OF CABBAGES AND KINGS COUNTY
Agriculture and the Formation of Modern Brooklyn

Marc Linder and Lawrence S. Zacharias

University of Iowa Press Iowa City
6. THE PREHISTORY OF THE CONVERSION OF RURAL KINGS COUNTY FARMS INTO SUBURBAN REAL ESTATE

As cities have expanded, rich fields have been planted with houses.
— Donald Bogue, Metropolitan Growth and the Conversion of Land to Nonagricultural Uses, 1956

OVERVIEW OF THE MOBILIZATION OF FARMS FOR REAL-ESTATE PURPOSES

A farm . . . furnishes a painful illustration of the unwholesome excitement attendant upon speculation. Here dwelt an honest, ignorant, peaceful old man, who inherited from his father a farm of little value. Its produce was, however, enough to supply his moderate wants. . . . Thus quietly lived the old-fashioned farmer and his family, and thus they might have gone home to their fathers, had not a band of speculators foreseen that the rapidly increasing city would soon take in Brooklyn, and stretch itself across the marshes of Gowanus. Full of these visions, they called upon the old man, and offered him $70,000 for a farm which had, originally, been bought for almost a song. $10,000 in silver and gold, were placed on the table before him; he looked at them, fingered them over, seemed bewildered, and agreed to give a decisive answer on the morrow. The next morning found him a raving maniac! And thus he now roams about, recklessly tearing up the flowers he once loved so dearly, and keeping his family in continual terror.
— Lydia Maria Child, Letters from New York, 1844
A good sense of the agricultural land base available for conversion to residential housing in the various towns of Kings County can be gleaned from Table 21, which presents the total farm acreage recorded at the agricultural censuses between 1820 and 1880 (see also Figure 11). Abstracting from several methodological discontinuities, it is clear that in several towns farmland contracted almost continually. This pattern was characteristic of the most urbanized towns — Brooklyn, Bushwick (which on becoming part of Brooklyn in 1854 artificially inflated the latter’s acreage in 1855), and New Lots. New Utrecht’s farm acreage displayed remarkable constancy, remaining virtually fixed from 1820 to 1875, and then declining a modest 12 percent during the next five years. This development underscores the suddenness of the suburbanization of New Utrecht in the late 1880s. Flatlands, the most rural of the towns, held on to all its farmland from 1850 to 1860; after losing 1,200 acres between 1860 and 1870, it regained almost half by 1880. Thus during the whole period from 1850 to 1880, Flatlands lost about 650 acres, or 17 percent of its farmland. Gravesend added a marginal amount of land between 1850 and 1870, and then lost about 850 acres, or 29 percent, during the 1870s. This significant loss coincided with the acquisition of several large tracts devoted to horse-racing tracks, which soon “helped to build up Gravesend and aid in its financial prosperity.” Finally, Flatbush, which progressed more quickly toward suburbia during the latter part of the nineteenth century than the other three rural towns, preserved its agricultural land base intact until about the Civil War (quantification is difficult because of the separation of New Lots). Then during the 1860s it lost almost 900 acres, or 37 percent of its farm acreage. Although it regained somewhat less than 200 acres during the 1870s, by 1880 farmland in Flatbush was probably only about half as extensive as it had been at the time that New Lots split off in 1852.

The mass conversion of farms into residential lots in the 1890s was foreshadowed by developments decades earlier. Perhaps the earliest and most spectacular was John R. Pitkin’s failed attempt in 1835 to found a great city, East New York, in New Lots. Until that time: “The prosperous and conservative Dutch and English farmers who tilled the land were content with their situations. The thought of dividing their land into building lots would never have entered their minds.” But in that year, Pitkin, a Connecticut businessman, visited the village of New Lots and by 1836 began buying up farmland from the Van Siclen (54 acres and 16 parcels of land for about $25,000), Snediker (35 acres), Wycoff, Stoothoff, and Livingston families encompass-
ing a two-mile by one-mile area. Like many Easterners seeking “urban opportunites rather than fertile soil,” Pitkin and other “enterprising land speculators eyed those towns which they anticipated would grow into large cities.” Pitkin’s vision of transforming “farms and quiet villages” into “a vast transportation center along the shore of Jamaica Bay” was thwarted by the

Figure 11. Kings County, 1865. From Report of the Superintendent of the United States Coast Survey, Showing the Progress of the Survey During the Year 1865. 39th Cong., 1st Sess. H. Ex. Doc. 75, Coast Chart No. 20 (1867).
panic of 1837, which rendered him unable to meet his financial obligations; consequently, "much of the farm land he had bought reverted to its former owners." 

In Flatbush the conversion of farmland into residential real estate in the 1890s also had its prehistory. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, looking back from the year of the consolidation of Greater New York in 1898, could discern "no changes of moment" in Flatbush from its founding in the seventeenth century until 1834, when "speculators began cutting up several of the old farms into building sites." Only then did "real estate speculation bec[o]me a prominent factor in the affairs of the town, the owners theretofore being too much interested in other pursuits to realize the possibilities of real estate ventures." In 1834 Gerrit Martense, whose ancestor, "Martin the Boor," had settled in Flatbush in the seventeenth century, laid out a tract as lots and opened two streets, but the project, which spawned the building of only a few houses, "was not a financial success." 

The underdeveloped state of transportation at this time meant that Flatbush remained too distant from New York and even downtown Brooklyn for commuting "to attract a massive influx of well-to-do suburban residents." No public transportation connected Flatbush to Brooklyn until 1830 when a once-daily stage line was instituted. Until that time the village had also been without a post office: letters to residents were addressed to Brooklyn and brought to Flatbush as a favor by a man who traveled there daily on business.

Despite this impediment, by 1840 Flatbush had already revealed its potential as a residential suburb for the wealthy while retaining its character as an agricultural district of wealthy farmers furnishing an abundance of produce to markets in Brooklyn and New York. The village had, according to J. T. Bailey's *Historical Sketch of the City of Brooklyn and the Surrounding Neighborhood*, become such "a delightful spot" that "several splendid villas have been erected, all having the appearance of good taste, and conveying an impression of the wealth and opulence of these elegant mansions. A softer or more agreeable landscape than is here presented, is seldom met with, and can scarcely be wished for." 

Two years later, Thomas Strong, pastor of the Flatbush Reformed Dutch Church, could observe the embryonic mobilization of farmland for suburbanization in his town history:

While in other sections of our country, the lands possessed by the original proprietors, have passed from their descendants; here, but few farms
comparatively, have changed hands; the spirit of roving not having been cherished. Most of the farms are still in the possession of the descendants of the first patentees and proprietors.

