OF CABBAGES AND KINGS COUNTY
AGRICULTURE AND THE FORMATION OF MODERN BROOKLYN

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7. MODERNIZERS THWARTED: 
THE GREAT ANNEXATION DEBATE 
OF 1873

"Will you walk into my limits?" said the city to the town,
"Tis the finest little city that can anywhere be found," . . .
"Oh no, no," said the country town, "to ask me would be vain,
For who goes into your limits can ne'er come out again." . . .
"Come hither, hither, pretty town, with your broad and gorgeous fields,
Your lands are rich and fertile, from every debt you're free,
And as for taxes and assessments they never trouble thee."
— Flatlands, "Brooklyn and the Country Town,"
*Kings County Rural Gazette,* January 25, 1873

In 1873 a historically crucial debate took place around the campaign to annex all the rural towns to Brooklyn, by then the third most populous city in the United States and intent on the territorial aggrandizement that would make possible even greater growth. The resistance, led by old-line Dutch farmers and overwhelmingly supported by other rural residents, sparked sustained public controversy that shed considerably more light on the tensions and conflicts between farmers and (sub)urban modernizers as well as among farmers over the future of market gardening than the successful annexation campaign two decades later. Farmers' ability to obstruct, at least for a decade or two, plans to drive agriculture away from the city rested on two strategies — some farmers being ideologically committed more to one than the other — during the interim: to engage in profitable vegetable production and to wait until demand for suburban housing space boosted land prices to the point at which no cabbage crop could be more lucrative.
than the coupon-clipping made possible by a mass sell-off of the farms. The difference between the 1870s and the 1890s lay in the fact that by 1893–94 developments had overtaken debate: regardless of whether the towns underwent formal administrative consolidation with Brooklyn, defenders of town autonomy no longer based their arguments on the long-term future of agriculture.

Despite the inevitabilists' propaganda, abandonment of the autonomy of rural Kings County was not unilinear. And although farm owners in Flatbush, a town that was more commercially developed and interlinked with the city of Brooklyn than Flatlands, Gravesend, or New Utrecht, more readily perceived the financial advantages of annexation in the short term, even a majority of them resisted the merger until the 1890s. The many-sided public debate on annexation in 1873, when inevitabilism had not yet become hegemonic, affords deep insights into the relationship between farming and general socioeconomic and political development.

The state legislature's creation in 1873 of a board of commissioners to devise a plan to consolidate the city of Brooklyn and the five towns of Kings County suggests that the wave of the market future was present to the governmental mind. But the ingathering of the rural parts of Kings County into the city of Brooklyn began much earlier. The pull of the largest and fastest growing manufacturing and mercantile area of Long Island on towns contiguous to it had been powerful for many years. As recently as 1854 it had resulted in annexing Williamsburgh and Bushwick.

More importantly, discussion, reinforced by inauguration of work on the Brooklyn Bridge, had already turned to merging Brooklyn and New York. "It is 'manifest destiny,'" wrote one reader to the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in January of 1873, "that New York and Brooklyn must . . . become united as one great city. . . . The question will be . . . shall New York annex Brooklyn, or Brooklyn annex New York?" The reader, "H.," offered Brooklyn and "its extensive suburbs" as affording "ample space to accommodate all of New York's overcrowded population, who may desire to become possessed of homes in one of the most delightful and desirable localities to be found." H. believed that while New York, Long Island, and Westchester had procrastinated, New Jersey had busily built up railroads, "giving to the penned up denizens of New York the most liberal facilities for reaching her rural districts." Consequently, thousands of New Yorkers, investing millions of dollars, had "converted her miserably impoverished wilds into blooming parks, groves and elegant villas." H. correctly predicted that if Brooklyn built railroads to the various towns, "capital will flow in upon us so rapidly as to
advance real estate fully one hundred per cent, on its present value and . . .
er long the beautiful hills, valleys and plains of Long Island will swarm with
homes of thousands of New Yorkers.”2

Others agreed that of the quarter-million people who had left New York
City for Jersey City and other outlying districts, half might have gone to and
enriched Kings County if only rapid transit had been introduced. An index
of the impoverishment that had instead descended on the Kings County
towns was comparative land prices: an acre of land within five miles of the
center of Brooklyn was cheaper than a lot within many miles of Jersey City.
In addition, in 1869 New Jersey exempted, in counties across the Hudson
River from Manhattan, all mortgages from taxation, thus offering “a strong
inducement to the inhabitants of . . . New York . . . to change their resi-
dences and become citizens of New Jersey.”3

Even the more modest boosters of a Brooklyn encompassing all of Kings
County gloried in the prospect that it would be, “territorially at least, the
largest city on the American Continent,” its 72 square miles being three
times greater than New York. In this spirit, the Brooklyn Reform Commi-
tee, later known as the Committee of One Hundred, a body committed to
municipal reform, at the end of 1872, prepared a bill annexing the county
towns, which the Brooklyn authorities were reportedly prepared to support
in the state legislature.4

Others, however, were just as certain that, as the Gravesend town super-
visor put it, “creating a city out of a farming district” would injure many.5 A
reader of the Rural Gazette, argued:

With the exception of a small area within the town of New Lots, and possi-
ibly a very small section of Flatbush, the whole territory . . . is purely
agricultural; it consists entirely of farms cultivated for market produce,
with a few country stores, blacksmith and wheelwright shops, auxiliar to
and dependent upon the farming interests. There is not a territory any-
where of the same extent more purely agricultural, or which has less need
of a city government.6

That the agrarian landlords of the commercially more highly developed
town of Flatbush might have forged a different position on the advantages
of annexation than the boers of Flatlands becomes plausible when it is real-
ized that in the early 1870s the latter was “almost entirely an agricultural dis-
trict” of 9,000 acres of good farmland on which owner-farmers produced
vegetables for New York markets:
The annexation question is not only new but startling to many of them. Their situation . . . is so remote and secluded that but few of the exciting events of the period disturb their serenity. Their [sic] is neither stage nor car line that penetrates most of this township, and a stranger that is set down on the highway in its central part, might easily imagine himself to be in one of the most obscure and old fashioned of far New England hamlets. On every side, as far as the eye can reach, is a broad expanse of well fenced, and well cultivated fertile flatlands.\(^7\)

