownership of more than one-half of the Bath Beach section of the township:8

he went with his father-in-law to Bath Beach. In order to make a village out of the little settlement he bought the old Lott farm and cut it up into lots, which he sold cheaply. While engaged in real estate speculation he opened a public park on the water front. . . . Later he purchased a part of the Bennett farm and also a portion of the Benson farm, upon which is Bensonhurst. In 1872 Mr. Young . . . bought the commons west of the Dycker Meadows. This tract for years had been used as a public pasture ground, and when Mr. Young fenced it in there was great indignation for a time.9

Young, who in 1879 became a director of the Brooklyn, Bath, and Coney Island Railroad, still owned 187 acres in 1886 in addition to numerous lots. When he bought 40 acres of the old Cropsey farm in 1885, the Rural Gazette suggested that Bath Beach “might very properly be called Youngstown.”10

That three people who had been born in Paris and Milan and whose occupation was “opera singer” were returned by the 1860 Census of Population as residing in New Utrecht suggests that it was no longer an insular community of boers. Cultural aspirations culminated in the incorporation in 1871 of the Bay Ridge Atheneum “for the purpose of encouraging and cultivating literature, music, and the arts.” The 30 incorporators included almost the entire Manhattan-based urban business elite, such as Edward Armstrong, John Bullocke, George Hope, Joseph Perry, and William C. Langley, as well as the wealthy retired farmer J. Remsen Bennett and the ubiquitous Teunis G. Bergen. The town's heterogeneity was, nevertheless, underscored by the fact that as early as the Civil War one-fourth of males between the ages of 18 and 45 were aliens.11
Businesses, such as William Matthews's large (D. Appleton & Company) bookbindery in Williamsburgh, Henry Johnson's bookstore, and Edward Hincken's ship brokerage, also required their owners — all British — to commute from the rural towns, which were too sparsely populated to support such large undertakings, to Brooklyn or Manhattan. Several of the other richest residents of Kings County were also English, including the gum manufacturer Davies.¹²

The 1869 Internal Revenue Assessment Lists — chosen for scrutiny in chapter 10 because they supplemented the 1869–70 Census of Agriculture — were not atypical. Table 38 shows the incomes and occupations of the 10 taxpayers reporting the highest incomes in rural Kings County in the years 1863 through 1871. The tax data for the years 1862–1865 and 1870–71 reinforce the pattern that prevailed in 1869–70: not a single one of the 10 highest-income taxpayers in any year was a farmer. The highest-income farmer in each of these years was ranked: 28th in 1862 (J. Remsen Bennett, New Utrecht, $3,061.22); tied for 19th in 1863 (Teunis Bergen, New Utrecht, $5,000); 21st in 1864 (Robert Magaw, Flatlands, $7,475.70); 23rd in 1865 (J. Remsen Bennett, $6,484.62); 19th in 1870 (John Ryerson, $2,387.36); and 17th in 1871 (Jacob Ryerson, Flatlands, $3,279.16).¹³

The income-richest resident of rural Kings County in 1869, Edward Ridley, was a 54-year-old Englishman whose income that year was almost $44,000 (including the exemption). At the 1870 Census of Population, he valued his personal estate at $350,000 — almost three times greater than that of the very wealthy John Lefferts — and his real estate at $70,000. Ridley, whose large and famous fancy and millinery goods store had been located in Grand Street in Manhattan since 1849, maintained a “beautiful homestead” in Gravesend, which he had bought from an old-line farm family there, but most of the land that he owned was in the Parkville section of Flatbush. Ridley’s store employed almost as many people (1,700) as the total population of Gravesend.¹⁴

That so many wealthy merchants whose income derived from urban enterprises resided in the county’s rural sections as early as the 1860s suggests that the lack of rapid transit was not an insuperable barrier to suburban commuters. After all, Edward Ridley, even after the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, drove his carriage home seven miles to Gravesend every evening — despite the dangers of horse-drawn transportation and the serious injuries that he and his wife had once sustained. Nevertheless, even Ridley was alive to the barriers to residing in rural Kings County for those who worked in
Manhattan: in 1881 he proposed to build 50 cottages on the 40 acres he owned near Kings Highway in Gravesend to rent to his employees at moderate prices — but only after he completed arrangements with the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad to operate trains all year round.15

MAKING THE ENVIRONMENT SAFE FOR SUBURBANIZATION: FIGHTING THE IRISH PIGGERIES

It was fortunate for Flatbush that wise men with long vision came and bought the farms, rather than greedy and short-sighted speculators.

—Flatbush of To-Day: Realm of Air and Light, 1908

The disamenities of living amongst densely packed working farms apparently did not deter wealthy city businessmen from preferring the rural towns to more conveniently located Brooklyn or Manhattan, any more than they prompted John A. Lott or John Lefferts, rich scions of farm families who continued to own land while they focused their attention on urban business affairs, to abandon Flatbush. At a time when these cities were themselves plagued with stenches and diseases emanating from manure-strewn streets, residents may not have perceived farm odors as posing any special unpleasantness or hazard. Nevertheless, both the agricultural and mercantile wings of the elite devoted some of their influence to combating health hazards not related to vegetable farming. Despite their wealth and power, some of their efforts seem laughably ineffectual. For example, in 1879, five years after the Flatbush Board of Health had been established and had issued a Sanitary Code forbidding owners to allow cattle to go at large, the board conceded owners were violating it in some sections of town. Throughout the 1870s, contractors and others continued to be “in the habit of” dumping night soil on empty lots and unloading wagons with manure and heaping it within the town limits.16

A related environmental battle lasted even longer and absorbed more of the political-economic elite’s resources. Before it succumbed to or welcomed the city, the elite was preoccupied with Sisyphean struggles to dam the alien influences of an ever-approaching Brooklyn in general and the in-rushing Irish in particular. As early as 1873, John A. Lott, John Lefferts, Abraham Ditmas, and “a very large number of our oldest, best, most influential and wealthy citizens” stepped forward to prevent the sale of intoxicating liquors in Flatbush on the sabbath. Their mission would last into the
1880s and demand much of their time. The success with which Lefferts, John Z. Lott (taking his deceased father’s place), five members of the Ditmas family, and others remonstrated with the town excise board to deny the application for a hotel in the beginning of 1880 proved to be only one small victory. A few months later, “A Delegation of the Principal Property Owners,” including Lott, Lefferts, Ditmas, and William Matthews, personally waited on the excise board to urge it to grant liquor licenses only under the strict letter of the law. Perceiving that achievement of their objective would require organizational continuity, 15 of Flatbush’s largest taxpayers met at Matthews’s residence to form the Law and Order Association of the Town of Flatbush. They appointed as counsel the politically well connected lawyer, William Gaynor, who then managed their dealings with the excise board.17

In addition to preventing liquor sales on Sundays and all liquor sales without a license, the association’s object was combating houses of ill repute. Although John Lefferts held so many positions in so many private and public bodies that he was constrained to resign from some (such as the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad) for sheer lack of time, he frequently attended hearings and trials pertaining to alcohol and prostitution. In 1880, for example, Gaynor, on behalf of the association, represented a resident of Flatbush who successfully sued a neighboring tenant to have him removed for running a brothel. Present in court were Lefferts (just returned from visiting his Vermont farm), his potato farming son James, John Z. Lott, Abraham Ditmas, William Matthews, Henry Lyles, and other wealthy association members.18