It no doubt will appear strange to some, that a village so contiguous to the great emporium of our country, and combining the advantages of health and means of education, with the absence of many temptations to the young should not have grown with more rapidity. But the reason is to be found in the fact that until within a very few years, not a building lot could be purchased in the town. The owners of property, living in comfort, and gradually adding to their estates, felt no inducement to part with their lands. But of late, some farms have been purchased, and Flatbush land is now in the market. Had the village been laid out regularly in streets and building lots, some thirty or forty years ago, it would we have no doubt by this time have rivalled some of our largest inland towns.⁶

In 1835 Dr. Adrian Vanderveer had his Flatbush farm surveyed into lots, "but little, if any, of the property was sold" for three decades; the next year, portions of the Michal Neufus and Schoonmacker farms were developed. In 1851 and 1852, another settlement, Greenfield (later called Parkville), was created from portions of the David Johnson and Henry S. Ditmas farms, the United Freeman’s Association paying an average of $500 per acre for 114 acres. In 1867, Teunis J. Bergen bought a 14-acre farm from the heirs of Cornelius Antonides for development purposes, and soon buildings were constructed. Bergen, the son of a onetime New Utrecht farmer, moved to Flatbush and became the president of a Brooklyn insurance company and a real-estate broker.⁷

In a typical developmental pattern in Kings County, suburbanization of farming districts was preceded by a transitional phase in which “large landholders turned their farms into country estates.” In the Bedford section of Brooklyn, for example, this process began about 1835 and lasted until the 1880s because the owner of the “choicest property,” Leffert Lefferts, withheld his farm from the market. During these decades, and especially before the Civil War, speculators bought up farms and building cycles coincided with business cycles. A similar pattern repeated itself in Prospect Heights, Kensington, and Brownsville, where large realtors bought land for long-term speculative purposes during years of prosperity, but the selling of lots was curbed by the Civil War: “The actual settlement of these three suburbs was delayed from thirty to forty years following the breakup of the farms. . . . Brooklyn grew by spreading to land adjacent to settled locations. It did
not, as in the case of Boston, develop from the filling of areas between various outlying areas." Because Flatbush lacked "the dramatic location desired by the wealthy, the upper class Broklynite did not compete for the land, and it became the province of the middle class," whose influx, however, was slowed down by the "conscious policy on the part of speculators to hold their land until the demand for first class housing raised prices in the district." Even as late as the first half of the 1890s, at least until annexation by Brooklyn, development was impeded by the Flatbush town government's refusal to provide services such as paving and sewers: "As a result, Brooklyn banks were reluctant to give property loans to Flatbush residents, and those who could secure mortgage money paid higher interest rates than home owners living in Brooklyn." Overall, the building cycle governed development more than the extension of mass transportation lines.8

The upper class may not have competed with the middle class for Flatbush land once suburbanization gripped the town in the 1890s, but wealthy Manhattan and Brooklyn businessmen had resided in some of the choicest Flatbush locations for decades. Figure 12 maps the residences of the village of Flatbush in 1870: the prominence of wealthy nonfarmers is impressive. Moreover, not all who speculated on the future urbanization of rural Kings County let their investments lie fallow. Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt recounted how on one of the farms of the Flatbush Lott families, which was sold for division of property in 1865 and then cut into lots, "[h]eavy brick stores" soon "loom[ed] up upon the corner lots. They are the harbingers of the changes which in time must come, but which might have been for some time deferred. The owners of these stores have anticipated a future in which they may be needed rather than a present in which they are."9

\[\text{One day, during my visit to New York, I paid a visit to the different public institutions on Long Island, or Rhode Island — I forget which.}\
\text{— Charles Dickens, American Notes, 1842}\]

The precondition for suburban growth and overcoming the "prevailing reluctance of the farmers to part with any of their acres" was improved transportation. The premodern character of transportation in rural Kings County just a few years earlier emerges distinctly from the state legislature's act in-
Figure 12. Village of Flatbush, 1870, merchants’ residences. From Catherine Nelson and E. Theo. Nelson, “The Village of Flatbush as It Was in the Year 1870.”
corporating the Bath and Coney Island Turnpike Road Company. Autho-
rized to begin in Brooklyn and “thence continue over the hills” to the rural
towns, the company was empowered in 1835 to exact tolls such as five cents
“for every farm wagon or stage with four wheels and two horses or other an-
imals.” The commissioners appointed to lay out the road and to open the
books included such prominent members of old-line Dutch farm families
as James Bennett, Egbert Benson, and George Stillwell. In 1853, farm own-
ers, including John Lefferts, Henry and John Ditmas, and Asher Hubbard,
created the Flatbush Plank Road Company, whose road ran four miles from
Brooklyn to Flatlands, and was macadamized by prisoners from the Kings
County penitentiary. From the stockholders’ perspective, the road’s most
vital feature was its toll gate, at which its toll gatherer was statutorily autho-
rized to collect 1 cent per mile for each animal-drawn vehicle and one cent
for each additional animal — except from farmers going to and from work
on their farm.10

Until about 1857, Flatbush, which was “distinguished from the other vil-
lages only by its natural beauty, and the larger number of its inhabitants,”
had been able to preserve “its strictly rural character” despite its proximity
to the city of Brooklyn. Symbolically, 1857 was also the year in which the
state legislature enacted a statute to prevent horses, cattle, goat, sheep, ass,
mule, or swine from running at large in the town of Flatbush. Because Flat-
bush residents opposed the opening of several avenues from Brooklyn, that
city began growing toward its eastern, western, and northern suburbs, but
not toward Flatbush to the south: “The long, tedious ride, by stage, over the
hill, was a serious barrier to the growth of the city toward Flatbush. This had
been, no doubt, in some measure, a benefit to the village; keeping back the
tide of immigration which flooded the eastern section of the city, and pre-
serving intact the woodlands which were afterwards purchased by the city
for Prospect Park.” It was only in 1860 that the Brooklyn City Railroad, aided
by state legislative arrangement for opening Flatbush Avenue, extended a
track so that the first horse-drawn streetcars could finally run to Flatbush.
Significantly, this transit link had to overcome “the most bitter opposition
on the part of local owners of farms and old estates, descendants of the early
settlers, who justly feared that with these changes the quiet and exclusive-
ness of their communal life, which they had maintained for centuries . . .
would be forever destroyed.”11

If the advent of the streetcar spelled “the doom of Flatbush as a country
place forever,” the initiative may have rested with men “of prominence in
Brooklyn and New York circles,” who lived in Flatbush and for whom “transit was not always convenient by private conveyance.” In particular, the lawyer and judge John A. Lott (1806–1878), and the very wealthy farmer and capitalist John Lefferts (1826–1893) — at the 1870 census he listed no occupation, in 1880 “Gentleman” — were also responsible for establishing the infrastructural underpinnings of Flatbush suburbanization. Lott and Lefferts were linked in the traditional intertwined Dutch manner: the grandmother of Lott’s wife, Catharine Lott, was a Lefferts, while Lefferts’s mother was Maria Lott. The static quality of the political prominence of these two families — whose founders had settled in Flatbush in 1653 and 1660 — is underscored by the fact that John Lefferts and John Lott Jr. were elected Flatbush town clerk and supervisor, respectively, at the last Flatbush town meeting whose minutes were recorded in Dutch on April 4, 1775, and sheds interesting light on the inadvertently critical remark of Lott’s son-in-law, Cornelius Wells, minister of the Flatbush Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, that Flatbush had “no aristocracy except the money power.”

Modernizers’ authority was further supplemented in 1871 when the state legislature established a Board of Improvement of the Town of Flatbush with the power to open or improve streets with the consent of the owners of the land to be taken or who would be assessed for it. John A. Lott had prepared the statute, which he also induced the legislature to enact in order to prevent “scheming politicians” from “fleec[ing]” property owners. That the legislature in the statute itself named as board members representatives of major old-line Flatbush farm families such as Lott, Lefferts, Martense, Zabriskie, Vanderbilt, and Ditmas suggests that the agricultural powerholders occupied positions that could enable them to help accommodate and shape the changes in land-use patterns identified with suburbanization.