Flatlands' predominantly rural character is obvious from figure 16, which depicts its virtually uninhabited center situated between the small villages of Flatlands and Canarsie.
City government, in the words of Edgar Bergen, the 22-year-old lawyer son of Jeremiah Bergen, one of Flatlands’ biggest potato farmers, was inappropriate to Flatlands, which had “four acres of land for every inhabitant, not a single block of houses nor any two houses adjoining.” At the time of the next annexation struggle, twenty years later, the Brooklyn Corporation Counsel could still call Flatlands “one petty town . . . being smallest in assessed valuation and population.” The agrarian underpinnings of Flatlands were readily visible in 1893, when, pursuant to a newly enacted state statute, 30 of its taxable inhabitants filed a petition with the Town Board requesting that it install electric lighting in all the streets. Two days later no fewer than 263 taxpayers signed counterpetitions protesting “against the lighting of the streets of the Town by electricity for the reason that the Town is largely composed of a farming community and public necessity does not demand it at the present time.”

Most of the Flatlands boers were, according to the Eagle, “descendants of the first settlers . . . and as a class . . . very wealthy, thrifty, and highly intelligent.” But whereas the older farmers generally opposed annexation, the younger ones were rebelling against the idiocy of rural life:

“We are shut up here from nearly all public progress, as though we were behind the walls of China. The old folks and some of the big landowners want to hold on to their lands and wait for a large and sudden advance in prices, and then to sell at enormous profits. We don’t want that policy. Let the city government open up this country, run avenues through it, give us country seats, capitalists, railroad, quick time to New York. We can make it pay handsomely to ourselves.”

Edgar Bergen shared this position, believing that annexationists had put the cart before the steam railroad: what Flatlands needed was rapid communication, from which dense population and then annexation would follow. The battle lines seem clearly drawn here, but a slight haze befogs understanding when the Eagle quotes an antiannexationist as opining that: “The farms now pay moderately only, and not then unless very carefully worked.” Annexation would, according to this farmer, withdraw land from market gardening for streets: “We want our farms let alone just as they are. When we want annexation, we’ll ask for it.” How Flatlands farmers became wealthy from only moderately profitable farms remains as puzzling as why farmers would tenaciously cling to them if they demanded such hard work for such modest returns — unless, as one of their sons charged, they were
in fact slyly awaiting the right moment to sell at the highest developmental price.\textsuperscript{11}

Flatlanders were especially worried about having to pay for superfluous city institutions — such as police and flagged sidewalks beside farms — and the tax consequences of annexation and development: “Instead of rating your farms at $500 per acre . . . you will then boast of lands worth $1,500 per acre, and instead of paying paltry tax of 50 or $100 per year, you will then have the privilege of paying more than your farms will rent for.”\textsuperscript{12}

The simplest way to defuse farmers’ resistance to annexation — or at least to unmask the real basis of their opposition — was, as the \textit{Eagle} noted, to condition annexation on a pledge that “the lands actually used for agricultural purposes shall be taxed even less than they are now.” Annexation statutes and commission proposals failed to go quite that far in propitiating farmers, but they did offer significant tax preferences to them. In 1873, however, they did not suffice to accommodate the boers in Flatlands or elsewhere in rural Kings County, who recalled that when Bushwick had been annexed two decades earlier, it, too, “was at first taxed as an agricultural ward, but only for two years, and then was taxed as city lots, and to-day there are hundreds of vacant lots in that district many of which will not sell for sufficient to pay the taxes and assessments thereon.” Moreover, annexation without representation — that is, mandated by the state legislature without approval by a majority of the annexees — would, in the words of Jacques J. Stilwell, a member of one of the oldest families and property owner in, and town supervisor of, Gravesend from 1861 to 1878, constitute “a revolutionary measure that would justify armed resistance.” Although the legislature in 1873 ultimately decided not to compel annexation in the amended charter of the city of Brooklyn — and also abandoned the “spiteful” proposal to require the towns that refused annexation to form their own county or be joined to Queens — annexation in 1894 was prescribed by statute.\textsuperscript{13}

Not coincidentally, then, the annexation proposals that resurfaced with ever greater frequency in 1872 and 1873 focused on New Lots, which by this time was almost as populous as the four other towns combined, although it also encompassed an important farming sector. On February 11, 1873, a bill was filed in the New York State Assembly to annex the town to Brooklyn. New Lots had originally been created by the overflow of the children of farmers in Flatbush and Flatlands: “In the rear of their farms lay the expanse of plain hill and forest, not then tilled or thought much of.” The farmers
opened roads to the area and apportioned lots to their sons, who “grew rich,” and passed their possessions on to descendants, many of whom — such as the Van Siclens, Van Sinderens, Wyckoffs, Rapelyeas, Lotts, and Vanderveers — in the 1870s still owned the land. The town of New Lots consisted of the old farming village (population 500), and three larger towns, Brownsville (1,000), Cypress Hills (2,500), and, by far the largest and most industrialized, East New York (8,000). Annexationists’ belief that inadequate police and fire protection and gas and water utilities had proved that economic and demographic growth had outrun the town’s self-governing capacities formed, together with perceived necessity of rapid transit to the ferries, the focus of their testimony before the New York State Assembly Committee on Internal Affairs at its hearings on the New Lots bill. Opponents, largely but not exclusively old-line Dutch rural landowners, were actuated by a fear of higher taxes and “an undesirable inroad of new settlers who will be in unpleasant proximity.”

East New York in the 1860s was occupationally dominated by the German tailor and cigar maker, whose “rulers” were “the immortal descendants of the Dutch settlers, the Van Sicklens, Schencks, Cozines, Wyckoffs, who ruled him gently and did not try to rob him because their coffers were already full of yellow joy.” Shortly before the annexation movement gained momentum, speculators approached the Dutch farmers, who “owned nearly all the property,” some of whom “grasped at the prices offered,” while “others twinkled curiously with their eyes and said they couldn’t see it.” By May, the Rural Gazette was urging “[c]apitalists” to invest in East New York property, which it predicted would double in value within three years.