Despite their wealth, the political power of the diversifying Dutch farmers and their mercantile allies was far from absolute. And, in at least one environmentally significant conflict, upstart Irish businessmen held the elite at bay. The goal of eliminating the piggeries near the Brooklyn city line stymied the leading citizens of Flatbush for more than a decade — despite the early declaration by Philip Crooke, counsel of the Board of Health and himself one of the town’s powerholders, that “the removal of this stigma from the gateway of our town, was the most important thing which could claim our attention at present.” On September 9, 1874, the newly appointed town health officer, Dr. H. Bartlett, himself a Flatbush landowner, reported to the Board of Health on his inspection tour through “the stench infected and pig inflicted district” lying between Flatbush Avenue and the New Lots line. There he found “piles on piles of manure, mixed with the contents of privy vaults, distilled hops, decayed meats, and vegetables.” This manure business was run largely by nonresidents who came to Flatbush “only to
make money irrespective of consequences." The piggeries and bone-boiling establishments so reeked with filth that by contrast the Augean stables were "a paragon of neatness." The piggeries, where the pigs were fed garbage and swill transported from Brooklyn, were also operated by nonresidents and "of course, non-taxpayers; many of them squatters and not even paying rent." Whereas Brooklyn and New Lots had suppressed piggeries, the entire northern border of Flatbush, three miles long and one-third mile wide, was used "for purposes detrimental to health, to the exclusion of more desirable residents." Bartlett, equally attuned to property and health interests, found it a "burning shame" that such men had been allowed to take possession of a square mile which, "from its proximity to the city, should be valuable, not only destroying its material value but rendering it actually dangerous to life and health." 19

The following week, Bartlett reported to the board that as a result of patrols by his sanitary police inspectors, the feeding of garbage had been entirely stopped, the dumping of manure effectively prevented, and most of the pigs "removed to more salubrious climes." He added that although some proprietors had been defiant, other larger operators had expressed a willingness to comply, but requested initial leniency "as they would suffer great pecuniary loss." When Bartlett not only supported their plea, but also recommended reducing the number of sanitary officers, board counsel Crooke, who took a dim view of the piggery operators' credibility, replied: "As a man averse to heavy stinks, let me tell you that within three nights from the time you took off these extra men, the nuisance would be as bad as ever." Crooke's interventionist approach uncovered tensions within the town's political-economic elite. Jacob V. B. Martense, the Flatbush town supervisor and a retired farmer who still rented his farmland out to tenants, and the board's only farmer-member, urged a decidedly more cautious fiscal approach: "Well, we should consider the expense. We don't want to spend too much." Crooke, obviously speaking on behalf of himself, Leferts, John A. Lott, and other rich property owners, saw what was at stake for the drive toward suburbanization: "Those who pay the most taxes are the most willing to bear any extra expense. The largest taxpayer in the town is willing to pay any additional tax which may be incurred by action of this board." The elite appeared to suffer its first defeat when the board empowered Bartlett "to do as he thought best." 20

At a special meeting on September 23, 1874, Dr. Bartlett instructed the board that a distinction had to be drawn between District No. 1, the area between Flatbush Avenue and Clove Road, and District No. 2, lying between
Clove Road and the New Lots town line, farther away from the village. Whereas the great majority of operators in District No. 1 paid neither taxes nor rent and were "consequently not worthy of much consideration," most operators in District No. 2 owned property, some of them considerable amounts, and had occupied it for a long time. Bartlett impressed on the board the need to deal with what he called the most important question that it would ever be asked to decide — how to maintain the town's "material growth and prosperity" and to guard the inhabitants' health in the face of special interests who profited from the piggeries and knew how to influence politicians. A considerable number of men, many "honorable and law-abiding citizens," according to Bartlett, were "largely interested pecuniarily in the perpetuation [of] this evil." It was only "natural" that they spent money freely on the "powers that be." They had offered their support, and the not inconsiderable support of their "fellows" "to any aspirant, no matter what his character or fitness, so long as he can further their cause." Their success had been so great that "those men are made to believe" that the board's regulations were "only a dead letter." 21

Bartlett's remarks seem odd since the (largely Irish) group that he singled out lacked the wealth and political power of Flatbush's landed and mercantile elites. 22 Nevertheless, the board again avoided taking the hard-line approach that Crooke had proposed earlier. Instead, it resolved that no permits be granted for keeping swine or cattle to be fed on city garbage or swill between Flatbush Avenue and Clove Road and north of East New York Avenue, and that no one be allowed to dump manure there "except for strictly agricultural purposes." A motion proposed by Martense was also adopted that because a "large amount of capital is invested" in the piggeries and a "large pecuniary loss" would result from their sudden suspension, they would be given until April 1, 1875, to remove all such animals provided that they operated in the interim under the board's supervision. Tongue in cheek, the Rural Gazette suggested accommodating Brooklyn's desired enlargement by letting it annex the "exhilerating [sic] piggeries" along with the county institutions. 23

By May 1875, however, the board received a petition from a number of the town's Dutch political-economic leaders, including John Vanderbilt, John Lefferts, and Martense (who was no longer town supervisor or a board member), asking the board to take summary proceedings to remove the piggeries east of Flatbush Avenue. But even these luminaries could not assert their will summarily. A report to the board the next month found that because of the great distance from the populated part of the town, the ef-
fluvia were not so great as to be detrimental. In 1877, residents, including P. L. Schenck, the medical supervisor of the county hospital and himself a scion of one of the county’s Dutch farming families, requested that the board take measures against epidemics that the piggeries might cause once the weather became warm. At the same time, a standing committee appointed by the board to examine the piggeries reported that several of them were not fit to continue. Significantly, virtually all the owners of these piggeries had Irish surnames. Later that year the board of health raided some piggeries, ordering nonresidents to remove them, while residents were merely required to put their operations in “proper sanitary condition.”

In 1878, the elite once again urged the board to act. This time William Matthews, Jonathan Longmire, and John Prince (three of the town’s income-richest mercantile businessmen), Lefferts Vanderbilt, John Lefferts, and William Williamson and George Schenck (two of the very few Dutch farmers in Flatbush still operating their own farms, which were on the less populated side of town near the piggeries) asked that the piggeries between Clarkson Avenue and the Brooklyn city line be removed. When the health officer reported that the 82 piggeries in Flatbush exceeded the previous year’s count by 20 and contained 5,000 hogs, the board merely moved to enforce the sanitary code’s prohibition of transporting garbage. In a transparent delaying tactic, Supervisor Peter Williamson and one of the other members unsuccessfully moved to appoint a committee to inspect the piggeries. The Rural Gazette, losing patience, both found it mysterious that Williamson could put himself on record as favoring these pestilences and solved the mystery: Williamson might have political friends who did “not favor catering to the lowest element of society,” but the supervisor himself apparently found it “necessary to become surety for those who are not considered law abiding in order that his political supremacy may be sustained.”