Lott’s appointment as president of the board by the other members underscored his pivotal role in the political-economic restructuring of the town. The board’s choice of Lott’s centrally located Flatbush residence as its sole meeting place for the first four years of its existence until it arranged for the building of a town hall — the $98 shortfall in the public financing of which the members made up for with their own money — reflected the ambience of cozy homogeneity that characterized the ruling class in Flatbush, almost all of whose members, for example, had attended and were trustees of Erasmus Hall Academy. The absence on the board of any representative of the wealthy Manhattan or Brooklyn merchants residing in Flatbush could be interpreted as an indication either that they may have been too
occupied with their businesses to attend to local civic matters or that the Dutch farm families retained the political-economic power, despite the much larger annual incomes of some of these mercantile neighbors, to shape the development of Flatbush. In fact, however, several of these businessmen, such as William Matthews (1822–1896), were intensely involved in the town’s civic affairs. After having operated his own bindery in Manhattan for a few years, he became the head of the large D. Appleton bindery, moving to Flatbush in 1855. He devoted the greater part of his fortune to his house, and became one of the organizers of the Flatbush Water Works Company, of which he remained a director until his death.15

Lott and Lefferts were also the driving forces behind the creation of the Flatbush Telegraph Company in 1872. At the time of the transmission of the first telegraphic message from Flatbush to Brooklyn in 1873, the Eagle, noting how much progress had been achieved during the preceding decade, charged that the telegraph had been delayed so long “for reasons that can only be found expressed in the words ‘old fogyism,’ as ruling in the bosom of the gray haired and obstinate fossils who always stand in the way of material progress.” Whereas a decade earlier the trip from Brooklyn to Flatbush was “a tedious ride through the country in some sort of a wagon,” by 1873 it was only an hour in horse cars and soon it would be but 15 or 20 minutes “behind a screaming or bell ringing dummy . . . if indeed not behind a full fledged lightning express.” In 1875, when a steamcar replaced horsecars on the Coney Island and Brooklyn Railroad running between the Brooklyn city line and Gravesend, the four-mile trip was reduced from 45 to 20 minutes.16

STREETS, PARKS, AND SEWERS

In 1869 the New York State legislature enhanced modernizers’ capacity to galvanize change by enacting a statute that appointed the supervisors of the towns of Flatbush, Flatlands, Gravesend, New Lots, and New Utrecht to be commissioners to “plan and lay out streets, roads and avenues . . . conforming to the avenues and streets and plan of the city of Brooklyn, as now terminated at the city line, as nearly as may be practicable and judicious.” By conferring exclusive power on the commissioners for this layout and prohibiting any street plan not in conformity with the officially prescribed seamlessness with the Brooklyn grid, the state legislature was either codifying what was manifest higher market-use destiny or preordaining that out-
come. The inauguration of a town survey made it clear to the *Rural Gazette*, even before the commissioners submitted their report, that Flatbush was in a “transition state from town to city.”

The commercial far-sightedness of the commissioners, who recognized that the county was “destined . . . to contain a vast population,” is reflected in their rejection of the view that “the lands should be treated as villa sites, with ample grounds between the streets and avenues,” and adoption of the plan, in conformity with “the interests of the public,” requiring “a regular city system of blocks, which would obviate any future trouble in subdivision.” The commissioners demonstrated the seriousness with which they intended to “give the surplus population of New York access to Kings and Queens counties” by calculating that on the 23,336 acres (or 36.304 square miles) of Flatbush, Flatlands, Gravesend, and New Utrecht, assuming blocks 700 by 200 feet, streets 60 feet wide and avenues 80 feet wide, 4,992 blocks would be created. At 56 lots per block and seven residents per lot, the commissioners made provision for “a possible population of 1,956,836, at some future day”—a total in excess of the population that would ever live in those sections of Brooklyn.

The commission itself apparently had no doubts since it touted the town plans as “a broad, comprehensive and uniform system of streets running toward the ocean or harbor, carefully connected with the city streets and avenues, and located without regard to farm lines or individual interests, so as to meet and develop the interest of the dense population destined in time to occupy this area; an area with which no other, within the same distance from New York, can be compared in advantages for suburban life.” Indeed, the chief rationale behind the appointment of the commission was that “so many local plans of streets had been proposed, without any uniformity of interest, each owner cutting up his property as it suited him [that] the necessity for organized development was so generally felt.”

The commissioners were presumably influenced in their urbanizing policies by the annual report that Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of Prospect Park, had recently issued to the Brooklyn Park Commission in which he addressed the introduction of a street plan. Olmsted’s impact on urban planning in Kings County was profound enough to warrant a brief review.

Urban agriculture had been central to earlier visions of the city. A succession of early nineteenth-century “urbtopians” envisioned the strong urban presence and democratizing influence of agriculture. By midcentury, however, a striking change of emphasis, from greenery that produced food to greenery that served to rest the eyes and refresh the air, could be de-
ected. Not surprisingly, this reorientation of the urban future from production to aesthetics and residential health dominated changes in midcentury urban planning as well. In 1852, Olmsted joined with Calvert Vaux to compete successfully for the commission to design New York's Central Park, later forming the nation's leading landscape architecture firm. Olmsted concerned himself with bringing the pleasures and natural beauties of the country into town. His vision was not to bring the farm into the city, let alone to preserve the farms as cities expanded, but to create parks and boulevards that straddled residential city life with green, with beauty that imitated nature, and with healthy space and air that would relieve urban residents, at least temporarily, from the growing congestion and quickening pace of city life.

Olmsted's work accommodated late nineteenth-century American urbanization in several ways. In the case of rural Kings County, several possible futures presented themselves at midcentury. A village like Flatbush might have developed into a discrete suburb or a subdivision that retained the character of the village. Alternatively, Flatbush could have been wholly integrated into an expanding Brooklyn, linked by a continuing street grid, centralized planning, urban services and utilities, with newer, more densely populated structures supplanting the old. In this regard, New Yorkers had had some experience: as the century had worn on, New York City continually absorbed more northerly sections of Manhattan, eroding their local cultural and agricultural antecedents. Olmsted's Central Park design accommodated that expansion, taming upper Manhattan's wild landscape in preparation for organized and attractive residential development.

Olmsted's participation in Brooklyn's expansion followed a similar pattern. At the point he was drawn into the discussions on the future of Kings County, the city of Brooklyn was already planning a street grid that would traverse and subsume all of the county's still rural, agricultural, and independent villages. Olmsted and Vaux had been hired in 1866 to design and supervise construction of Prospect Park. Although Olmsted had by then begun to evolve a style of suburban development that retained a strong rural presence, his ideas for Kings County ran parallel to those for Manhattan.

In an 1868 essay on improving Brooklyn's street plans, Olmsted recommended that the street plan focus more closely on the possibilities offered by the park. Given the rapid growth of Brooklyn's harbor and its proximity to New York, Olmsted believed that urban spread into rural Kings County could not be impeded, only shaped and regulated by street and park designs. After noting the good port facilities and associated locational advantages for mercantile and manufacturing purposes that the western end of Long Island
offered along a ten-mile-long shoreline, Olmsted mentioned that behind it lay a stretch of elevated ground, “the higher parts being at an average distance of more than a mile from any point to which merchandise can be brought by water. East of this elevation the ground slopes to the shore . . . of the ocean itself. A shore in the highest degree attractive to those seeking recreation or health, but offering no advantages for shipping, manufacturing or mercantile purposes.”