On February 18, 1873, another bill was filed in the New York State Assembly — this one to annex all the rural towns to Brooklyn. In June the state legislature enacted legislation directing the mayor of Brooklyn to appoint six commissioners, and each of the supervisors of the five rural towns to appoint one commissioner, to a board to “devise a general plan” to unite and consolidate all of them into a municipal corporation called the city of Brooklyn. Specifically, the board was to set forth “the relative rate of taxation . . . to be assessed upon the respective portions of the territory” as well as to provide for a consolidation with the Kings County government toward the end of reducing expenses. After a two-thirds majority of the board adopted the plan, it was to be submitted to the voters at the general election in November; if a majority of the votes cast in Brooklyn and a majority of the aggregate votes cast in the five towns favored consolidation, the com-
missioners were to prepare an act for consolidation for the legislature. The voting procedure in the rural areas was designed to deny any one of the small towns the power to veto annexation for the others by requiring all to come in or stay out together. From the outset it was deemed a foregone conclusion that the commissioners would favor consolidation and that voters in the three most rural towns, Flatlands, Gravesend, and New Utrecht, were “almost unanimously opposed to consolidation.”

It is in accordance with the natural order of things that the towns, already to a degree a practical part of the city, should become a political part. This natural tendency is sure to end in unification at no distant day, despite the present illogical attitude of some of the townsmen. The municipality is steadily creeping over the rural section of the County... Streets are pushing out into the towns, paved thoroughfares are taking the place of country roads, town lots are commanding city prices, and as... the municipal line is a merely political one, practically disregarded by Brooklyn in her resistless development.

— “City and County,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, April 8, 1873

Flatlands, Gravesend, and New Utrecht were represented by major farmers — Peter Lott, William Bennett, and Teunis G. Bergen, respectively. Flatbush’s representative, John A. Lott (1806–1878), whom the members chose as their president, was the most eminent living member of the old-line Dutch farm families, “perhaps the wealthiest lawyer in Brooklyn” during the antebellum period, and the key political entrepreneur shaping the modernization of Flatbush. His centrality to Flatbush was symbolically on display spatially as well: as shown in figure 17, the Lott residence, located on Flatbush Road directly across from Erasmus Hall Academy and next to the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, was at the center of Flatbush life. Lott became a judge on the Kings County Court of Common Pleas in 1838, a member of the New York State Assembly in 1842, of the Senate in 1843, a judge on the Supreme Court in 1858, and completed his career as a public official by serving on the state’s highest court, the Court of Appeals, in 1869, and as Chief Commissioner of the Commission of Appeals from 1870 to 1875. A few months after the annexation election, the Rural Gazette and the Eagle suggested Lott as the Democratic candidate for governor of New York.

Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. called Lott the “ablest lawyer” in Brooklyn,
while others regarded him as "the most distinguished member of Dutch lineage to occupy a judicial office in Kings County" in the nineteenth century. Though listed in federal population censuses as a lawyer or judge, Lott was not only a major farm owner in Flatbush (and other county towns), but also the central figure in an extended family of Lotts who owned considerable blocks of land throughout the rural towns. In 1850, for example, the Census of Population listed him as a lawyer owning real estate valued at $50,000, while in the Census of Agriculture he appeared as owning a 160-acre farm valued at $30,000, the output of which was, however, not great. By 1875, Lott owned, according to the Rural Gazette, "in acres, more property in Kings County than any other man in it. Of the Lott farms in Flatbush, not an acre has been parted with." Not all of this land had been owned by the Lott family for two centuries; for example, John A. Lott's father, Abraham, bought a section of prime farmland in Flatlands in 1821. At his death in 1878, John A. Lott left an estate valued at $500,000.19
Some old-line Dutch farm families' power derived from shrewdly diversifying their agricultural holdings to profit from the coming suburbani-

zation:

The fat farm lands and their strategic position had brought wealth and independence to the old families, and they controlled the political power as well as the growing public utilities. . . .

The land of the Dutch settlers in “Vlacke Bos” had become valuable. By staying quietly at home the Dutch had located the gold the adventur-

ous Scotch-Irish so often failed to find after suffering and hardship in . . . California. . . . [T]he descendants of the old settlers, the Lotts, Vander-

bils, Ditmases, Zabriskies, Leffertses, Wycoffs, Martenses and Snedekers held the offices and ran the Dutch Reformed Church. They owned the water works, the telegraph company, the toll road, the gas company; dic-

tated the policy of the fire company, the excise commission, the law and order society and regulated all social affairs.

Consequently, the “most prestigious families in Brooklyn were those whose ancestors had received tracts of land and played active social and political roles” in the city itself and the outlying towns.20

John A. Lott was, together with John Lefferts, the most conspicuous ex-

ample of such diversification. Through his long career as lawyer, politician, and judge, he amassed positions as president of the Long Island Safe Depo-

sit Company, Flatbush Gas Company, Village Board of Improvement, and Brighton Beach Hotel and Railroad, and director of the Nassau Insur-

ance Company and Long Island Insurance Company. He was also a trustee of the Flatbush fire company. His obituary in the New York Times charac-

terized him as so “absolutely venerated” in rural Kings County, that when, in the final year of his life he became president of the Brooklyn, Flatbush, and Coney Island Railroad, which ran through “a rich farming district,” the “farmers had such faith in Judge Lott that not a single lawsuit was brought against the company concerning the right of way.”21

Lott, like John Willink and other rich residents of rural Kings County, maintained business interests extending well beyond local real-estate trans-

actions. They financed land purchases in rural counties surrounding New York by means of mortgages, which were called indentures and could be foreclosed on if the farmers were unable to meet their payments. These rela-

tively complicated financial arrangements suggest a high level of sophisti-
cation about land matters, which not only would have served Lott and others well in negotiating the sell-off of their own land, but also reveal that they may have undertaken the kinds of calculations about farming versus selling that are ascribed to market-rational farmers.\textsuperscript{22}

The wealth that Lott accumulated through legal practice and his other enterprises may eventually have exceeded that generated on his farmlands, but the fact that as early as 1873 he was willing to promote annexation, which he must have known and hoped would mean the end of agricultural Flatbush — his commitment to “one city, one government and one destiny” was so firm that he was prepared even to abolish the names of the towns — suggests that the agricultural landowning class in Kings County was split along lines of diversification: those who had already begun shifting their assets into other productive forms were more eager to expedite suburbanization. This axis of differentiation undercuts the monolithic view that the “vast difference” between Brooklyn and Flatbush could be explained by the fact that the descendants of the original Dutch settlers in the rural town continued to hold “the landed ownership and administrative control.”\textsuperscript{23}