In 1881, the elite — including, once again, Lefferts, Vanderbilt, Lott, and Matthews — were still remonstrating in vain to cause the board to abate the nuisance. On September 12, John Lefferts himself attended the board meeting, this time expressly abjuring any appeal to property values. Instead, he stressed that Flatbush was “eminently a place of homes and residences,” that the odors should not be tolerated, and that the board should use its power to suppress the piggeries. Two days later, Dr. John Zabriskie, the new health officer and member of a large landowning family, read his report detailing the “disgusting business” of boiling garbage in immense vats to a “seething mass,” which was allowed to run to waste on the premises, which then became the pigs’ favorite wallowing ground. Appended was a list of the names
of the occupants of the establishments, fifty of sixty of which appear to have been Irish. After taking a number of partial measures, the board — which now included members of such prominent landed elite families as Vanderveer, Lott, and Zabriskie — on September 22, 1881, ordered the piggeries declared nuisances to be discontinued by January 1, 1882. It also adopted a regulation prohibiting the keeping of “more than two animals of the species hog” on any premises without the board’s permission.26

To no one’s surprise, “Pigtown” continued to thrive. The Rural Gazette explained the failure of the health board’s “[s]pasmodic efforts” against operators — whose names identified them as Irish — by reference to “politics . . . and as the piggery men held the balance of power they were simply warned not to keep nuisances.” By “politics” the newspaper meant that the votes of “that section have always been purchasable.” By the summer of 1884, the newspaper disclosed that some piggeries kept thousands of pigs. Late that year, under deceptively hopeful headlines, the Rural Gazette reported that thenceforward no swine, dead or alive, could be brought into or taken out of Flatbush without a permit. Pressing its credibility, it reported the next spring that the piggery nuisance was “very nearly exterminated.” In fact, however, the Rural Gazette expired before the piggeries: in its last word on the subject before it ceased publication, the newspaper was constrained to concede in 1885, 11 years after it began documenting the fight against them, that the piggeries had grown bold once again.27

**SUBURBANIZING FORCES**

[1]It has only been within a few years that the farms have been cut up into building lots and the New Flatbush has come into existence. It was most fortunate that the farms were held intact until this period. . . . Had the farmers sold their land thirty or forty years ago, and the tide of city expansion been in this direction, Flatbush, to-day, would not be the beauty spot that it is.

—Flatbush of To-Day: The Realm of Air and Light, 1908

Frederick Law Olmsted knew in 1879 that Brooklyn was an essential part of New York as a metropolis, but only in the same speculative sense as Newark, Bridgeport, and Yale College. Because Kings County had not yet become a real part of New York, the city had experienced the recent urban tendency toward compact and vertical business and social concentration but not the concomitant broad and open residential dispersion. New York thus
largely lacked residences “combining urban and rural advantages, neither solitary . . . nor a mere slice of a block,” which were found in “healthy and pleasing localities, with quick and frequent transit to business, social, artistic, literary and scholarly centres,” and were “springing up in hundreds of charming neighborhoods about London and Paris,” and from which Boston and cities in the West were formed. New Yorkers made much less use of such areas than the inhabitants of any other large city because hitherto there have been no thoroughly healthy suburban neighborhoods sufficiently accessible about New York. In time such neighborhoods will be formed. Whenever they are, the metropolitan advantages of New-York and the profits of its local trade must be greatly increased by constantly increasing accessions to its population of men who have accumulated means elsewhere, and who wish to engage in other than purely money-making occupations. Such men, living under favorable circumstances and with capital and energies economically directed to matters of general interest, are the most valuable constituents of a city; and it is by their numbers, wealth and influence, more than anything else, that a city takes the rank in the world of a metropolis.  

The opening of the Brooklyn Bridge four years later made that incorporation much less metaphorical: Brooklyn “offered its broad expanse of uncovered acres within the city for the easy occupation of those who wish homes, either modest or splendid. The capital and the sea were henceforth also nearer to neighborhood.” Although Kings County would make dispersion possible, residential concentration would soon replicate itself there. But before any of these forces could make themselves felt, the territorially dominant farming sector had to be eliminated. Once that impediment had been removed, Brooklyn would, as Abraham Abraham of Abraham and Straus, told the New York State legislature on behalf of Brooklyn’s mercantile sector, offer a consolidated Greater New York “a city naturally endowed, and not exceeded by any other in the land, with a boundless territory for a large population, washed by the waves of the ocean and its numerous bays thus insuring healthfulness and salubrious air.”  

The seeming inexorability of the suburbanization of Kings County was rooted in Manhattan’s constricted geography: “The city was like a growing potato enclosed in a narrow tube. It wanted to expand in all directions, but the only line of growth was northward.” Brooklyn’s advantage was twofold: not only could its residents reach Manhattan’s business district
more quickly than could Manhattanites north of 59th Street or Central Park, but it was also favored by an “enormous and inexplicable difference in the market values of real estate.” Whereas

[independent homes on Manhattan Island are already beyond the reach of any but the wealthy, . . . land is . . . so much cheaper . . . in Brooklyn, that a residence property can be purchased outright in Brooklyn, for what would pay only two years’ rent of it in many parts of New York. . . . Upon this important fact is the prospect for a new era of prosperity for Brooklyn founded. . . . To the individual . . . it means, first, a home with all the advantages of residence in New York at from a tenth to a fifth of the original cost, and, second, a vastly larger annual increase in the value of his property and, consequently, a larger income upon his investment. . . . Brooklyn borders are wide enough for four times as many people as she now contains. . . . These are facts upon which the home-seeker and investor may depend.31

In spite of their unceasing promotion of the unique residential opportunities that Kings County’s formerly rural sections offered, “New York’s real estate developers were unable to take a clear position on consolidation” with Brooklyn. The authoritative Record Estate Record and Builders’ Guide was ambivalent. On the one hand, it advocated development of the northern part of the existing New York City rather than “extending ourselves promiscuously over all the adjacent territory . . . of not very easily assimilated material.” Although the magazine was willing to “regard Brooklyn as a possible rival in the not distant future, provided always that its clapboard domiciles do not get burned to the ground some day,” a Greater New York “means the promotion of the interests of Kings county . . . [m]erely that we may surpass Paris in population and keep ahead of Chicago.” This resistance was based in part on the argument that since Brooklyn taxes were much heavier on a higher valuation of property, taxes for New Yorkers would inevitably have to be raised. On the other hand, the Record simultaneously perceived an identity of interest rooted in the fact that Wall Street real estate ultimately benefited from the growth of the periphery, and opined that equalization of taxes would “naturally” come about. The press generally supported railway construction in Kings County, which “should soon be filled with fine houses,” while “the adjacent territory in Queens county will increase in value so rapidly that the men who own property there will be made rich in a few years.”32

Although the advent of large-scale speculators and developers by the late
1880s meant that suburbanization no longer proceeded haphazardly, individual real-estate firms’ profit considerations did not amount to planning. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* limned the new state of affairs in 1893:

> The days of unmethodical suburban settlement have passed. Outlying villages and towns which derive their sustenance and owe their existence to the enterprise and needs of greater communities are no longer suffered to grow to maturity in whatever manner chance or caprice suggest. Where the prospective suburbanite once bought his building site from a farmer who half reluctantly parted with a portion of his ancestral acres, and gave for the purchaser’s money no other equivalent than a piece of ground of questionable value, there can be purchased to-day property ... supplied with all the modern conveniences calculated to enhance its value in the future. The wealth of a number of millionaires is attributable to judicious operations in suburban realty, and to the enterprise of such men is due the existence of the several beautiful villages just beyond the confines of Brooklyn.33

Exactly how these enterprising men implemented their precept that outlying villages, which have “never, except in name, risen above the dignity and measurement of a farming community,” could not be suffered to grow to maturity unless subordinated to the urban property interests’ conception of the proper function of farmland, will be explored by reference to Flatbush and Bensonhurst in New Utrecht.34

### Flatbush Bought and Sold

Meeting an old resident of Flatbush — a Mr. Fitzpatrick — he inquired if it was true that we had purchased the Cortelyou farm. I told him it was.