Olmsted seemed prepared to entrust future land-use decisions to the self-interest of the “gardeners and farmers” who occupied the slope, but he warned that suburban development was by no means a foregone conclusion. One or two streets had been laid out some years earlier, “but without intelligent regard to the alleged purpose in view.” In the absence of direction, the land was at risk of being “given up in a few years almost exclusively to shanties, stables, brewerics, distilleries, and swine-yards.” If, however, Olmsted’s plan for parks and parkways were adopted instead of a Manhattan-like street grid, then there would be “ample room for an extension of the habitation part of the metropolis upon a plan fully adapted to the most intelligent requirements of modern town life.” He praised large parts of Kings County’s “back country” as not only “open to sea breezes and . . . in full view of the ocean,” but as sheltered by its geography from the total enclosure by commerce that would soon characterize the habitable part of Manhattan: “Thus it seems set apart and guarded by nature as a place for the tranquil habitation of those whom the business of the world requires should reside within convenient access of the waters of New York harbor.”

To the extent that the lands occupied by farms and country seats were susceptible to slumlike development, Olmsted was ready with the plan to preempt it. His principal recommendation was to give Prospect Park a more central presence by running boulevards and ribbons of green from the park to the outer reaches of the county, thus making Flatbush and neighboring communities spread along the green axes more attractive for residential development. His designs for Prospect Park’s entrances incorporated elaborate street patterns to facilitate traffic flows toward the park.

Olmsted’s designs were intrinsically tied to the real-estate market, to what he thought would create not just social or aesthetic value, but actual financial gain: “Upon the manner in which there are good grounds for confidence that the elevated district which has been indicated will be occupied in the future, depends the valuation which can justly and sagaciously be now placed upon it, and upon this valuation mainly depends the financial prosperity of the city of Brooklyn.” Accordingly, Olmsted paid no attention to
the farmer’s connection to the city. His vision of the urban fringe was tied quite narrowly to the interests of the city’s affluent and middle classes, and his aim was to enhance their lifestyles by separating residences from places of business and by creating environments for each that would maximize convenience or pleasure. In this vein, Olmsted objected to the placement of a public (botanic) garden in Prospect Park; he argued that access to one side of the park itself would be obstructed, which, in turn, would diminish nearby land values for residential purposes.26

Olmsted’s disregard for farming was a part of a particular strand of urban design in America, though one that would become increasingly dominant as new forms of transportation rendered the separation of work and home ever more attractive. Yet, the reliance on open space, parks, rural landscaping, wide, curvilinear streets and irregular lots to improve the air and relieve the emotions had some drawbacks on the financial side. Apart from the rather substantial public investments in construction that Olmsted’s designs required, his greenery was unproductive — largely nontaxable, in other words — and costly to maintain.27

Olmsted’s confidence in the self-interest that would impel Kings County farmers to sell off their farms for suburban residential construction may, in retrospect, have been justified. What neither he nor less sophisticated citizens of Kings County took into account was the societal consequences of the complete elimination of agriculture that suburbanization eventually required.

The creation of Prospect Park after the Civil War on what had been farms owned by John Lott, Helen Martense, Samuel Lott, Isaac Cortelyou, and the Vanderbilt family stimulated further residential real-estate activity. The necessity for locating this Brooklyn park in Flatbush and the state legislature’s designation of the land as belonging to the city underscored “the probability that Brooklyn would eventually swallow up all the towns of Kings County.” Indeed, spurred on by the park, “more advancement or progress, in the way of growth and development,” according to the Rural Gazette, took place in the four years between 1869 and 1873 than ever before in the history of Flatbush. The newspaper measured that development by the construction of a hundred buildings costing more than half a million dollars, including “many . . . very fine and costly residences” owned by some of the village’s richest “merchant princes.”28

The Rural Gazette looked back at Flatbush during those years as a kind of Potemkin village — fabricated by Prospect Park, which had unleashed a speculative wave of investment “the result of which was to place the value
of land at such ridiculous [sic] high prices that nobody wanted it especially when they found we had few or none of the improvements possessed in cities, and most other villages.” Brooklyn residents doing business in Manhattan bought much of the land near the park. Certain that they would “reap fortunes on the rapid growth of the property, . . . when they found they could not get $2,000 quick, for every $1,000 they had invested, they turned around and cursed Flatbush, and its time-honored land holders.” Land, for example, that the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church had sold for $4,000 per acre, was later sold for $2,000, and by 1875 could not have been sold again for even that much. The national depression of the mid-1870s affected no less a landed and moneyed potentate than John Lefferts, who, having sold land at very high prices in the town's most desirable location, by 1875 had to take it back under foreclosure of mortgage. By 1880, the Rural Gazette argued that real-estate prices had still not recovered from that speculative bull market, reaching only one-half of their level 10 years earlier.29

The real-estate boom could not be sustained in a suburb from which in 1873 the four-and-one-half-mile horsecar to the Fulton Ferry link to Manhattan still lasted an hour, especially when snow often blockaded the track, making it impossible for residents to return home for one or more nights. Such inconvenience may have prompted complaints from “mechanics and others who go at early hours,” and may have “militate[d] greatly against the growth of the place,” but the old farmers were not yet prepared to encourage an increase in the number of small lot owners who would be drawn to Flatbush by faster transportation. The Rural Gazette, perhaps reflecting the ambivalence of Flatbush’s heterogeneous strata of “wealthy citizens” — some of whom in 1873 formed a stock company to finance the newspaper — explained their lack of interest in investing in rapid transit from Fulton Ferry to Flatbush on the grounds that “our citizens are most of them well located upon homesteads of their own which they do not wish to sell, and therefore cannot be benefited by the rise of property, which all admit will follow.”30

Thus although the North Side Herald of Huntington, Long Island, praised the Rural Gazette in 1873 for its support of rapid transit to New York City “as a means of giving the working classes a breath of pure air, and a chance for cheap and comfortable homes,” the propertied interests in the rural sections were not yet advocating development as a code word for proletarianization of their towns. And even the editor of the Rural Gazette, H. J. Egleston, who relentlessly promoted suburbanization of Flatbush, when alluding
to the lure of "cheap living," meant that "some of our wealthy men [sh]ould erect the class of dwellings desired by the middle class of people, such as would rent for not over $400 a year." The *East New York Sentinel* thought that it had identified an inconsistency in its competitor's editorial standpoint: "With the inflowing tide into Flatbush of population and wealth, which the Gazette is doing so much to encourage, the newspaper, like the community, will readily merge into Metropolitan life — but what would become of the 'Rural?'" But the *Rural Gazette* deemed itself relatively immune to such threats, believing that since it was inevitable that the towns would eventually be "Moving into the City" one way or another, annexation now "on a liberal plan of your own making" was preferable to "forced annexation" on less desirable principles later.31

The laying of sewers and the laying out, opening, and constructing of streets constituted the major role played by municipal government in guiding an urbanization process that was almost exclusively market driven.32 The link between sewers and street openings was clear: since the number of streets was sufficiently great to interfere with natural water courses, failure to build sewers would result in the formation of stagnant pools of water. Apart from health concerns, advocates stressed that sewers would enhance real-estate prices. The *Rural Gazette*, ever attentive to the commercial advantages of modernization, demonstrated how the construction of sewers was closely linked to the preservation of a patrician Flatbush, which otherwise would be proletarianized:

> The time has gone by when men, who have our real good at heart, would hinder the influx of strangers, while the prices at which real estate is valued, and the burden of taxation, are both too great to allow longer the holding of large domains.

> If . . . the increase of population is inevitable, why not encourage the influx of that class which will add to us materially and socially, which we can only do by affording them the means of comfortable and luxurious living.