Lott, however, was no ruthless or mindless modernizer, bent on forcing Flatbush and the other towns into Brooklyn against their will. It did not escape contemporary observers such as the \textit{Eagle} that the commissioners’ success largely depended on Lott’s ability to deploy his conservatism to bring along the country members while his (and Flatbush’s) “spirit of progress” commended him to the Brooklynites. In this respect Lott’s position resembled that of the \textit{Rural Gazette}, which, while resisting annexation on terms set by Brooklyn politicians and taxpayers, steadfastly swore its advocacy of “progress”: “We demand it; we must have it; Rapid Transit, both by Dummies on our surface road, and by more rapid means underground. Our location near you requires it; our property interests require it; our business men need it.”\textsuperscript{24}

Lott’s urbanizing policies are particularly striking since his farmland, as seen in figure 19, extended into the much more rural towns of Flatlands and Gravesend as well as into New Utrecht. In 1870, for example, his aggregate holdings in the four towns amounted to 253 acres. Indeed, contemporaries assumed that he was the largest landowner in rural Kings County. It is uncertain whether large and wealthy landowning families such as Lott and Lefferts that had already diversified into nonagricultural assets understood the promotion of residential settlements as inconsistent with farming, but as land prices rose in the wake of the first successful suburbanization develop-
ments, they presumably realized that a "privately" held agricultural greenbelt reflected a civic consciousness that not even they wished to afford.25

Judge Lott's backward-looking agrarian foil on the commission was the New Utrecht representative, Teunis Garret Bergen, "a thorough Dutchman of the old school in all things." He was not only a farmer, but an antiquarian genealogist of the Kings County Dutch, surveyor, the town supervisor of New Utrecht continuously from 1836 to 1859, and former Congressman, whose first language was Dutch. Bergen's unceasing rejection of annexation throughout the commission's proceedings was at least as tenacious as Lott's advocacy of modernity. Bergen's unyielding stance may have been rooted in his knowledge that in February, when the New York State Assembly was considering the annexation bill, nineteen-twentieths of the people of New Utrecht had submitted a remonstrance to the legislature expressing their opposition.26

Bergen's rejectionist reputation had preceded his advent on the commis-
sion in August: during the first several months of the year he had been instrumental in eliminating annexation from the proposed amendments to the Brooklyn city charter. In April, the *Eagle*, weary of “the impenetrable obstinacy of Uncle Tune Bergen” in the face of “pathos, entreaty and logic,” published an anonymous satirical poem from New Lots, “The Wrath of Bergen,” which, as a unique document capturing the essence of the modernizers’ caricature of the resisting Dutch farmers’ mentality, deserves rescue from oblivion despite its length.27

“THE WRATH OF BERGEN”

The last Zebeck that came
And moor’d within the mole,
Such tidings unto Tunis brought,
As stirred his very soul.

Uncle Tunis sat at Bay Ridge,
The pipe within his lips,
And still at frequent intervals
The Apple Jack he sips.
In spite of lulling vapor,
From the soothing, brimming cup,
The spirit of our Uncle Tune
Is fiercely kindling up.

For why? — He heard that Sam McLean,
And “One Hundred” more,
Had journeyed up to Albany,
A little time before;
And brought a bill, that brooded ill,
To make the country towns
A part of Brooklyn’s limits,
And incorporate their Downs.

And so he jumped, and swore an oath,
Like Stuyvesant of yore;
Then dashed his pipe and Apple Jack
With fury on the floor.
Then, making three prodigious strides,
He reached the outward door;
With every step his passion rose,
And burned within him more.

The marching over hill and moor,
O'er frozen swamps and swales,
Where the musquitoes loved to swarm,
But now the famished quails;
The timid quails before him flew,
O'er frozen roads, in flocks,
While furtive rabbits started up,
And scampered for the rocks.

Thus Uncle Tunis marched across
His patrimonial ground,
'Twas night time and the silver moon
Diffused its beams around.
Oh, shall these fields of bulrushes
Be turned to city lots?
Shall stately palaces be built
Where now the turnip rots?

"Forbid it, Heaven!" cried Uncle Tune,
"Such changes should take place."
Just then unclouded moonbeams fell,
And hit him in the face.
His breath rose on the frosty air
Like wreaths of silver lace.
Still Uncle Tune moved fiercely on,
Nor did he slack his pace
Till he met Martin Schoonmaker,
Who loves the "possum chase."

Now, Martin had a mystic turn,
With a discursive style,
That lengthened every sentence out,
Until it seemed a mile.
And Martin was amazed to see
His friend show so much bile,
For heretofore Tune Bergen's face
Had always worn a smile,
Which said, or almost seemed to say,
   “I’ve been striking ile.”

His cheeks were like some dark ribbed cloud
   That holds the thunder in
Until a vivid lightning flash
   Let loose the storm within.
Says Tune, “Trojani Fuitmus;”
   And Schoonmaker says “Eh?”
“The country towns,” Tune Bergen cries
   Like Pantheus, “had their day.”
And now he added with a sigh,
   “The appointed hour has come
When Brooklyn, Gravesend and Bay Ridge
   Are melted into one.
Even Flatbush, where Judge Lott resides,
   Is equally undone.

“No more we hear the bullfrogs sing,
   Nor bob for eels at night;
Our swamps will very soon be drained,
   And gas lamps give us light.
Adieu to clams and pollywogs
   And heaven defend the right.”
With that he raised an old tin horn,
   And blew so long and loud,
That even the silent silver moon,
   Dodged in behind a cloud.

Then up came John C. Jacobs,
   And with him Dominick Roche,
And pledged that no city lot
   Should upon the swales encroach,
Nor any street surveyor
   The clams or eels approach.

Then Uncle Tunis simmered down,
   Resumed his former smile,
And Martin thanked these new found friends,
   In periods of a mile.
So all things stand in \textit{statu quo},
The bull frogs still can sing,
And night owls, o’er the stagnant beach,
Still flap their lazy wing,
And Tunis from the neighboring marsh,
His eels at midnight bring.