> “Well, thin,” said he, “yez’ll niver sell thot farm in all yer loife.”

I inquired on what grounds he based his prediction. Fitzpatrick’s reasons were quite terrifying:

> “Why, there’s more schnakes on the Cortelyou farm than was iver druv out of Oireland by Saint Pathrick. Oi’ve seen mosquitoes so t’ick in Flatbush thot when yez opened yer mouth you’d almost shpit mosquitoes, and Oi’ll warrant ye thot there’s more schnakes in the Cortelyou woods than that there’s mosquitoes in Flatbush.”


Just as Kings County farmers were achieving their historic peak output at the time of the Tenth Census in 1880, Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, the
56-year-old daughter of Senator John Lefferts, sister of the like-named pre-eminent political-economic manager of modernizing Flatbush, and widow of Judge John Vanderbilt, was writing her reminiscences about Flatbush with unmistakable nostalgia for a rural way of life doomed to extinction:

The southern borders of Flatbush bound the towns on which the ocean waves measure the rise and fall of the tides; toward the north lies the ridge of hills that long kept back the ebb and flow of the tide of human life in the adjoining city. In past years Flatbush slept as quietly between the two as if the waves of the one could no more reach it than could the waves of the other. But the separating hills have been leveled, and the village has been awakened by the noise of approaching voices. The tide of increasing population within the city boundary has risen higher and higher, and has swept hitherward in larger and ever-increasing circles. The first ripple of this rising tide has touched our borders, and before long the sudden rush of some great wave will sweep away every trace of village life.35

Fifteen years earlier Lefferts Vanderbilt had already glimpsed the alien incursions when she was compelled to warn her even wealthier neighbor Elizabeth Ludlow that vagrants had been setting fires in the fields, necessitating a neighborhood watch association.36 That the rural Dutch-American idyll was on the verge of collapse as modern transportation brought urbanity ever closer was underscored by an 1874 report in the *New York Times*, which paid scant attention to the rural Kings County towns:

For some weeks past a large number of Brooklyn roughs have been in the habit of going to Flatbush every Sunday, and gathering ... ostensibly to play ball and other games. Many complaints have been made of them by the residents to the Police. They are said to be a regular band of marauders, who have made themselves a terror to the citizens by entering saloons, and private dwellings even and demanding food, and liquor, which they took by force when refused. Yesterday Superintendent Folk sent a detachment of thirty policemen ... to Flatbush with orders to arrest all whom he might find acting in a disorderly manner. They arrived at Flatbush about 2 P.M., and surrounded the gang, and succeeded in arresting forty of them, who were brought to Brooklyn and locked up.37

Nor were such incursions peculiar to Flatbush. A few months later 15 “roughs” from Brooklyn and New York who had been annoying people in the vicinity of the estate of William Langley, one of New Utrecht’s rich-
est merchant princes, were arrested, while the neighboring residence of the family of the deceased farmer-lawyer, Daniel Roberts, was burglarized. Ninth-generation Dutch farmers might well have asked themselves what overarching cultural virtues they continued to enjoy in raising cabbages in a backwater vulnerable to depredations by aliens. After all, just three weeks after this marauding, the state legislature prohibited the killing of robins, brown thrashers, or starlings during nine months of the year — three years after it had enacted a five-year ban on deer hunting in Kings County. Such pessimism must have been powerfully reinforced by yet another sign of urban propinquity: petty thieves had become so bold during harvest time that farmers had to put watchmen in the fields. Nostalgia was an understandable mode of relating to the past among these “direct descendants of the first settlers,” who, into the 1890s, made it a part of “the delightful social life in the old Dutch town” to “get together and talk about the Indians which their ancestors killed.”

Yet as late as the 1880s “many large tracts of purely agricultural land and even much wild wood land” still covered central Kings County. In 1884, the *New York Daily Tribune* published a travelogue of Flatbush touting it as “the only pleasant suburb of New-York or Brooklyn” that the author, a new resident, had ever found. Unlike the others, it was not filled with rubbish-strewn vacant lots and pigpens and cow stables that “are rank and smell to heaven and . . . the abomination of desolation.” An even more “quaint and ancient” picture emerged from a piece on New York’s suburbs in *Lippincott’s Magazine* the same year:

[Y]ou have only to drive half a mile away on either side [of Flatbush Avenue] to forget that you are in a world where horse-cars exist. There are long and leafy lanes which look very much as they must have looked when British riflemen marched through them a hundred and eight years ago this August, past farm houses which even then were old, and of which many are still standing. . . .

It seems strange that these relics of colonial times should be lying in the path of yearly-broadening Brooklyn. . . . It all comes of the Batavian inertia. The houses are still inhabited by the descendants of their builders, who follow as nearly as practicable the ancient ways.

Flatbush’s antediluvian character was symbolized by the fact that as late as 1889, its main thoroughfare, Flatbush Avenue, was in the “unique position” of not belonging to the town, but being owned by the Flatbush Plank Road Company, which, under the presidency of John Lefferts had long paid
good dividends and "exacts toll from all vehicles which pass over it." Lefferts was, by the 1880s, the premier modernizer of Flatbush, but his long-term and short-term material interests were apparently in conflict in connection with the town's efforts to abolish the toll. (In 1878 the company had objected to routing a steam railroad along Flatbush Avenue because steam engines might drive away wagons and thus reduce the company's revenues.) When the company's original 30-year legal existence was about to come to an end in 1883, it reorganized and extended its duration by another 30 years. By this point, Lefferts, who at the time of the original incorporation had been the company's largest shareholder with one-sixth of its shares, had secured almost a majority (44 percent) of them. When the committee established by a town meeting in 1883 to examine the issue of the toll gate requested that the shareholders, acting "for the best interests of the town," present the road to the town "for nothing or for a moderate figure," Lefferts, while demurring that he and the other directors lacked authority to act on behalf of the shareholders, was merely willing to state his belief that the road "could be bought at a fair valuation." In the event, it took six years and authorization by the state legislature for the town to spend up to $10,000 to purchase the road.41

It was precisely these remnants of the Dutch agricultural past that prompted modernizers to insist that Flatbush's "streets must be opened and large tracts of farm land yielded up to the demand for suburban homes." Once real estate had been mobilized, the Rural Gazette argued in 1883, "there can be no doubt of our population and wealth quadrupling in the next five years" if only rapid transit were introduced.42

One of the most trenchant contemporary analyses of deagriculturalization was offered by a local historian and longtime resident of Flatbush, Daniel Tredwell, who had been chief clerk of the Supreme Court of Kings County from 1850 to 1895. In a 1914 address to the Kings County Historical Society, the 88-year-old Tredwell provided an account that referred back to events that had taken place when he moved to Flatbush 35 years earlier. The choice of years is fortunate, since Tredwell's reference year, 1879, coincides with the year for which the 1880 Census of Agriculture collected harvest data.43 About the time of his arrival,

Flatbush farming lands were becoming no longer remunerative as such — land had become too valuable for truck farming and was now classified real estate. The owners, successors of the Dutch pioneers, were just preparing to close out the period of farming which had been suc-
cessful as a money making industry beyond all precedents in this country and convert their acres into building lots. Simultaneously with this determination all the farms in the town were on the market for sale and the issue was no longer cabbages and potatoes, but real estate and lots for construction purposes. Speculators jumped at the opportunity.