> . . . Like East New York, we may grow by the construction of cheap cottages and shanties, but if we want "brown stone blocks" and "palatial homes," we must not only have gas, but also water and sewerage.33

Ocean Avenue, running five miles from Prospect Park to the Atlantic Ocean, was opened in 1876, followed four years later by the 210-foot-wide Ocean Parkway, which ran a parallel course. Both promoted the development of Gravesend and New Utrecht as well as of Flatbush. Tensions
between farm owners and modernizers were particularly sharp in relation to Ocean Parkway — one of the “octopian arms” by which Brooklyn was extending its power over the county towns — which was originally financed by considerable assessments on each parcel of land within the assessment district, which the Brooklyn park commissioners deemed benefited by the parkway. But as Flatbush town supervisor Peter Williamson observed in 1882, in urging that the county should pay for the parkway’s construction since it was laid out in the interest of the city of Brooklyn: “No farmers wanted a highway 260 feet wide. They laid out narrow roads to save their land for agricultural purposes.” To add insult to injury: “The farmer must pay for it but must not use it, for the smell of the vegetables or manure they cart would offend the nostrils of the Brooklyn aristocracy.” Even after the state legislature amended the Ocean Parkway statute to impose two-thirds of the cost of improvement on all Kings County property taxpayers, Flatbush, Gravesend, and New Utrecht farmers remained outraged that the park commissioners denied them permission to use the parkway boulevard to drive their loaded market wagons on the way to New York.34

Street openings, to be sure, would “undoubtedly bring into the market and enhance the value of property which now cannot be sold at any price.” By the height of the boom in 1873, real-estate prices had risen considerably, enabling Flatbush to attain to a certain pretentiousness: “Lots in the best portion of this place, 25 × 150, are held firmly at $3,000 in some instances which could have been bought a few years ago for $600.” But the long depression that began later that year — and that continued to deter those who had made speculative purchases from improving their real estate as late as 1877 — also prompted some Flatbushers, who until then, according to the Rural Gazette, had been so sedentary and uninterested in selling that they “cannot be benefitted even if the [Prospect] park did enhance the value of their property,” to “become anxious to realize.” Typical of the “great bargains” that landowners offered were plats containing eight city lots “(which have been for a long time held at $4000) . . . now offered at $3000.” One of the lures to potential buyers, in addition to lower prices, was the knowledge of “how very delightful it is to have . . . fresh vegetables at their command.” When, as Jere Johnson Jr.’s auction notice in the Rural Gazette, put it, “the great panic of 1873” forced Robert Turner, a New York banker who would soon project a steam railroad to Coney Island, to sell off 1,000 Ocean Parkway lots formerly belonging to the Flatbush Dutch Church, the sale was trumpeted as the “most extraordinary chance for speculative investment
that has ever been offered since the foundation of Brooklyn in 1642.” That
the lowest price for lots 20 by 125 feet was $525 — the equivalent of more
than $9,000 per acre — suggests that, despite the depression and the recent
defeat of annexation, many buyers must have speculated that “[n]o finer lo-
cation exists for first class residences.”

RAILROADS

The superintendent of the street survey, Samuel McElroy, reporting on
the commission’s work in 1875, commented on the elements of the contra-
dictory conceptions of land use without expressly concluding that agricul-
ture and housing were mutually exclusive and thus unable to coexist. McEl-
roy noted both that the fertility of Kings County’s soil was “a proverb” and
that “with broad and easy slopes delivering towards the bays on the south
and east, admirably adapted to street and house construction; with an abun-
dant supply of the purest and softest water; with fine roads, attractive boating,
bathing, fishing and hunting; with a population intelligent, industrious,
frugal, long associated with the land, and generally affluent; in the whole ra-
dius of forty miles [from New York City] . . . , this area, which represents
about 15 1/4 per cent in size, cannot be surpassed in advantages for suburban
residence.” In explaining why nevertheless from 1850 to 1870 New York’s
other suburbs had “accumulated a population of not less than 870,000,
which should give this section 133,000 increase,” whereas in fact rural Kings
County’s “41 1/4 square miles of unexceptional territory” recorded an increase
of only 16,300, McElroy found “a reason, and a very simple one. Through
this whole area there is no direct steam railway communication with New
York; no way in which, with regularity, frequency, comfort and speed, a
business man can be carried to and from the city, as he can be carried in any
other direction; and in consequence of this an acre of building lots in the
rocks or swamps or Harlem, six or seven miles from the Battery, is worth
twenty-five times as much to-day as an acre in Kings County no further
away!” McElroy noted, however, that: “Operators from Brooklyn or New
York have here or there purchased farms for investment, and united with
the farmers in urging local improvements.”

Ironically, in 1876, the New York, Bay Ridge, and Jamaica Railroad, of
which McElroy was the chief engineer, included much of this language ver-
batim in its prospectus. How the railroad company intended to preserve
such attractions as hunting and proverbially fertile soil while achieving its
purpose of developing rural Kings County as a suburban residence by “divert[ing] to Long Island its legitimate proportion of the annual exodus from New York,” it did not specify. But the mere fact that its owners expected the public to find the combination plausible suggests that neither regarded the extirpation of agriculture as inevitable.37

The prospect of railroad links between Brooklyn and the rural towns — the land for which appeared so valuable to the railway owners that they were willing to buy it from farmers at extraordinarily high prices — made it clear to boosters and detractors of the movement to consolidate with Brooklyn that the ridge of hills marking off the southern boundary of the city was only “an imaginary not a real barrier to the movement of population.” The inaccessibility of the rural towns by steam railroads was, in the view of the 

Eagle, the chief impediment to Brooklyn’s extension to the Atlantic Ocean and the answer to the vexatious questions as to the staying power of atavistic Dutch vegetable farms in the face of spreading modernity:

Why is it that that portion of the County of Kings known as the county towns, has so long remained stationary, and, with the exception of the Town of New Lots, almost exclusively an agricultural district? Why is it that the city proper, with much the smaller . . . territory contains a population of nearly half a million against $25,000 [sic] in the larger territorial divisions of the county? Why is it that cities as remote from the business centre of New York as Newark, Patterson, Elizabeth, etc., with populations ranging from 50,000 to 125,000, have grown up duplicating their population every ten years, while the county towns of Kings County, with natural advantages greatly superior to the cities named, remain stationary?38

Significantly for the perceived future of the rural sections, the 

Eagle emphasized the industrial needs that metropolitan area railroads also had to serve: “It is the case with Brooklyn factories and nearly all manufacturing establishments in cities and suburbs tributary to New York, that their salesrooms and warehouses are in that city. What manufacturers want is rapid and cheap communication between the salesroom and the factory.”39

In the aftermath of the defeat of consolidation in 1873, the 

Rural Gazette explained that a railroad that enabled inhabitants of the rural towns both to reach the ferry to New York in 30 minutes and to travel from one town to the other without having to take a circuitous trip to Brooklyn would contribute more to increasing the county’s population than any annexation
plan. For years the *Rural Gazette* pleaded in vain for the construction of a steam railroad to connect Flatbush to Brooklyn and the ferries to New York. The chief obstacle was the “supreme selfishness of every property owner in Brooklyn” in refusing “to have a steam railroad near [their] property, be it on the surface or elevated.” Ironically, when steam finally came, it headed in the opposite direction — from Flatbush south to Coney Island. In general, the development of steam railroads in Kings County was driven by entrepreneurs’ aim of promoting the beach as a resort, initially for the affluent, and then for the masses from Manhattan and Brooklyn. The first steam railroad in the rural county was organized by Charles Gunther, the mayor of New York City from 1864 to 1866. Foreseeing the possibilities of Coney Island, then a relatively inaccessible site, Gunther organized the Brooklyn, Bath and Coney Island Railroad, which began near Greenwood Cemetery and was opened in 1864. This steam dummy road was without competition for a decade, but was eventually eclipsed because Gunther had been forced to build a “very roundabout” route to avoid landowners’ opposition: “The slow going old Dutch farmers of New Utrecht and Gravesend fought him at every step.” In 1865 a second steam railway, the Brooklyn and Rockaway Beach Railroad, running from East New York in New Lots to Canarsie in Flatlands, opened in order to make a connection with a steam ferry to the beach resort across Jamaica Bay.

The first steam railroad through Flatbush was also a by-product of the transportation of the urban masses to the beach. In celebrating the advent of the steam railroad in Flatbush in June 1875, as the Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad Company, organized by Andrew N. Culver, made the fastest trip ever between Greenwood Cemetery and Coney Island, the *Rural Gazette* also “congratulate[d] the Gravesenders that they will now be able to consider themselves as somebody and not as a peculiar people five miles from anywhere, bound to lock their doors at sundown and go to bed because they cannot reach civilization and return on the same day.” Culver’s steam railroad reinforced the marketability of residential real estate between the end points of the line by introducing hourly service during the off-season. The next year, after Gravesenders complained that the lack of spark-arresters had kindled fires putting them “constantly in peril of being burned out,” the *Rural Gazette* admonished them not to doubt that “the few who are now annoyed . . . by the noise of trains shall . . . be a thousand fold profited by the growth of” Gravesend. The need for the rapid and cheap transit that would make it possible for a large population to live south of Pros-
pect Park was so crucial to the Rural Gazette that five years later it rejected Brooklyn's renewed effort at annexation as a transparent attempt to force others to share its debt burden until the city was prepared to provide that railroad link.41

The next steam railroad through Flatbush also served as a link to Coney Island. The Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railway — itself the result of the consolidation of the Coney Island and East River Railroad, organized in 1876, and the Flatbush, Coney Island, Park and Concourse Railroad, organized in 1877 — was opened on July 1, 1878. The first train was pulled by a locomotive named for John A. Lott, who shortly before had resigned as the company's president as a result of infirmities. The Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad, which carried 602,662 passengers in its first, abbreviated, season was very profitable, recording profits of $59,000 on receipts of $135,000.42

This steam railroad, which was the most intimately connected with Flatbush territorially and in terms of management and ownership, provoked a sharp dispute within the town's political-economic elite over the route and the comparative injury that it would inflict on individual landowners. The construction of this below-street-level line, with its deep excavations, tree cutting, barn removal, and cutting away of the woods near the Flatslands town line, transformed the appearance of the section between Ocean Avenue and Flatbush Road. To be sure, the Rural Gazette counseled that: "Someone must be hurt, of course, but sensible men cannot fail to see that we must have steam, steam, steam." However, several landowners, most prominently William Matthews, the wealthy operator of the large D. Appleton bookbindery in Williamsburg, objected to the rail line's running along Ocean Avenue literally in their backyard. Matthews initiated judicial proceedings to shift the route to run along the town's main thoroughfare, Flatbush Avenue, instead. John A. Lott, president of the railroad and a resident of Flatbush Avenue, unsurprisingly represented the other property owners along that street in resisting that shift. In addition to his personal convenience, Lott preferred the other route because it would make the road "the shortest, quickest and best paying line from Brooklyn to Coney Island." Once the construction was underway, Lott's dual role as capitalist manager and landowner was even made the basis for praise: when he "liberally exchange[d] land from which the timber had been cut for some on which it had not been cleared" in order to make way for track, the Rural Gazette observed that "[t]his is one of the advantages the public gain by having such a man as President of the road."43
Three months after this line was opened, the *Real Estate Record* observed that:

Charts of Brooklyn are already prepared and offered for sale which show the plotting of the whole region extending from the present corporate limits of Brooklyn down to and including the extremity of Coney Island. The many railroads which are now centering at Coney Island must supply most acceptable rapid transit for this intervening section. If these railroads are eventually continued to the ferries, or to the bridge, they must have the effect of attracting a large population to settlements on dry and wholesome lands between Coney Island and Brooklyn.\(^44\)

Remarkably, however, several railroad companies did not immediately perceive the profitability of year-round train service to the section intervening between Coney Island and Prospect Park. They failed to take up the *Rural Gazette*’s suggestion that “these wealthy corporations should take up sections of land . . . and build a number of neat cottages with garden plats about them, and lease them for reasonable prices, included in which should be the privilege of riding on the cars to town and back each day.” Thus Flatbushers had to importune John Lefferts to intercede with the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad to persuade his co-directors that it was in the company’s own financial interest to base its business not on three months of beach traffic, but year-round local travel.\(^45\)

Not only were the county towns “gridironed” with railroads, but by 1878
Flatbush, in particular, as the county’s geographical center and “The Great Railroad Hub!” had “more steam railroad trains daily passing through it than almost any other town in the country and possibly more than any large city but Boston or Chicago.” Figure 14 displays the railroad routes in 1879. The impact that the advent of steam railroads must have had on the traditional consciousness of the Dutch farmers can be gauged by the sudden explosion in the volume of traffic: already by the summer of 1878, on four railroads alone, 250 trains daily were transporting passengers to and from Coney Island. Suddenly experiencing the sight, sound, and smell of the world’s most powerful machines racing through what until recently had been “a great stretch of unbroken farmland and pasture” extending from Flatbush Avenue to Coney Island Plank Road at 40 miles an hour must have given the farmers pause about the continued compatibility of their way of life with this inrush of urbanism. By the summer of 1882, no fewer than six steam railroads crossed the rural towns in various directions with trains every 15 minutes. Yet even following the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, *Appleton’s Dictionary of New York* was still calling Flatbush “a post-village.”

The steam railroad companies also directly promoted a significant increase in land prices in the process of buying up land needed for building the road and facilities. In 1877, the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad paid $35,000 for a 106- by 513-foot strip of the Willink homestead for its depot. This price was equivalent to $28,000 per acre. Much more mundane property lying between Ocean Avenue and Flatbush Avenue was priced at $750 for lots 25 feet by 60 feet, which on a per acre basis worked out to $21,780.

Arguably the only steam railroad in the 1870s that was not originally projected to transport passengers to Coney Island was the New York and Hempstead, which was to run from Bay Ridge to Queens and Suffolk. At its inception in 1870, it was designed to lower freight costs by creating a waterfront terminal in Bay Ridge, across the Bay from New Jersey terminals, in order to trans-ship freight by barge without breaking bulk, and on to Long Island. After some initial construction, the economic panic of 1873 brought work to a halt. Abraham Wakeman, a major investor in the defunct line, recreated it as the New York, Bay Ridge, and Jamaica Railroad, to run only as far as Queens. Significantly, it also added a passenger branch to Coney Island, which opened in 1876.

In reporting on efforts begun in 1874 to rescue the failed New York and Hempstead, the *Rural Gazette* declared that it would “greatly benefit...
FIGURE 14. Steam railroad lines in Kings County, 1879.
From the New York Daily Tribune, May 17, 1879.
interests of property” in Flatbush and Flatlands by “facilitating the increase of population from the surplus of New York.” Members of the modernizing landed elite such as John A. Lott manifested their agreement by donating right of way to the railroad as did many farmers in New Utrecht, Flatbush, and Flatlands. Indeed, in New Lots, such old-line Dutch farmers as the Raphaljeas, Wyckoffs, and Vansinderns even subscribed to stock in the railroad. The Rural Gazette counseled farmers that it was absurd to interfere with the railroad by demanding large sums for rights of way because within ten years the value of their land would quadruple.49

When Austin Corbin, a New York banker and future owner of the Long Island Railroad, bought the Bay Ridge line from Wakeman in 1876 and reorganized it as the New York and Manhattan Beach Railway Company, he changed its whole purpose: “Instead of running east to west as a commercial carrier with freight trans-shipment as the principal income, it was now to become largely a north-south road to serve purely as an adjunct to a beach resort hotel; passengers would form the overwhelming bulk of the travel and service would be seasonal only.”50

That contemporaries did not perceive the focus on suburbanization as irreconcilable with the continued vitality of market gardening is underscored by the fact that farmers’ needs were a significant factor in the construction of transportation facilities undertaken by private entrepreneurs. One of the selling points of the Brooklyn Bridge was its facilitation of transporting farmers’ produce to New York. In 1872, the Rural Gazette advanced as one compelling reason for the construction of a railroad from Canarsie “through our rich plain” of Flatbush to Brooklyn that “our farmers might save much of their long night-work in going over to New York to market, by having a quick light draft steamer to take their produce from our own wharfs, directly around to the city, leaving say at 7 or 8 p.m. . . . [O]nce begun no money would hire them to go back to the present system of market work.” Two years later, the Rural Gazette, uncertain as to “whether capitalists and the people” would agree, suggested that a steam railroad be built to run from New Utrecht through Flatbush to a terminal at Wallabout, which had long been advocated as (and a decade later would become) a large market for farmers’ produce. Nor did the promoters of the Bay Ridge Steam Railroad in 1875 forget to add that: “For the purposes of taking farm produce to Washington Market, there will be the most complete facilities, at lower rates than our farmers can go with their own teams, and in one-half the time.” In 1878, farmers in Flatlands experimented with freighting manure on that railroad. The Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad also offered to dispose
of farmers’ manure. When the New York and Manhattan Beach Railway sought permission from the Flatbush highway commissioners to run the Kings County Central Railroad from Prospect Park down Canarsie Lane to the Kings County institutional buildings, it supported its request with the rationale that the road would “be a great convenience to the farmers of Flatbush, Flatlands and Gravesend, in reaching Brooklyn, and will help to build up the section of country through which it passes.”

Finally, the environmental glories of market gardening even played a major part in projecting Flatbush’s aspirations to independence, which attained their most palpable form in its unsuccessful effort in 1879 to become the site of the 1883 World’s Fair. Farmland formed one of the chief attractions as boosters emphasized that “there spreads out before one’s vision a broad expanse of living green — the garden farms of Long Island — fringed by the blue waters of the Atlantic.”

POLICE

Three weeks before the inauguration of service on the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad in 1878, the New York State legislature passed “An Act for the preservation of the public peace, the protection of private property, and the maintenance of law and good order in the town of Flatbush,” which required the town to appoint a board of police commissioners with the power to employ as many as ten policemen and required the Kings County board of supervisors to levy up to $5,000 annually on the town’s assessed taxable real and personal estate to pay for the expenses. Burglaries throughout rural Kings County, especially repeated and often violent entries into the houses of some of the town’s richest residents, created the perception that the local constables had been “utterly unable to protect the property of the residents of the village against the depredations of thieves who made frequent incursions into the village at night.” Moreover, despite its constant flow of boosterist puffery extolling the virtues of Flatbush, the Rural Gazette had to concede that urban ills had already infiltrated the rural idyll. To attract new residents to a town that was running the risk of uniting the worst rather than the best of city and country, “we must make living here both safe and pleasant — which, in some parts of our town, it certainly is not. . . . Our whole Northern border is overrun by pigs, goats and cattle. Our streets are taken possession of, by day, by rapacious milk-producers to the detriment of life and limb, and at night by street-walkers and young roughs from the neighboring city. Houses of ill repute flourish in our very midst,
without the fear of molestation, and ball-players and gin-mills make our Sabbaths a disgrace to modern civilization."

Not surprisingly, John Lefferts and John Z. Lott, John A. Lott’s son, stood behind the replacement of private watchmen with a public force and immediately served on the Police Board. Lefferts had had to pay his own watchman in any event to police his cornfields and arrest inebriated Irish interlopers. The *Rural Gazette* left no doubt that it was a “genuine Taxpayers Board”: “It is superfluous to speak of Mr. Lefferts. He is, by far, the largest taxpayer in the town.” John Z. Lott “represents a very large interest in the town.” It was, indeed, fortunate for advocates of a police force that the town’s chief taxpayer (who was also a trustee of the town fire department) was its preeminent modernizer, because many landowners, especially those residing in the town’s southern portion farther removed from the Brooklyn city line, had opposed the bill on the ground that “farming lands are already over-burdened with taxes.” The *Rural Gazette* criticized such opponents of the police bill, especially Henry S. Ditmas, “who represents a very large landed interest,” for their short-sightedness. Although farmland, “at least at present,” could not bear a large tax increase, the police force would cost only $1.25 for every $1,000 of assessed valuation. If the Ditmases and other more rural farm owners “would not give that amount for police protection,” they might eventually find their property devalued by the cessation in the inflow of potential and especially wealthier residents, who alone could bid up real-estate prices. Instead, antimodernizers were apparently preoccupied with the rise in taxation: the total tax levied in Flatbush had increased from little more than $1,000 in 1837 to $75,000 by 1875.

**GAS AND WATER**

The legislature promoted urbanization in 1864 by permitting Brooklyn gas companies to lay gas pipes in Flatbush and authorizing the Flatbush highway commissioners to contract with companies to supply gas for street lighting as well as to procure the requisite lamps and posts. Lott and Lefferts then organized the Flatbush Gas Company, of which they were president and treasurer, respectively. The motivation for introducing gas illumination was the “dense foliage” in Flatbush, which “rendered locomotion, upon moonless nights, not only difficult, but to a greater or less degree dangerous.” These dangers were emphasized in the *Rural Gazette*, which used the occasions of street muggings to urge the necessity of gas lamps. Gas lighting enhanced the habitability of Flatbush, which was as close to the ferries to
Manhattan as were certain parts of the city of Brooklyn while, boosters claimed, offering refuge from “city noise and bustle as though fifty miles away.” Moreover, the gas operations paid the company’s owners “a fair profit even from the start.” John Lefferts achieved that outcome by his hard bargaining with the highway commissioners over the price the town would pay; on at least one occasion, a stalemate led to the lights’ being turned off for two nights in Flatbush.55

One of the improvements that the superintendent of the Kings County street survey, Samuel McElroy, had in mind was a water system. The supply of water may have been abundant, but until 1881 in Flatbush, “the methods of obtaining water for domestic and other purposes were as primitive as those that prevail in any little Western frontier town.” Cisterns had been used to store rainwater for washing and cleaning as well as for the fire engine. Water for drinking and cooking came from wells, old-fashioned log pumps, or buckets, the installation of the former two often being shared by neighbors. Those who could not afford such private systems, used public pumps located throughout Flatbush. In 1881, a group of “capitalists and some of our largest landowners,” led by John Lefferts — who after John A. Lott’s death was “considered the leading man of our town” — John Z. Lott, and William Matthews, organized the private for-profit Flatbush Water Works Company, which pumped water through nine miles of pipes from artesian wells in part located in Flatlands. That year it sought permission to supply the residents of Flatbush with “pure and wholesome water,” and entered into an agreement with the town of Flatbush to supply water for fire and household purposes. In 1885, the waterworks and the town entered into a 10-year agreement that authorized the company, in addition to laying a specified number of hydrants, to supply private consumers with water at agreed-upon rates.56