The poem left no doubt as to whom the \textit{Eagle} meant when, in commenting on the commission’s first meeting on August 12, 1873, it cautioned the antiannexationist commissioners to consider “the ultimate destiny of the towns” while tempering their zeal with “a better appreciation of the real interests of the towns than fossiliferous leaders in them have sometimes exhibited.” Despite his reputation, Bergen was practically involved in numerous modernizing projects: in his capacity as surveyor in the 1850s he had surveyed some of the main arteries in Flatbush such as the Flatbush Plank Road, which facilitated communication and transportation, and prepared the map for the Greenfield residential project in 1852, thus accelerating the drive for annexation. He was also surveyor for the railroad company, headed by John A. Lott, that operated the first steam railroad from Flatbush to Coney Island. Nevertheless, Bergen’s premodern mentality was undeniable. Three years after the annexation debate, for example, in petitioning the Kings County board of supervisors to defer action on a vote in New Utrecht to build a new town hall there for $10,000, Bergen found it pertinent to dwell on his calculation that seven of his co-petitioners alone had paid more in taxes than all of the residents who voted in favor of construction.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{THE COMMISSIONERS DEBATE}

[1]f the farmers . . . could see it, they’d make more money by consolidation than they would by the cultivation of corn and cabbage all their lives.

— Edmund Driggs, Brooklyn Consolidation Commission,

\textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle}, October 22, 1873

At the annexation commissioners’ first meeting, a member from Brooklyn offered a resolution explaining the principles actuating the board, the pertinent point of which was: “That for purposes of taxation the property in the several towns shall be assessed as agricultural lands except when the same has been or may be divided and used as building lots.”
Bergen, however objected to the annexation scheme per se:

The government of New Utrecht was the least expensive; it was only an agricultural village, a long way from Brooklyn, and not in need of being included in the expenses of municipal government, at least not for the present. The question of guarantees also arises. Brooklyn might make fair terms now, but what might be the future course? On the present basis of representation, the county towns would have only one Alderman among them. The great trouble . . . is the prevailing spirit of centralization. If the county towns do not desire annexation, it should not be forced on them.29

In response to Bergen's claim that Brooklyn's "sole object . . . was to lighten its own heavy taxes," A. B. Bayliss, a Brooklyn representative, observed that consolidation "could not be avoided, because of the great and increasing growth of the city, and the progress of the population toward and into the county towns. The county towns lying contiguous to the city needed police protection, lighted streets, and protection from fires, because of their nearness to the city." When Bayliss tried to force a vote on the issue of annexation itself to test the antiannexation faction's strength, Judge Lott decided that the commission's charge was not to discuss the question but to frame a plan. The members then adopted the resolution, the farmer-commissioners from the most rural towns, Flatlands and Gravesend, joining Bergen in the minority. The press correctly interpreted this eight to three test vote as indicative of the final outcome of the commission's deliberations.30

This debate suggests that some farmer representatives did not yet view (sub)urbanization as inevitable or at least as imminent. Resistance to Brooklynization need not, however, be interpreted as the boers' last hurrah: opponents' strategy could simply have been to continue farming while pent-up pressure for suburban housing forced up land prices without farmers' having to pay higher citylike taxes during the transition. Teunis Bergen, after all, was not some unreconstructed backwoodsman, but a highly literate surveyor and longtime politician, whom judges found acceptable as a commissioner to appraise the value of farmland to be taken for a railroad. Nor was his fear that after annexation the city of Brooklyn might impose higher taxes on the hopelessly outvoted farm towns outlandish.31

Bergen elaborated on these fears the next week at a meeting of the Committee on the Consolidation. When he "expressed apprehension that farm
lands might be unjustly taxed" for the expense of introducing water into the towns, a Brooklyn commissioner replied: "The charter says that certain lands shall be assessed as agricultural lands, as was done in the Eighth ward here [Gowanus] for a long time. I mean that the city assessor shall not go down there and assess it as if it were laid out in city lots." But Bergen insisted: "The idea of valuing it as 'agricultural lands' is all humbug." He seemed mollified when two Brooklyn commissioners added that the agricultural portions of the county would not be taxed for fire protection or water connections until they asked to share such city services. But this concession taxed Bergen's credulity, prompting him to exclaim: "When I want to catch a fish, I bait the hook with good bait." Losing patience, his Brooklyn interlocutor then admonished him: "Look here, Bergen, you have got to have faith, you know. Faith, and plenty of it, will do a good deal." Bergen protested that although the commission "wants to do what is right," later politicians in the state legislature and on the Brooklyn Common Council might alter the policy. To persuade Bergen, Brooklyn commissioners related that when other farming districts such as Bushwick joined Brooklyn no farmers ever complained of being oppressed. When Bergen named one disgruntled farmer, a Brooklyn commissioner opened a line of argument that transcended Bergen's conceptual framework by observing laconically: "Well, he is a rich man to-day, and he was not then." In the end, even Bergen voted in favor of a motion to exempt the towns from taxes for the police, fire, and water departments until they requested such benefits. And later he also voted for the crucial tax preference for owners of agricultural land in the rural towns.32

Despite Bergen's skepticism, the commission's Committee on the Consolidation reported a few days later that the "county towns or agricultural wards" would not be taxed like the rest of Brooklyn with regard to street lighting, and the fire, police, water, and health departments. The report also proposed that: "In all levies of taxes or assessments on property in the several towns, real estate not divided up, or set apart, or used as building lots, shall be as now, as agricultural lands." As a further accommodation of agricultural interests, the commission's Committee on the Legislative Department, which Bergen chaired, reported that the new city's Common Council would "have no power to require licenses from farmers for selling the produce of their farms or gardens."33

Such concessions, particularly the agricultural tax preference, which John A. Lott repeated, as well as granting veto power over street openings in the new wards to the majority of property owners to be assessed, may have
been designed to overcome the resistance of the farmers' representatives, but annexation to Brooklyn can hardly have seemed an unmixed blessing when virtually every day brought new headlines heralding the latest revelations of city officials' corruption. "Plundered Brooklyn" was just one of dozens of articles that adorned the front pages during the annexation commission's brief existence. Bergen's suspicions can hardly have been allayed when one of the Brooklyn representatives, Thomas Kinsella, the editor of the *Eagle*, expressed his resentment over granting the county towns agricultural tax preferences in addition to other advantages so that when the new wards were built up in a few years an "unfair disparity" would obtain between them and the old city. Kinsella's assertion that the towns "must be brought into the city, 'fairly if we can, but otherwise if we must,'" prompted even John A. Lott to voice his disapproval of a plan that would "force a section of county, against its wish, under the government of a municipality in which it had no voice." Lott predicted that such sentiments would exacerbate prejudice against consolidation and ensure its defeat in the towns.34

Despite conflicts that arose over equal rights to be accorded the towns, the future jurisdiction of the county government, and taxation of Flatbush residents for Prospect Park lands taken by the legislature from the town and transferred to Brooklyn, John A. Lott was able to fashion a resolution enabling the commissioners to present the annexation proposal to voters on November 4, 1873. Lott opposed any plan that would have burdened the county towns with the expenses that they had had no voice in creating and from which they derived no benefit. He therefore proposed that the towns as a whole not be charged with any of the interest on the loan for the construction of Prospect Park — but only that part of Flatbush directly benefiting from it. Lott's guiding principle was that the towns should "pay their share of the cost of the great improvement at some future time, but were relieved of the payment of the present accruing interest." Bergen's counter-proposal that county towns, which had had nothing to do with the creation of the park, should be exempted from the payment of principal, interest, and maintenance "altogether and forever" gained the votes only of the commissioners of Gravesend and Flatlands, who also voted with him to reject Lott's proposal.35

But the state legislature had structured the commission and its voting procedure so that the Brooklyn commissioners required the agreement of only two rural towns in order to submit the proposal to the voters. Since Lott was committed to annexation and the three farmer-commissioners to rejection, success ultimately hinged on accommodating the demands of the
most populous town, New Lots. An alliance between Flatbush and New Lots might have seemed preordained, but a certain tension between the towns had to be overcome. Despite its economic position as a primarily agricultural producer, Flatbush was being touted by Brooklyn boosters by the early 1870s as “destined to be the very centre of the future Brooklyn”—within fifty if not twenty years. The key role played by Flatbush was resented by some in New Lots, who called it “the spoiled child of the county,” and resented the disproportionate share of wealth and resources that the town had been able to attract by virtue of its personal and political influence. In addition to needing the single vote of the commissioner from New Lots in order to forward the proposal, the annexationists also had to accommodate the New Lots electorate sufficiently to induce it to furnish a large enough proannexation majority to overcome a potential rejectionist majority in the other rural towns. Lott won over New Lots’s representative by exempting the rural towns from responsibility for the outstanding interest on the loans for building Prospect Park on the grounds that, since most of the land in the towns was agricultural and used for agricultural purposes, “no immediate direct benefit or increase in value results to it from the Park.”

The agricultural land tax preference that ultimately lay before the voters provided that real estate within the new wards “shall be assessed . . . as agricultural land, on the value thereof for agricultural purposes only, unless the same has been, at the time of such union and consolidation, or may hereafter be divided up into building lots, and a map thereof filed in the office of the Register or the Clerk of the County of Kings, or in the office of the Assessors of the City of Brooklyn, and a sale or sales shall have been made, referring to such map, or unless the same shall have been otherwise sold as a building lot or lots, or used as such.” The consolidation plan specified, however, that the tax rate itself for these different objects and purposes “shall be uniform, according to the assessed value of the property.”

Despite the final plan’s provision prohibiting the Brooklyn Common Council from forbidding “the keeping of cattle or swine on lands used for agricultural purposes,” the farmer-commissioners from Flatlands, Gravesend, and New Utrecht read a 12-point protest before voting against the plan. The profoundly agrarian mentality of their constituents was amply on display in their protests against: any charges for the city parks, which were “a luxury which a rural population does not desire and cannot afford”; charges for a police force, which would be “of little use, unless composed of an army, in consequence of our large and sparsely settled territory”; and the loss of their local fence viewers to settle disputes over stray cows and dam-
ages caused by cattle, “necessary in an agricultural community.” (In New Utrecht, “the lives of women and children” were “in imminent peril, because droves of horses and cows” were “turned out to pasture in the streets.”) The poignancy of this clash of rural and urban cultures and Weltanschauungen can be grasped only by keeping in mind that Teunis Bergen’s New Utrecht, which he constructed here as a remote rural settlement, in fact shared a border with the third-largest city in the United States.³⁸

The concluding paragraph of the dissenting farmer-commissioners’ protest is perhaps the most eloquent defense ever mustered of the old agrarian way of life in the shadow of the metropolis. Bergen and his allies objected to the majority’s report for

unjustly subjecting an agricultural people to the heavy expenses of a city government necessary in a densely populated community, but unnecessary and burdensome in a rural district, and thus, probably, more than doubling their taxes, the effect of which in consequence of its unbearable and grievous burdens and the taxes for which, exceeding the rents of agricultural land can be let, or the profits which owners can obtain over the costs of cultivation will have a tendency to compel many of the farmers in our midst to dispose of their premises at such prices as they can obtain, abandon the homes of their ancestors and emigrate to more favored localities out of the reach of city burdens and oppressions, leaving their farms in the hands of speculators and non-cultivators and thrown out as common waste land, a pasture for goats, geese and stray cattle as is at present the case with most of the lands in the present outer wards of the city in place of the present smiling fields and highly cultivated farms and gardens yielding in abundance and ministering to the wants of the population of the city.³⁹

Side by side with this vivid advocacy of a positive program of metropolitan agrarianism coexisted Bergen’s parochial view of community best captured by the rhetorical query that he never wearied of repeating: “Why should I contribute to pay for a dock or a school house which is four miles away from my property?” Although such narrowmindedness was not a necessary attribute of a movement to sustain suburban vegetable farming, the fact that its leading proponent was such a self-caricature of possessive individualism made it an easy target of ridicule. The farmer-dissenters protested, for example, that after annexation they would not only be required to lose one day traveling to city hall to obtain a tax bill and another to pay it, but also “put to the annoyance of being compelled to enter into
a line of those desiring to make payment, and of being jostled and kept standing for hours before arriving at the desk of the receiving office.” After Bergen declared that Gravesend would not get water to attach to fire engines for at least the next half century, Commissioner Kinsella had an easy time countering that: “Mr. Bergen insists upon speaking of the towns as they now are. I hope to see them parts of opulent cities.” When Bergen asserted that the Brooklyn Bridge, then under construction, would benefit the property that he owned in Brooklyn, but would be of “no earthly good in any way” to what he owned in New Utrecht, Kinsella adroitly responded that being able to ride a car from Bergen’s farm to New York City Hall would surely benefit New Utrecht.40

Annexationists, however, could not rely on scoring such easy debaters’ points. While hardly concealing that the whole point of annexation was suburbanization, they never confronted the structural-environmental consequences of deagriculturalization. They did not have to address this issue because they masked it by repeating: “We propose to assess their lands, when used for agricultural purposes, at their value for such purposes. This insures low valuation, and where there is such valuation there cannot be city taxation.” Nevertheless, when the mayor of Brooklyn recommended annexation in 1879, some still believed it would mean “ruin for many farmers.”41

The problem with this perspective was that the preservation of within-the-city farming required a political, not an economic or fiscal, solution. Although low assessments meant that high taxes might not render farming financially impossible, the much greater threat to which market gardening was exposed lay in the shrinkage of the land base that would inevitably result from lucrative sell-offs as some neighbors found it to their advantage to cut coupons rather than cultivate cabbage. That so many farmers had already become rent-takers as Irish and German tenants (and their laborers) increasingly performed the actual hard work of producing vegetables, made it easier both for farm owners to abandon their ancestral ties to the land and for annexationists to dismiss farmers as complaining all the way to the bank. As more and more of the surrounding land was converted into real estate for housing suburbanites, the greater would become the physical obstacles to farming and the interpersonal conflicts with neighbors. The only solution to this dilemma would have been some politically imposed protection such as the programs to purchase development rights that states did not create for a century. This form of state intervention was not ideologically available in the 1870s. But even if it had been available, urging such relief would have required Teunis Bergen and the other Dutch farmers to con-
fess that what they really needed protection from was not rapacious tax assessors, but their own potential greed.\footnote{42}

Alternatively, a political solution would have presupposed the existence of a compromise vision between Bergen's rural idyll with local autonomy and the urban expansionists' drive to exterminate mosquitoes, bogs, and rotting turnips along with the farms that sustained them all. Yet no prominent public figure — let alone a movement — articulated such a compromise. Olmsted, with his cleaned-up countryside of landscaping and parks, perhaps came closest, but he had long lost interest in making or keeping the countryside productive. Urban boosters, however, were blind to such possibilities because their exclusive focus was the “close-fisted corporation” of Kings County farmers, whose “backward, antediluvian” policies against any and all “improvements” blocked the “flow of Brooklyn capital.” The mere fact that the proceeds from the sale of a lot thirty miles from New York sufficed to buy a farm in New Lots was for them horrifying proof of the consequences of the stagnation that metropolitan agriculture necessarily left in its wake.\footnote{43}

Just how far the annexation proposal was from adopting a policy that would protect farmers from market and capital accumulation forces was readily visible in the commission's final plan empowering the “people of any ward of any town, or portion thereof [to] form a district, and upon the petition of a majority of property holders to be affected thereby, the Common Council shall include said district within the territory chargeable with the expense of the Police and Fire Department of the City of Brooklyn.” This authority was tantamount to an invitation to new suburbanites to carve out colonies in which they could outvote farm owners and ultimately force on them the very city services that the farmer-commissioners had declared their constituents unable to afford, while annexationists assured them that any “talk of extending city expenditures over the towns” was “ridiculous, since it is specially provided that the real estate in the towns shall be valued as agricultural lands, so long as this real estate is used for no other than agricultural purposes.”\footnote{44}

On the literal eve of the annexation vote, the \textit{Eagle}, with the type of dispassion that only a conviction of manifest destiny could underwrite, editorially announced that regardless of “imaginary” lines of separation, the East River and Atlantic Ocean formed Brooklyn's “natural boundaries.” Indeed, the newspaper attributed this conviction even to antiannexationists: “The friends and foes of present consolidation agree in this, that consolidation sooner or later is inevitable. Both sides admit that consolidation will be de-
sirable some time for both the towns and the city." Although Teunis Bergen never offered such a concession, the *Eagle* insisted that the "hate and bitterness" of the debate had been unnecessary because: "The question is a business question — one of dollars and cents, and of common interests to the city and the towns." Yet money, from one publicly articulated point of view, was precisely what the annexation debate was not about. Die-hard rejectionists like Bergen were not posturing behind a hidden agenda of extracting a monetary offer they could not refuse. When annexationists implored farmers to grasp that the increase in property values would "more than compensate . . . owners . . . for any additional taxation which will follow consolidation," they were disingenuously ignoring the whole point of annexation, which they simultaneously conceded with all imaginable clarity: "the cheap lands of the towns will be bought for suburban homes rapidly, as soon as those settling in the suburbs can be insured water, police, and fire protection, and other advantages of city life, as soon as they require them." Farmers who were struggling for the preservation of a 200-year-old way of life that they realized was incompatible with absorption by what might become the world's largest city could hardly be reassured by a program of suburbanization that would not stop until it had bought up the last cabbage field.

The alternative interpretation, according to which farmers believed that annexation in 1873 was merely "premature," had to be based on the assumption that they were simply waiting for a more propitious moment in the development of the suburban real-estate market. All of Bergen's eloquence was, from this perspective, merely a rhetorical smokescreen for a high-stakes game of land speculation. Without stating the point expressly, annexationists sought to parry this thrust by warning the farmers that the terms being offered in 1873 were as "fair" as they would ever be — in any event, more favorable than they would be if the state legislature ever exercised its undeniably lawful power to impose annexation without consultation or a referendum. The chief flaw in this cynical interpretation was its irreconcilability with the "anomalous condition" that the farmers were apparently content to live in towns some of which "are no richer than were a quarter of a century ago" and one of which was allegedly losing population. Regardless of the truth content of this annexationist claim — farm production was in fact increasing — their perception that farmers could live without the transformative impulses emanating from dynamic capital accumulation corroborated the argument that city boosters urgently sought to
deny: farmers were not holding out for more money, but were desperately trying to sustain a threatened traditional agrarian mode of existence.46

The contradictions inherent in annexation were palpable enough that on the eve of the election even the boosterist *Rural Gazette* had to concede that it was “beyond a question very damaging for Flatlands, Gravesend and New Utrecht (excepting the vicinity of Bay Ridge) to have to submit to the desires of the people of the more thickly populated towns.” Once it was too late, the newspaper had second thoughts about the all-or-nothing procedure, which prevented New Lots and Flatbush from joining Brooklyn on their own.47

**ANNEXATION DEFEATED**

Since the consolidation scheme is defeated, the owner of a few hundred acres of land here, will not become a beggar just yet, or the laborer a millionaire.
— “New Utrecht,” *Kings County Rural Gazette*, November 15, 1873

Even this belated insight was moot. On election day, November 4, 1873, 85 percent of Brooklynnites favored annexation, whereas more than 70 percent of voters in the five rural towns opposed it, thus defeating the initiative. Large majorities favored the old regime in all the towns except New Lots, where, to some observers’ surprise, the farmers’ almost unanimous opposition led to its rejection by a small overall majority. In the four other towns, five-sixths of the voters rejected annexation.48

Table 22 shows the vote in the towns. Unsurprisingly, the electorate in the most rural towns, Flatlands and Gravesend, was almost unanimously opposed to union with Brooklyn, a minuscule 21 of 700 voters favoring consolidation. The main surprise to contemporaries was that a larger proportion of voters in New Utrecht, Teunis Bergen’s “stronghold,” supported annexation than in Flatbush, which was “more directly interested in its favor.” Even to modernizers such as the *Rural Gazette*, the overwhelming majority meant that consolidation was “not likely to be accomplished in another decade.”49

The *Eagle* interpreted the fact that on the same day, a large majority in the towns of lower Westchester voted to be annexed to New York City (forming part of what eventually became the Bronx) as an obvious consequence of their residents’ having been the strongest annexationists. Nevertheless, on the long view, the setback in Kings County was trivial: although
the towns in 1873 may have found "any real union of the rural and urban portions of the county" unacceptable, annexation was "inevitable" when the two sections "assimilate more nearly in condition and character than they do at present." And the *Eagle* knew exactly what had to bring about that assimilation: "With rapid transit, cheap and desirable homes can be provided for tens of thousands of the crowded people of New York, in the rural portions of Kings County, and the solution of the rapid transit problem will be found to be the solution of the question of consolidation." Annexationists could confidently await the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge, "a turning point in the history of Brooklyn," which would extend the city to its "natural" boundaries.50

A clear sign of the limited time left to the independence of the rural towns appeared in the very same column in which the *Rural Gazette* reported the election tally. Without detecting a connection to the contested visions of the future, the Flatbush-based weekly editorialized about one of "the greatest nuisances which towns laying [sic] adjacent to large cities are subjected to" — namely, "loafers" who took Sunday tramps into the suburbs, "with a perfect lawlessness, making common property of whatever they choose to lay their hands on." Worse still were trespassers out for a day's shooting with their guns and dogs: that very week "the villains actually murdered a quiet man on his own premises, because he ordered them off." Rather than viewing the incident as the occasion for creating an urban police force, the newspaper urged the townspeople to "take the matter in hand" themselves. The newspaper's vigilantism may have merely reflected its acquiescence in the election results: a few months earlier it had listed as the first reason to favor consolidation "a good effective police force" to combat "the rougher classes" and "crowds of lawless pleasure seekers" pouring out of the city who were wont to "desecrate" Sundays with their "ball playing and profanity . . . to say nothing of the drunken revelry in . . . our would be quiet localities."51

On November 25, 1873, after a spirited campaign, New Lots voted separately under authority of its own annexation statute, which the state legislature had passed the same day it established the commission. For New Lots, the most populous and developed of the towns, the legislators themselves created the terms and conditions of annexation, authorizing the electors to approve or disapprove. On the strength of farmer's numbers and virtually unanimous resistance, those opposing annexation prevailed 735 to 634, and again in 1875 by a larger margin of 773 to 510. Even some of those who favored annexation continued to concede that it was wrong to "coerce" farm-
ers in New Lots under a city government, but annexationists there persisted, and kept the issue constantly before the legislature until they prevailed in 1886. And by 1895, “farming in the town of New Lots had become, practically, a thing of the past.”

Scarcely a week after the countywide election, the New York Times editorialized on the opportunities that Brooklyn’s property owners had lost as “men of moderate incomes, having become tired of street-car blockades, high rents, and delusive schemes for securing rapid transit,” had abandoned New York. But instead of moving to Brooklyn, they had preferred towns in New Jersey that were linked by railroads to the ferries to Manhattan. If during the years after the Civil War, the Times lectured, Brooklyn had introduced rapid transit in the form of steam railroads to its suburbs, “hundreds of acres overlooking New-York Bay... might to-day be thickly studded with workmen’s cottages and handsome villas.” A decade later, however, as a petition to reduce the fare on the Flatbush horsecar demonstrated, the $50 per year that the average workingman paid who patronized it for business purposes was still “a drawback to the improvement of the town.”

The town of Flatbush, emboldened by the defeat of annexation, asserted its independence by building a new town hall in 1874 and, for a few more years, by resisting seamless connection to the encroaching city street grid. Teunis Bergen continued to oppose annexation — at least until increased population compelled it. Yet even he remained acutely aware that time was running out. As he observed on the occasion of the opening of the Bay Ridge and Manhattan Railroad: “We are between two fires. Brooklyn tries to devour us, and New York tries to swallow us.”

Even when the Brooklyn Bridge and rapid transit were almost completed to expedite the bursting populations of New York and Brooklyn to a suburbanized Kings County, the Rural Gazette knew that the chief remaining question was whether the inevitable annexation would be carried out in a manner fair to agricultural landowners. No longer even hedging its bets, the newspaper, which on October 7, 1882, had changed its name to Kings County Rural and Brooklyn Gazette, declared a month before the bridge’s opening that it would defend the rural towns’ interests only “until the day when the city extends her authority over the agricultural districts.”

In 1894, a few months after the state legislature had annexed the rural towns to Brooklyn, a nonbinding referendum on consolidation with New York initiated by the region’s “mercantile elite” to “promote the unified, comprehensive development of shipping, railroads, and related facilities”
resulted in an almost equal number of ballots for and against in Kings County: 64,744 and 64,467. Without the votes of the newly annexed towns, a majority of Brooklynites voted against consolidation, but the majority in the new wards of Flatbush (57 percent), Gravesend (55 percent), and New Utrecht (76 percent) created a tiny countywide 50.1 percent majority.56