The original farmers of Flatbush had large productive farms with all modern appliances through which they had attained to wealth — but the earliest method of farming was primitive and crude and followed in general that of the fatherland. But when we came to Flatbush no farmers in the country were better equipped than they for obtaining the best results in their line of agriculture. . . . John Lefferts, our nearest neighbor, raised on his farm that year 11,000 bushels of potatoes which he sold to relieve the famishing population of Manhattan at $2.50 per barrel. On that potato patch of Mr. Lefferts’ now stands [sic] 320 dwellings and apartment houses with a population probably of 2,000 to whom the entertaining grocers of Flatbush are retailing potatoes at $2.50 a peck — a masterly adaptation of constructive larceny.

Tredwell’s account supports the argument that market gardening in Kings County was the most advanced and profitable of its kind in the United States, and that the Dutch farmers, who amassed “a greater average amount of wealth . . . than any other class in the county,” dismantled their productive apparatuses not because property taxes exceeded the financial capacities of their farms, but because suburbanization promised even greater profits. This view accords with an anonymous manuscript from 1920, which emphasized the tenacity of the Dutch farmers’ attachment to their land: “They had many opportunities to sell at tempting prices, but it was not until after the annexation of Flatbush to Brooklyn in 1894, that they gave a willing ear to such offers, and then only because they realized that the rural character of the town was gone forever.”

According to Charles Andrew Ditmas, the 22-year-old scion of one of the most illustrious Dutch families, it was the “historic sale” of the Martense homestead on February 20, 1889, that marked “the beginning of that great real estate movement.” Nostalgically noting in 1909 that “the last semblance of farm life is being removed from this rural section,” young Ditmas saw Greenwood Cemetery as “a reminder of the time when all this land was open country and when this farm included a part of the cemetery.” The turning point took place in the early 1890s.

Henry Adolph Meyer, one of the developers chiefly responsible for the
conversion of Flatbush farms into residential real estate, had been the unsuccessful Republican candidate for mayor of Brooklyn in 1891, later unsuccessfully sought to develop Jamaica Bay, and, as a Democrat, was Deputy Dock Commissioner of New York City from 1918 to 1934. Born in 1860, Meyer, after attending a German Lutheran theological seminary in Indiana, returned to Brooklyn to join his father’s retail grocery business. By 1886,
Meyer, who was already in the grocery business for himself, became president of the Retail Merchants' Association. "In business he amassed considerable money, and has it invested largely in city property." His business acumen was informed by his belief that the "crowded conditions of the cities makes [sic] it almost compulsory for the masses to seek the suburbs as a solution of the problem as to the betterment of their surroundings and conditions." 47

Meyer devoted a privately published turn-of-the-century memoir, which he incorporated almost intact as a chapter ("A Farm Today — A City Tomorrow") of his 1930 autobiography, to his role in transforming Flatbush. This memoir is useful because Meyer specified the per acre prices that he and his enterprise, Germania Real Estate Company, which he, Henry Dreyer, John F. Dreyer, and A. W. Schmidt incorporated in May 1892, paid for various farms. For example, the Vanderveer farm of 65 acres — "It seemed as if nature had intended the property as a place for homes, for it was as level as a floor" — was originally offered to Meyer at $2,200 per acre in 1892; smaller segments were offered at $3,250 (and eight months later at $4,500) and $1,500 per acre. Germania paid 40 percent down for this first purchase of 43 acres at $1,500 per acre in 1892, arranging a 5 percent mortgage for the balance. 48 In spite of nature's favor, however, Meyer's partners were apprehensive lest the proximity of a cemetery and of the Kings County hospital and asylums undermine the salability of the lots. Nor did all members of the community appreciate the drive to mobilize farmland for the real-estate market. Meyer himself described his reception

at the hands of the old settlers of Flatbush in the Fall of 1892. We were looked upon as intruders and trespassers. They were of the opinion we had come to Flatbush to make a sort of goat-town of our Vanderveer Park property. Some members of the Vanderveer family were openly scored by their neighbors for committing such an unpardonable sin as to sell us a part of their farm. 49

Because Flatbush in 1892 was still dotted with "spreading farms" and numerous salt and fresh water ponds, the "Flatbush people, both in the village and among the rich landowners, had a prejudice against the real estate men. But Meyer and his associates kept on." 50

In 1893, Germania bought another 182 acres for $388,000 ($2,132 per acre); Meyer bought another, six-acre, Vanderveer farm, including "its immense barns and outbuildings," for $8,300 per acre, a price that according to Meyer "did much toward establishing a basis for values in the future."
That year, when “there was much talk of annexing Flatbush to Brooklyn” and rumors circulated of the opening of a new avenue, Meyer and his associates, realizing “what a vast benefit this meant to Flatbush,... took immediate steps” to buy the Cortelyou farm. Meyer viewed this transaction as “another vivid illustration of the very little confidence placed by the old citizens of Flatbush in the future of their town” — in spite of the fact that John A. Lott’s son, John Z. Lott, a leading political-economic architect of a suburbanized Flatbush and “one of the most prominent lawyers of Flatbush,” who prepared the contract, told Meyer that “he never expected to see the Cortelyou farm sold for the next fifty years.” But the 1893 Flatbush assessment roll crossed out the holdings of the Cortelyou family, replacing them with an entry signaling Germania’s ownership of 71,212 acres valued at $63,700 and taxed $1,406.45 — almost twice the amounts stated in 1892. This new assessed value of $659 per acre, in turn, was about half of the $1,250 Germania paid. Another important signpost on the way from agriculture to suburbia was the petition, written on March 20, 1893, to the Flatbush Town Board from Meyer on behalf of Germania requesting gas lighting on Avenue C between Rogers and Albany Avenues.51

The deed to one 15-acre section of the Vanderveer farm included one tantalizing provision: it was subject to a year’s lease. Meyer offered the farmer using the land $1,500 for his unexpired term (of ten months), but when the farmer demanded twice as much, Germania decided to take its chances on selling the land subject to the lease. This failed negotiation suggests that the tenant farmer expected to earn at least $3,000 for the year. In April 1893, Germania bought a 17-acre farm for $2,750 per acre. That real-estate prices were rapidly rising in Flatbush was signaled by the fact that Hans Von Westering, who was farming this land at the time, assured Meyer that the previous year the farm could have been bought for $900 per acre. Soon, the Flatbush assessment rolls were filled with page after page of lots owned by Germania.52