This new system vastly simplified the lives of Flatbush farmers — and especially of farmers’ wives, for whom the lack of running water was a major source of “hours of back breaking drudgery” — but the leading old-line Dutch farm families-turned-modernizers such as Lott and Lefferts understood that provision of a modern water supply system, not least as the essential component of an urban fire-fighting organization, would sweep away a crucial obstacle to suburbanization. Indeed, their explicit purpose in undertaking this investment was to “benefit and render salable” the “large tracts of land” that they personally owned in Flatbush. Lefferts, the vice president of the waterworks, “owns miles of property in the town which he wants to develop.” The Rural Gazette was gratified to report that the incep-
tion of work immediately “attracted the attention of capitalists” and sparked a real-estate boon, but it uncharacteristically warned of the potential for “extortion” and “monopoly” inherent in private ownership of such a necessity of life, and urged the town to take over the franchise.57

GROWTH

By the early 1880s, as the Brooklyn Bridge neared completion, the coming streams of commercial prosperity had become a foregone conclusion for modernizing boosters in Flatbush. Chief among them was the Rural Gazette, which did not expressly welcome or lament the demise of farming, but in an 1882 editorial aptly titled, “Growth,” celebrated the unprecedented growth of the town’s population and housing stock during the preceding ten years. The 50 percent increase in dwellings included some “costing even as high as $40,000.” The editorial recognized that the “large increase of population which is continually coming among us from the neighboring metropolis . . . must continue to flow hitherward for many years to come. For as the great cities are continually growing and stretching out their borders, we must expect to see Brooklyn grasp our town and absorb it, just as every other town bordering on a great city is being absorbed in the insatiable maw of coming population. This result is inevitable.”58

Despite the explicit analogy that the Gazette drew between the inevitability of New York's surpassing London and America's outstripping Britain, the period was sufficiently transitional that the newspaper could still take Kings County's agricultural vitality for granted. Thus while boasting in one editorial of the 25 first-class dwellings (costing at least $4,000) that had been built during the previous ten years on the John Lott farm, in the adjoining column it praised George B. Forrester, the inventor of the first complete chemical manures “used in our county towns,” which did “wonders for the farmer.” Until Forrester demonstrated that potatoes excelling those of former years could be raised on land treated exclusively with his chemicals seven years consecutively, it had been “a new idea to our farmers that chemicals could take the place of stable manure.” Even though his office was located in lower Manhattan — his factory was in Brooklyn — farmers sought personal advice from Forrester, who advertised in the Gazette that his chemicals produced the “largest yield and best quality of potatoes, cabbage, onions.” One advertisement in the newspaper even asserted that fertilizer had so far replaced manure that the custom of hauling it from the city had died out.59
In 1882, in advance of the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, which, when linked to a system of rapid transit, gave residents of interior Brooklyn as easy access to lower Manhattan as that of New Yorkers above 59th Street, the *Real Estate Record* knew that there "ought . . . to be money in well-located Brooklyn real estate." Since magnification of real-estate prices had long been one of the driving forces behind construction of the bridge, the Record's insistence was scarcely surprising. In a jaundiced appreciation of the Brooklyn Bridge immediately after it opened, however, the *Railroad Gazette* warned that unless passengers were able to travel uninterruptedly by rapid transit from their homes in Brooklyn to Manhattan, the bridge would offer little advantage over ferries; but once such a link were established, "Brooklyn would truly be made a part of New York" and rents for houses near Prospect Park would double. In fact, annexation in the mid-1890s of the Kings County towns to Brooklyn followed in the wake of the development of a rapid transit system.60

In 1883, shortly after the Brooklyn Bridge opened, the *Rural Gazette* insistently proclaimed "The Real Estate Boom in Flatbush." Proudly announc-
ing that: “Never before in the history of our town has there been a healthier tone regarding property,” the paper declared that “the attention of a very large portion of dealers and purchasers in the great cities have [sic] been called to the fact that Flatbush has finally waked up from her slumbers. . . . If we can secure Rapid Transit, there can be no doubt of our population and wealth quadrupling in the next five years.” The next year — marked by the inauguration of night-car service to Flatbush by the Brooklyn City Railroad — one of the authors of Stiles’s history of Kings County finally made the prognosis explicit: the opening of streets in the wake of the commission’s work and to “meet the pressing demand for building-lots” would “continue until all our farming-land is turned into building-lots, and we become a constituent part of what is destined to be the largest city in the world.”

The self-fulfilling glosses issued by McElroy and other inevitabilists proved correct not only for Flatbush. In the early to mid-1880s, market gardening in New Utrecht furnished “the best vegetables for the New York market of to-day” that were also “of far more value than any of the other towns of Kings County.” At the end of the decade, just five years “before its annexation, New Utrecht had been little more than a farming town. But the arrival of the Second Avenue Trolley quickly revolutionized the neighborhood. Thousands of houses were constructed; streets were opened up; and the real-estate developers descended on the unsuspecting community.” By the end of the 1890s, “Bay Ridge and Fort Hamilton had practically lost their rural flavor and . . . become thickly settled districts.” Residential development and extension of the transportation systems reinforced each other as they both served to oust agriculture from its once dominant position.

If in Flatbush, too, the trolley “marked the end of an era,” “the destruction of its social life followed the same pattern as in New Utrecht, but the pace was more leisurely.” The relatively prolonged transformation in Flatbush was a function of its longer developmental prehistory, but New Utrecht’s course was not unique. Prior to its annexation to Brooklyn in 1886, Brownsville, too “had been a pastoral suburb given over to green fields, cow stables and barnyards.” At midcentury it had been “purely a farmer’s land.”

Growth in Gravesend also had to await rapid transportation and the dividing up of farmland into building lots. Prior to 1875, Coney Island had, from a commercial perspective, been “little more than a barren waste of sand.” But the building of a steam railroad opened Coney Island to the masses and investors. If prior to 1875 the only land route from Brooklyn to Coney Island was unmacadamized, “wretchedly” maintained, and “fleeced”...
travelers by means of two tollgates, by 1879 eight steam railroads, nine steamboat lines, and one streetcar transported as many as 150,000 visitors daily. The sale in 1877 of a 50-acre farm at public auction accelerated the dissolution. But more generally, the proliferation of horse racing (for example, at the Coney Island Jockey Club) and the development of Coney Island as a resort and amusement park were fostered by the advent of the trolley later in the century. Soon “the land-boomers got an eye on Gravesend and began to menace its rural life. . . . Old farms were abandoned to the builders . . . and the closer and more accessible an old farm was to the water front the more quickly was it staked out.”

In 1878 the Rural Gazette surmised that the run-up in the prices of Gravesend’s Common lands “has no parallel unless it be in the mining regions of California.” The next year, when “[a]most fabulous sums ha[d] already been spent in improvements” on Coney Island, the paper, which in 1880 signaled the growing commercial importance of the ocean beach by adding “Brighton” to its own name, observed that Gravesend “has been or is likely to become as much of a Utopia as was California in the palmy days of 1848–9.” This new Atlantic bonanza was soon “attracting the attention of every species of speculator from the three card monte to the millionaire Presidents of Railroad corporations.” The sky’s-the-limit atmosphere prevailing in Gravesend was reflected in the Rural Gazette’s rhetorical question, on hearing that farmer John Voorhees had sold eight acres of meadowland at $1,000 per acre to Austin Corbin, the head of the Manhattan Beach Railroad: “Captain, why did you not ask two thousand dollars an acre?”