In 1893, Germania also bought land in Flatlands for $2,500 per acre from Abrahams, McNulty, Dunne, and Taylor, who in turn had bought it from the original owners (the Lott estate) nine months earlier at $1,500 per acre with $20,000 down and a mortgage for the balance, enabling them to realize $74,000 on a nine-month investment of $20,000. In December 1894 and June 1895, Germania bought the Van Brunt–Ditmas farm and part of the Antonides farm, a total of 47 acres — “without exception... the most fertile farming land in the entire town of Flatlands” — at about $2,850 per acre. In 1896, Germania bought another 122 acres including a 30-acre farm (the
Percy Pyne tract) for $3,600 per acre. The same year, Meyer and associates made their largest single acquisition, the 92-acre farms of Elias and J. P. Hubbard, at $2,500 per acre, “a very high price at the time.” This farm, owned by the Hubbard family since 1652, was the best part of the 1,000-acre Flower syndicate, which “collapsed in 1896 on account of its immensity.” In 1897, Germania bought the 36-acre Wyckoff and Voorhees farm mapped into 633 lots. The next year Meyer and his partners bought the 51.5-acre Timothy I. Hubbard farm, the 59.5-acre Kouwenhoven farm, and the 100-acre Lott farm in South Midwood, “the largest in area and financial consideration ever consummated in Kings County.” In order to focus on its development, Germania sold at auction 826 lots from 56.5 acres of two farms, all of which were disposed of in five hours on May 30, 1899. In evaluating the role played by Meyer and Germania in the 1890s in transforming Flatbush from a community of vegetable farms into a fashionable residential suburb, it is crucial to remember not only that Flatbush had, on a limited scale, been a suburb for wealthy merchants for decades, but that subdivision into lots had also been going for years. By facilitating the dissolution of several large prominent farms, such as those owned by the Vanderveer, Cortelyou, Ditmas, and Lott families, Meyer accelerated the demise of farming in Flatbush in the sense that the abandonment of agriculture by these elite families was the clearest signal that 250 years of Dutch farming had come to an end before the twentieth century opened. Nevertheless, scrutiny of the Flatbush assessment rolls makes it plain that, since at least the late 1860s, lots, not farms, were Flatbush’s future. Such insight is not merely hindsight: both residents and town and county tax and government officials were well aware of the proliferation of lots.

The 1867 assessment roll illustrates the state of encroachment by subdivisions. After recording the large and highly assessed farms owned by the Bergen, Cortelyou, Lefferts, Lott, Martense, and Vanderveer families, the roll listed numerous “maps” of land filling page after page with sections and lots assessed at as little as $50. For example, on land formerly belonging to Henry V. Vanderveer, the map of which had been filed in the county register’s office in 1864, 13 owners were recorded as owning 18 sections valued at $50 to $400. In 1867, Tunis J. Bergen filed a map listing numerous sections with similar assessed values; 104 lots were listed on what had been the Clarkson farm before the map was filed in 1853; the Crooke farm’s subdivision into lots was filed in 1855. In addition, the map of Greenfield, the development of the United Freeman’s Land Association, was filed in 1852, while Pleasant Cottage Sites belonging to Windsor Terrace Land Association was
subdivided in 1860. Eighteen sixty-seven also marked the year in which the heirs of Isaac Cortelyou filed a map of what until then had been the family’s 81-acre farm in order to effect a division of the estate. By 1870, the Flatbush assessment roll listed no fewer than 23 such maps, including land that had once formed the farms of the Martense and Bergen families.54

Like other owners of extensive properties in Flatbush, Meyer enthusiastically welcomed the town’s annexation to Brooklyn: “Flatbush will now . . . wake up from its sleep of a hundred years and begin to be what it ought to be.” As early as 1890, when Democratic politicians and officeholders from Flatbush appeared before the state legislature to oppose annexation: “The business interests appeared for the bill, led by the old families, the Lefferts, the Lotts and the Vanderbilts.” 55

John Lefferts, for example, was not only president of the Flatbush Water Works Company, treasurer of the Flatbush Gas Company, director of the Brooklyn Bank, trustee of the Long Island Loan and Trust Company, and president of the Long Island Safe Deposit Company, but also “a warm advocate of the project of annexing Flatbush to Brooklyn.” His personal financial interest was manifest: “He owns a large tract of land in Flatbush, and is doing much to add to the attractiveness of that suburb by building a number of handsome cottages on Lincoln road and other streets, a number of which he has opened, and also he has abetted the introduction of water and gas. The nearness of Mr. Lefferts’ land to the city renders his cottages among the most desirable in the town of Flatbush.” In the year of his death, 1893, Lefferts was listed in the Flatbush assessments rolls as owning only 47.75 acres of land with nine houses valued at $178,800. At that time, James Lefferts was still managing his father’s farmlands, portions of which John Lefferts had advertised for use by market gardeners. Eighteen ninety-three also marked the beginning of the subdivision of his land for building hundreds of row houses in Lefferts Manor, although as early as 1887 the assessment roll reveals that Lefferts had begun dividing his onetime farmland into lots, reducing his 86-acre property to 55 acres. In the assessments for 1880, which was also a census year, Lefferts had been taxed on about 90 acres of land including four houses and greenhouses, valued at $135,975.56

In the run-up to and after the legislature’s vote on annexation on April 25, 1894, Meyer’s Germania Real Estate Company published escalatingly exuberant advertisements for building lots (“$200 and up, $5 and $10 monthly”) in its Vanderveer Park subdivision in Flatbush in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. On February 21, 1894, it stated that the trolley fare to the bridge and ferries was only 5 cents. By March 17, Germania announced: “Future 29th ward of
Brooklyn 'grand old Flatbush!' The ideal spot for homes or investment.” By April 24, once the legislature had passed the Flatbush annexation bill, Ger­mania proclaimed: “Finest residential or investment property ever offered.” A few days later, Germania expostulated: “That this property is the most de­sirable in the ward has been demonstrated in the sale of 3,000 lots, at a time when other properties have been idle. Success of the past and present a guar­antee for the future.”

Underlying this promotional hyperbole was a real point: speculators and residents achieved significant savings by building on farmland that was ready for construction rather than on hilly or rocky soil, which would have required considerable preparatory work. Two years later, Germania was still offering lots in Vanderveer Park, starting at $275 on $5 and $10 monthly in­stallments. Meyer now also advertised “fine detached houses, with $500 first payment, balance same as rent you are now paying.” These prices suggest that unlike financially exclusionary projects (such as Bensonhurst in New Utrecht), Vanderveer Park was designed for those with incomes superior to those typical of the working class who, however, could not afford lavish houses.

Germania was not the only firm selling lots in Flatbush at the time of an­nexation. One competitor was Jere Johnson Jr. Born in 1827 into an old-line Dutch family, Johnson was the grandson of one of Brooklyn’s elite — “the
very rich” large farmer and mayor, General Jeremiah Johnson. On becoming a real-estate broker and auctioneer in 1866, Johnson “at once saw what great possibilities there were in suburban property, owing to the phenomenal growth of New York and Brooklyn.” During the next quarter-century, through private sales and auctions, he disposed of at least 200,000 suburban lots, more than 20,000 of them on the monthly installment plan between 1886 and 1891. If in 1866 Johnson “saw at once that a fortune could be made in the selling of suburban property,” by the early 1890s he had in fact “acquired a fortune,” conducting “one of the most comprehensive real estate businesses in the state.” The scope of his operations can be gauged by the fact that on newspaper advertising alone he spent $75,000 annually.59

In February 1894, Johnson advertised lots supplied with water mains and stone sidewalks starting at $250 and only 25 minutes from the Brooklyn Bridge. In March, Johnson, president of the Brooklyn Real Estate Exchange and a strong advocate of consolidation of Brooklyn and New York, touted his Kensington-in-Flatbush “suburban property” as “perfectly level and yet by far the highest and most healthful in the neighborhood” and “surrounded by beautiful houses, costing from $6,000 to $15,000, and in close to splendid churches, stores and schools.” Immediately after annexation, Johnson advertised that “prices not yet raised . . . will soon double in value.” Proving that Irishmen could profit from the demise of Dutch farming, James McGowan and Peter McNulty (of Wechsler & McNulty, Dry Goods) announced that by “this single stroke of annexation the lucky purchasers here in Kensington (by our advice) of some 2,400 superb dwelling plots during the past 18 months have doubled their money!”60

Some old-line propertied families did not sell off their land through speculators and developers, but sold their land as lots and plots themselves. Meyer seemed less than pleased that the Vanderveer family, for example, held back part of their farmland and sold it directly in 1897. As early as 1891, the Zabriskie homestead, an old farm that had been in the family’s possession for more than two centuries, was auctioned off in lots. The advertisement in the Real Estate Record announced that the location, “the most desirable in Flatbush,” was “surrounded by desirable modern-built dwellings, villas and Queen Anne cottages.” It was “easy of access” because the Flatbush Avenue horsecars ran within one block and three electric cars passed the property.61

By the 1890s Flatbush had become “one of the most aristocratic suburbs of the city. Since the annexation many old-time Brooklynnites have moved within its borders and land values have enormously increased.” Flatbush
had "shown the most remarkable development. . . . The property . . . has
grown past the purely speculative stage and values are firm and steady."
Within five years, Vanderveer Park became one of "the greatest real estate
developments in Brooklyn," in which 10,000 lots were sold and 500 houses
built. Even Meyer purported to have "adopted an iron-clad rule never to
sell to one who seemed to us to be an objectionable person." In the long
run, the deal that Meyer struck with the Brooklyn Heights Railroad to ex­
tend its Nostrand Avenue trolley line to Vanderveer Park in 1895 must have
worked against socioeconomic exclusiveness. Such "restricted" Flatbush
districts as Ditmas Park (which had been part of the farm of John and
Henry S. Ditmas) and Midwood (created from John A. Lott's farm) retained
this affluent character into the twentieth century as "substantial citizens"
bought new houses there: "Flatbush is a city of homes, and its business is
one that begins and ends with ministering to these. The land, fortunately,
has been too high for factory sites." In 1900, Holmes V. B. Ditmas, architect
and builder, advertised the "Famous Flatbush Water" and his houses and
lots as "country homes for city people."62

Whether "the biggest gainers" from the conversion process were the
farmers themselves or "real estate speculators and lawyers who had ad­
anced information about street openings [and] bought such property at
bargain prices" is unclear. The financial webs that made development pos­
ible are unexplored, but it is clear that both sellers and buyers realized siz­
able gains. One possible resolution of this issue was offered by Tredwell,
who, looking back at his life among the Dutch farmers in Flatbush in the
1880s, asserted that in the wake of a "crisis" among real-estate operators —
lot prices rose 400 percent and were "sold on all kinds of wild cat terms"
such as $10 down and $5 per month — the Dutch farmers "entrenched
themselves behind bonds and mortgages and became capitalists, bided their
time and much of their land came back to them."63

This account is corroborated by the anonymous author of "Old Flat­
bush," who from the vantage point of 1920 noted:

Direct descendants of the early settlers are living in Flatbush today and
they make false the theory that "from shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves is a
matter of not more than three generations." The lineal heirs of the Dutch
pioneers held on to the land acquired by their forefathers which in each
succeeding generation became more valuable, until it became entirely
too valuable for agricultural purposes. Then they cut it up or sold it to
syndicates. The land was a gold mine. . . . Even now, though not a few of
them are very wealthy, their style of living remains simple. Until a dozen years ago there were some who still occupied the old homesteads.64

**BENSONHURST IS BORN**

Why do not some of our large capitalists form land improvement societies, with a view to buying up whole streets and sections of the city, so as to improve them properly? It would pay enormously. We have no Emperor here to will the rebuilding of the metropolis... What say our capitalists?
— *Real Estate Record and Builders’ Guide, September 25, 1869* 65

Deagriculturalization of New Utrecht differed from that in Flatbush. Even neighboring areas within New Utrecht developed in different ways. Like Flatbush, some parts of the town, such as Bay Ridge, whose high ground fronting on New York Bay made it “one of the pleasantest [localities] that can be found in the vicinity of New York as a place of residence during the summer and fall months,” had long been colonized by “many of the professional men and merchants of New York and Brooklyn” whose great wealth enabled them to buy large acreages for estates.66 By the same token, in the 1880s, according to Hazelton, the county’s historian: “No country town could boast a more picturesque or inspiring site” than Bath Beach, “throned upon a grassy plateau backed by woodlands, twenty feet higher than the surrounding country” and overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and the Narrows:

The plain on which Bath Beach was built, so high, so breezy, so level and so easy to drain, appeared to be set apart by Nature for the populous suburb of a great city... Old Robert Benson stood on his farm east of the village and swore: “Bath Beach shall come so far and no farther!” He held to his word and the growth of Bath Beach was stunted for years, kept in farms and potato patches while the surrounding country grew. At length taxes mounted to a point where farming did not pay and the situation took another aspect. When the land was sold there was a wild scramble to possess it.

James D. Lynch... flung himself into the struggle, a bright, stirring, energetic real estate dealer in New York. With millions behind him he could buy right and left... He bought the hog wallows and... the sunken lots that stretched between Fourth and Fifth Avenues. He levelled the land and sold it, and improved his fortune.
When he entered the Bath Beach field, nothing less than a square mile would suit him, and he obtained what he wanted, after a struggle. In three years ending with the summer of 1889, Lynch owned the farms of Robert Benson, Egbert Benson, Margaret Benson, Richard V. Benson, Samuel Smith, an ex-mayor, Erhardt Schmidt, Ella Wyckoff, Robert McGaw, and Rebecca Van Sicklen. Robert Benson's farm was held out to the last.67

That some Dutch families had owned their farmland for more than two centuries did nothing to mitigate Hazelton's perception that clinging to land in the face of offers to buy it for sums far in excess of the monetary income that farming on it could generate was irrational. To be sure, Hazelton's account is marred by the fact that neither the 1870 nor 1880 population census for Kings County returned any farmer or retired farmer named Benson; nor was any farmer by that name listed in the 1870 or 1880 agricultural census. The last Benson to farm in New Utrecht was 33-year-old George Benson, whose 85-acre farm was recorded at the 1860 census. Indeed, other than Harmon Benson and his family in 1810, and Egbert Benson and his family in 1830, no Benson was even returned by any federal census as living in New Utrecht before 1860.68

The Bensons, who traced their lineage to one of the first Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, did not even acquire their large farm before the nineteenth century, let alone farm it continuously. The turning point in the family's landed fortunes was 1820, when Egbert Benson (1789–1866) married Maria Cowenhoven (1803–1867), whose grandfather Judge Nicholas Cowenhoven (d. 1793) in the 1780s had bought more than 200 acres in New Utrecht (and Gravesend) from the Van Brunt, Wyckoff, Voorhees, and Gifford families. Egbert Benson acquired this land through a partitioning in 1826 at the request of Maria and her sister Jane, who received a separate 157 acres of land. Egbert Benson, whose heirs were recorded as the owners beginning in 1866, was listed as early as 1830 as owning a 207-acre farm, the town's largest holding. Yet by the 1840s, he appears to have sold off most of the farm. In 1842, Jacobus Voorhees owned 194 acres of it; in 1849, Voorhees was replaced by Jacobus Van Siclen, who owned 100 acres, while Egbert Benson was listed as owning 63 acres. By the latter part of the 1850s, however, Benson's holdings rose again toward 200 acres, but for several of these years he was listed as a nonresident of New Utrecht.69

Rather than farming themselves, the Bensons rented their farmland to some of the many tenant farmers in New Utrecht. In 1875, for example, Mrs. Margaret Benson advertised "farm to let" in the Rural Gazette. Surviv-
ing leases in the Benson family papers document some of these tenant relationships. In 1864, for example, Egbert Benson, who lived in New York City, leased 18 acres, straddling New Utrecht and Gravesend — which at the time was occupied by another tenant, W. Verity — to Garret Wyckoff of Gravesend, from March 1, 1865, to March 1, 1868, for $15 per acre per year. Interestingly, the tenant was also liable for any school taxes and road assessments. Similar concurrent and overlapping leases demonstrate that the Bensons rented out their extensive farmland to several tenants.70

Moreover, whatever antimarket oaths “old” Robert Benson (Egbert’s brother) may have sworn must have last occurred many years before Lynch conceived Bensonhurst, since he was already 86 years old at the 1870 census, and died two years later. At the time, he was living with his nephew Robert, who at 48 already designated himself “retired,” and his niece Susan together with two domestic servants and a gardener. By 1880, the brother (who in the meantime had become a director of the Brooklyn, Bath, and Coney Island Railroad) and sister continued to live without occupations but with servants. In 1870, the heirs of Egbert Benson owned 190 acres of farm and meadow land; by 1880, Susan, Margaret, Egbert, George, Richard, and Robert Benson had increased their holdings to a total of 234 acres. By the time of the New Utrecht land boom in 1887, Susan Benson sold Lynch 36.85 acres of a farm at the corner of Cropsey Avenue and 21st Avenue assessed at $16,585; the next year Richard H. Benson sold Lynch 13 acres of a 48.5-acre farm (valued at $350/acre), leaving Benson with 35.5 acres (valued at $397/acre) in addition to 26.7 acres of meadowland (valued at $100/acre), while Egbert Benson sold Lynch 14.7 of 15.7 acres he owned. All of these tracts were taxed at the uniform rate of 1.56 percent in 1887 and 2.02 percent in 1888.71

Thus in 1887 Lynch succeeded in buying “nearly a square mile of ground from those whom it was more difficult to buy than from any other class of men around New York City — the historic Long Island families.”72

As soon as he owned a tract large enough for his purposes, Lynch began to develop the land. . . . [H]e set two hundred men with ninety wagons and carts at work to perform a task which looked interminable. This force “skinned” the land and levelled it off like a lawn. . . . The name of Bensonhurst was given to the territory in 1887, and it began to grow like a fairyland.73

Despite a setback in 1891, when “bear talk about Bensonhurst values and prospects” caused many properties to be withdrawn from sale, the Eagle praised Lynch’s entrepreneurial prescience in 1893: “The modern idea of
mapping out an entire residential locality, arranging for streets, walks, houses, sewers, gas, etc., all before the first shovelful of earth is turned has inaugurated a new tendency, which promises some Utopian results in the future... Bensonhurst-by-the-Sea... stands as a model for future creators of suburban settlements.”

Bensonhurst was heavily promoted. A month after the Real Estate Record had printed an advertisement (barely distinguishable from an article) calling it “the most perfectly developed suburb ever laid out around New York” and touting it to “the better half of the world” as filled with properties that “can at any time be sold at a profit,” the magazine published an even more fulsome advertorial. It proceeded from the proposition that within a decade or two residential areas would have to be found for the surplus population unable to find housing south of 125th Street in Manhattan. Long Island had already attracted many who worked in New York City who could not afford to pay the annual rentals in excess of $500 that were common there. Because land could be bought “for almost a bagatelle” in the suburbs, where “frame cottages which cannot be built within the fire limits of New York, can... be erected, and homes consequently built, for a few thousands of dollars, rents being proportionately low,” the population of the suburbs would increase. The Record therefore advised investors to think about the “immense wealth” and “fortunes” that had been made in places such as Bath Beach.

Having praised Bensonhurst as part of this “immense stretch of territory which is geographically situated so close to the very heart and the business centre of New York” available for those unable to pay Manhattan-level rents, the Record then about-faced and described the development as a “model settlement, where some of the most refined, intelligent and cultured of New York and Brooklyn’s citizens have built their homes.” Rather than catering to the masses, Bensonhurst was suitable for financial and social elites such as a brother of Mrs. Vanderbilt, an architect, a physician, an assemblyman, and Samuel McElroy, who had supervised the portentous survey of Kings County two decades earlier. That the “evidently well-to-do people” figured so prominently was no coincidence since Lynch’s “idea is to eventually settle the place with a thousand such families, cultivated and well-to-do, without displaying wealth or extravagance. The secret of the rapid success of Bensonhurst is... found... in the restrictions which have been placed on the property. On the greater part no house must stand on less than three lots, and in some place five lots, while in several cases an entire block is occupied by a single residence. The owner of Bensonhurst has wisely laid out... a plan to keep each class of property in its own neigh-
borhood, so that any purchaser who builds on a plot might not fear that his neighbor would build an inferior home." Despite this elite orientation, the Record concluded by returning to its other theme — that New Utrecht was an investor's paradise: "When it is considered that the price of lots in New York City, within forty-five minutes' journey from Wall street, varies from about $3,500 to $40,000, and that at Bensonhurst, which takes only about the same time in reaching, lots can be bought for a few hundreds of dollars," real-estate operators were well advised "to look outside of New York City for their fortune." 76

The Eagle contributed its share to the promotion in language appropriate to the stilted aristocracy that Lynch seemed to prefer for his development. The paper noted that for the 40-minute trip from the Brooklyn, Bath, and West End Railroad station in Bensonhurst to the southern tip of Manhattan, "the distance intervening may be covered at a pecuniary expenditure of ten cents." For just a dime there was "no more attractive journey after a hard day's work than that which carries the wearied business man from the turmoil of New York and Brooklyn to the cool and quiet fields that overlook the waters of the lower bay." No wonder that such "ready access to metropolitan centres" had "greatly developed that tendency which [was] continually moving the more desirable portion of an urban population towards the freer and less confined surroundings of the suburbs." 77

In 1890, the Record was again promoting Bensonhurst-by-the-Sea as part of a series on suburbs within twenty miles of downtown Manhattan: "The growth of this region on every count has been scarcely less wonderful than of the metropolis itself. Millions of capital have been invested in factories; indeed it would not be in the spirit of wild prophesy to say this district is destined to be the greatest manufacturing centre of the country; farm lands have passed into villages; villages into towns and well ordered cities, and vacant places possessing hitherto unappreciated . . . advantages of site or surroundings, as though Nature in her work had not been blind to the commercial side of things, have been seized upon by capitalists and 'developed' with quite modern rapidity." Stressing that "within a distance of seven miles from New York . . . a quantity of farm land was being cultivated, it may be said, until yesterday, by the Bensons," the Record observed that after Lynch had had 500 men "turning the farm lands into streets and avenues," 90 to 100 houses were built from 1888 to 1890, "in every case of an ornate character." Lots 20 by 100 feet, which cost from $200 to $750, were assessed at $50; the property tax rate was 1.3 percent, or 65 cents per lot annually; the houses
themselves, which cost $3,000 to $10,000, were assessed at one-third to one-half of their actual value.\textsuperscript{78}

The cunning of history ultimately intervened to divert Bensonhurst from its intended purpose as sanctuary for a suburban elite. Like other farming sections on the outskirts of this outer borough, it eventually served the more pressing task of providing shelter for the Jewish and Italian proletariat. So far had Bensonhurst strayed from its patrician origins that by 1952 it could plausibly serve as the home of such archplebeians as Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton.