

# BATTLING FOR BROOKLYN HEIGHTS

by  
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*Introduction*  
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Preservation in New York City has achieved such a level of success that it risks being taken for granted by new generations of New Yorkers; a fate that could translate into a future of unnecessarily lost buildings and disfigured historic neighborhoods.

December 2009 saw the designation of the city's 100<sup>th</sup> historic district and 2010 marks the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of New York City's hard won landmarks law. Preservation in New York certainly has come of age. Contributing to the possibility that future New Yorkers may misguidedly assume preservation is now the city's default policy position (tragically ignoring the cold reality that the blood of most New York powerbrokers still races at the mere mention of real estate development) is the fact that preservationists have largely failed to tell their stories of the often heroic efforts required to save the city's landmarks and historic districts.

One wonderful exception to this is the story of the saving of Brooklyn Heights. Thanks to the prescience and dedication of those involved in this battle, the struggle to save Brooklyn Heights is the best documented of all New York City's preservation sagas. Today we are fortunate to have available to us extensive newspaper accounts from that time, numerous original documents, oral histories and personal remembrances. If only the same could be said for other significant chapters in preservation's history.

Thanks to Martin L. Schneider, we now can add to the existing material on Brooklyn Heights, this compelling narrative "Battling for Brooklyn Heights." Told through the eyes of a witness to history and capturing the emotions of one who lived through it, Mr. Schneider's personal account significantly adds to our ability to understand this multi-faceted civic drama. Martin provides us insights into the larger context of Brooklyn Height's preservation efforts. He addresses everything from the Height's need and desire for middle-income housing to the rise of reform politics in Brooklyn. He covers the growing real estate pressures threatening the neighborhood and the debates over providing quality public education. He writes of the changing dynamics of slum clearance and the unfolding of urban renewal policies. Civic villains and neighborhood heroes come to life as he weaves together the many threads of this fascinating epic.

Foremost, "Battling for Brooklyn Heights" is the story of how dedicated, passionate, and informed citizens took the future of their neighborhood into their own hands. This is a David and Goliath tale of grassroots activism powered by housewives and historians, civic leaders and clergy, editors and educators, architectural historians and lawyers. Today it still informs us and instills hope in similarly minded people who are passionate

about the places they call home and find themselves called to save them. May it help them achieve an equal measure of success in preserving their cherished places.

Just as the Brooklyn Heights story continues to inspire neighborhoods around the city, I hope Martin's "Battling for Brooklyn Heights" will motivate others who made preservation history to capture their stories on tape or in writing. Only when New Yorkers realize that the survival of the buildings and special places they love is the result of the constant vigilance of concerned citizens like themselves, will the future of our city's landmarks be secured.

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### *Prologue*

My wife-to-be and I were extremely lucky. The first time we saw the Heights was in late 1956. It had just begun to snow. We had taken the subway from the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The sky was turning dark as we came out of the Clark Street station and made our way toward Willow Street to look at what would be our first apartment. The snow seemed whiter than usual as it dusted the black wrought-iron fences lining the sidewalks and running up the stoops. It was uncannily quiet and peaceful. We could not believe this was New York City. We fell in love with Brooklyn Heights.

Years later, Nick Barnett, a friend from Los Angeles, was visiting us and during the late morning went with me on a brief walk. There were a few morning "how-are-you's?" to neighbors and friends. Then, a greeting to one of the regular "supers" who spends a good deal of time out on the sidewalk, keeping an eye on things. And there came Mr. Johnson, our mailman. Mr. Johnson and I exchanged strong ideas about the weather, good or bad or getting better. Nick was astounded, "I've lived in L.A. for 20 years and never even laid eyes on my mailman, let alone greeted him by name!" What a place to live.

How familiar it has become, and how that familiarity grows on us. It connects us with our next-door friends and all of the people who passed this very way, for two centuries or so. It links us to this country's history. Our pre-Civil War buildings, the details around the windows, the shutters, the bluestone sidewalks, the bricks and the replanted old curb stones in the backyards, the marble fireplaces and decorated plaster

ceilings, all seem to radiate the past. The following is the story of how it came to be that Brooklyn Heights— a beautiful, sheltering and comforting neighborhood— would survive virtually intact into the next millennium. The turning point came a little over a half century ago.

Much has been written about the sweeping urban demographic events in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America; they helped to change the course of history in the Heights. At the time, historic preservation regulations affecting city blocks existed only in a handful of American cities, most notably Boston's Beacon Hill and the Vieux Carré in New Orleans. The very idea of legally protecting an entire neighborhood was but a gleam in the eyes of some far-sighted Brooklyn locals.

The activities of a community of newcomers who were bent on recapturing a declining, central urban area was to dominate the neighborhood for several years. Their intense dedication paid off victoriously — for the neighborhood and for the City — in April, 1965, with the enactment of the Landmarks Preservation Act by the City Council of New York and its signing by Mayor Robert F. Wagner. But getting to that juncture involved a long, frustrating, often exasperating trial of the civic commitment of those who, for the most part, only recently had chosen to make the Heights their permanent home.

These are some personal notes on how it all started, what it was like to live through it, and on the drudgery and the disappointments along with the excitement and gratification of being on both the right side *and* the winning side of a notable urban dust-up. For help in recalling and documenting those times, I am indebted especially to two sources:

The Brooklyn Heights Press, which, during the action-packed late-1950s was owned and edited by the late Richard J. Margolis. The Press was the newspaper that provided the absolutely essential social and political connecting point in a pre-computerized, blogless neighborhood. It also set a new, and award-winning, standard for a New York City neighborhood weekly and;

Our □ good neighbor, attorney Otis Pratt Pearsall, who on the occasion of receiving the prestigious *Landmark Lion Award* in 1993 from the Historic Districts Council, prepared a detailed chronology of the designation of the Heights as New York's first Historic Landmark District.

Another vital source is found in: Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb, by Clay Lancaster (1917-2000) (New York: Dover Publications, 1979) originally published in December, 1961, by Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, VT. As with so many of the people involved in this struggle, it was personal choice that had brought Lancaster to the neighborhood and a historians' deeply felt concern for its preservation that led to the book. The book itself helped pave the way for the laws that protect the Heights today.

In the course of preparing this personal view, I was able to talk with people who are still neighbors today and also to track down a few who have moved away but carried their memories of those days with them.

For the definitive history of New York's struggles to protect its landmarks, including that of Brooklyn Heights, one has to see Anthony C. Wood Preserving New York /Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmark, Taylor and Francis Group, 2008.

But, for a truly full accounting of what has been contributed to our lives, one can take a slow, meandering walk anywhere in the strikingly pleasing, fifty blocks that make up the neighborhood and look around.



## Battling for Brooklyn Heights

### *How a Post-War Generation Found and Fought For a City Neighborhood*

In the 1950s Brooklyn Heights was a distinctly fading beauty. It was down at the heels, dingy at the edges, and plain worn through in spots. Its residents were aging. The boom in its transient population, brought on by the war effort of the 1940s, and sustained by a post-war influx of migrants from around the country and Puerto Rico, had a powerful impact on the old neighborhood. Single-room-occupancy quarters were not uncommon in the outmoded housing stock. For absentee landlords, SROs provided an economically attractive answer to the capacious but "completely impractical" apartments the brownstones offered.

Soot from incinerators, cheap heating oil and smoky trucks and cars had created an overall grayness. It was not a good idea to leave your windows open for very long if you were finicky about gritty sootfall. The ubiquitous dirt and grime had turned the once handsome-looking pre-Civil War houses into dark-stained and seemingly worn out oldtimers. Here and there were inappropriate commercial and light industrial incursions scattered along Fulton Street and near the borders at Atlantic Avenue and down by the Brooklyn Bridge. Some of the houses were scarred by tacky, superficial attempts at modernization. In the cold glare of day Brooklyn Heights did not offer an obviously promising outlook to the casual beholder.

If you were in the market for a permanent place to call home, the sharp contrast between this core city location and the greener grass of the suburbs was compelling. The urban term "white flight" had just been invented. But, as far back as February, 1910, when the Brooklyn Heights Association was organized, concern for the future of the basic housing stock was being discussed. One of the organizing speakers at the meeting put it that "Our rich move away and our young find locations elsewhere." The New York Times wrote on April 24 of that year that "A great many elegant dwellings have been razed..." and that "...the wealthy residents of Brooklyn ..." have been forced to seek housing further out in Brooklyn and Long Island. The article carried the subhead "Old Residential Character of the Heights Giving Way to Business."

Yet, forty-odd years later, under the dust and soot and decrepitude, a lot of history and urban potential palpitated. This was still, for many, an extremely attractive and human-scale place to put down roots. Its convenience to Manhattan was compelling. The great promenade flanking its west side with world-class views of the lower bay and, in the distance, the Statue of Liberty, was breath-taking. The friendly visages of row on row of 19<sup>th</sup> century town houses seemed welcoming. Antiques stores clustered on the old Fulton Street across from a new ten-acre, heavily treed park. There were friendly, locally-owned shops, small supermarkets, specialty meat and fish stores and a couple of traditional, mom-and-pop newspaper/candy stores.

For the discerning, the ambitious and the optimistic, the potential was tangible and the soon-to-be pejoratively named yuppies — young, upwardly mobile professionals — had begun gathering. They had career and family plans and, as it turned out, shared a vision of perfectibility for Brooklyn Heights. In fact, city-wide in the mid-1950s, a new mood of urban betterment and political reform generated a good feeling about the city's future. There was a widening sense that the city was everyone's to improve and perfect.

But even the most dedicated neighborhood re-builders could not ignore the clouds on the horizon. Looming most menacingly for the Heights was the great Robert Moses behemoth: *SLUM CLEARANCE!* However, even Moses could be stopped, as had been shown in 1956 by the Mommies in Central Park, who, at the famous 'Battle of the Tavern on the Green,' had blocked a parking lot from replacing a favorite playground and had embarrassed (and infuriated) the previously unstoppable bureaucrat-tycoon.

Another menace was the traditional autocratic exercise of power at Borough Hall. There, the established political and moneyed interests had their eyes on the strategically valuable, "downtown" location. Any desirable changes in the Heights would, they reasoned, involve bulldozing the old to make way for commercial progress and more economically efficient, new construction. Robert Moses himself had declared, "You can't make omelets without breaking eggs." Yet Borough Hall, too, had its weaknesses. Political reform was in the air and such power centers were being challenged throughout the city.

In the mid-1950s the Heights was of various minds. At one end of the spectrum were those who believed that the "bad parts" of the Borough could be, almost literally, walled out. Paul Windels, president of the Brooklyn Heights Association in 1960 — and a commanding figure with an outstanding record as one of the key architects of Fiorello La Guardia's successful Fusion campaign — represented an isolationist approach to preserving the Heights; he spoke hopefully at the time of a "wall of high buildings separating the Heights from the rest of Brooklyn..."

Then there were those 'practical' politicians and developers on the outside, for the most part, who saw no value at all in living with what were, in their thinking, clearly obsolete buildings. 'Knock 'em down and build up proper, modern, safe and sanitary and, most importantly, profitable housing,' was their philosophy. In fact, Borough President John Cashmore — at the time committed to realizing his long-held dream for a new Brooklyn Civic Center — spoke plainly about the wrongheadedness of trying "to raise children in downtown Brooklyn when you could move out to Coney Island." Out there, his good buddy, Fred Trump (Donald's dad), was putting up thousands of units of state-aided, tax-abated, middle-income housing.

### **ONLY IN BROOKLYN**

In philosophical opposition to such naysayers were those residents — mostly but

not exclusively the newer ones — who envisioned the idealistic possibilities of having poor and rich and in-between, of all colors and faiths, living here happily in peace and harmony. These urban optimists could foresee the kind of poetic future for Brooklyn that inspired Walt Whitman, in the previous century, to describe it as "... the new city of Friends."

Francis Morrone, the distinguished architectural historian and Brooklyn expert, reminds us that as early as 1861, Walt Whitman had favorably observed that the kind of housing being built in the Heights was already showing the way for Brooklyn's "architectural greatness." Whitman lauded the spread of "...hundreds of thousands of superb private dwellings, for the comfort and luxury of the great body of middle class people — a kind of architecture unknown until comparatively late times, and no where known to such an extent as in Brooklyn," he wrote in *The Brooklyn Standard*.

Through the intervening hundred years, Whitman was followed by others who had publicly boosted the Heights as an exceptional place. One of the many important American writers who had lived and worked here was Carson McCullers. "Brooklyn," she wrote in *Vogue* in 1941, "in a dignified way, is a fantastic place. The street where I live has a quietness and sense of permanence that seem to belong to the nineteenth century. .... It is strange in New York to find yourself living in a real neighborhood." McCullers had captured exactly the special quality of the neighborhood whose inspiring essence had managed to survive well into the 1950s.

By then many of us had shared the thrill of McCullers' discovery that the Heights — and that was the part of Brooklyn she was writing about — was a fantastic place with lovable characteristics that were indeed very strange to New York City. But you didn't have to be a hard-core, urban romantic to love the Heights; there were also those who simply believed it to be an excellent and affordable place to raise a family, especially if the schools could be improved.

So it was that these numerous and diverse factors were to come into play a dozen or years after the end of World War II. As in any unorganized crowd, the feelings and hopes of these many neighbors were amorphous, unformed, and just waiting for the right catalyst to set off a series of actions that ultimately would make important urban history.

In fact, it took three triggers to detonate what became the revolt of the Heights against the array of threats to its very survival as a neighborhood:

- Two large-scale slum clearance projects;
- A clearly inadequate public school; and,
- The accelerating loss of pre-Civil War brownstones to thoughtless 'modernizers' and looming apartment buildings.

Then it was 1958.

### ***Dedicated Preservationists Face Down the Wrecker's Ball***

The 1950s represented a centennial of sorts for Brooklyn Heights. On Saturday, November 25, 1854, *Gleason's Pictorial*, a distinguished, pre-Civil War weekly publication out of Boston, there appeared a cover article. A wood engraving showed the foot of Montague Street from the river looking up a fairly steep ramp to the Heights with an observation platform straddling it roughly where the Promenade is now located. The headline read, simply: "Brooklyn Heights." The text complimented this singular part of New York in terms that would warm a real estate promoter's heart: "... *there is no place that commands a better view of New York than the Heights; and the stranger who pays them a visit is well recompensed...*"

[INSERT GLEASON PIC]

But it is more than topography that makes the Heights special, Gleason's goes on: "*Perhaps no city in the country is better built than Brooklyn. The houses are very generally marked by chasteness and elegance of design, and many of them are splendid specimens of architectural beauty.*"

Unfortunately, one hundred years later, it had become clear to everyone in Brooklyn Heights that this once-lauded, exceptionally fine neighborhood was, in fact, precariously balanced on a tight rope between restoration and decay.

On the restoration and preservation end, many of the newcomers had strained their resources to buy their first homes. Often the purchases were financially feasible only because of their willingness to spend seemingly endless weekends and evenings working at fixing up their hundred-year-plus, urban handyman's specials. In addition, the excess space in the roomy 19th century homes could be put out to rent. For most of the young couples making such investments in the future of the Heights, this was a perilous journey. When their optimistic vision of the future of the neighborhood — into which they'd already sunk a considerable amount of their personal resources — was seemingly jeopardized, they reacted accordingly. They were not about to take any such threats lying down.

For some, there were also children involved. To be urban-with-child at that time meant one usually had to count on a decent public school. What it would take to assure such schooling was another fundamental and daunting question of the day.

As it turned out, it wasn't until 2005 that quality, public elementary schooling became available in the Heights. The turn-around of the venerable PS 8 on Hicks Street proved to be another stirring example of determined neighbors banding together for progress. But such long-range positive action was not at all foreseeable to the newly hatched home owners of the late 1950's. Though, as we shall see, the need for decent public schooling and for additional educational choices led to positive results anyway. Most notable was the creation in 1965, from scratch — in a large, disused white elephant of a building at the corner of Clinton Street and Pierrepont Street — of the private, highly respected St. Ann's School for gifted children.

Thus, by a combination of pragmatism and visionary, local leadership, there formed a consensus that the first priority had to be the neighborhood's outstanding physical legacy. So, the same people who'd made their personal commitment to their homes became the dedicated stewards of our jointly inherited architectural history. Their battlements were the brownstones themselves which provided superb reminders of what the Heights had been in the mid-nineteenth century. These ranks upon ranks of pre-Civil War buildings — grimy and outmoded for conventional living as they seemed to be — nevertheless represented something extremely desirable; they were constant, everlasting connections to a people's past and a nation's progress.

Beverly Moss Spatt, a Heights resident since the early 1940s, who was to become a helpful member of the City Planning Commission and then Chairperson of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, spoke of the importance of "continuity with the past" and firmly believed that these living connections to history added substantially to the civility of a place.

These hundred-year-old townhouses — clearly numbering in the many hundreds, although at the time no one had done an inventory — presented a potent physical argument that we had inherited and become responsible for a vital and valuable asset. It was a past which only the reckless and ignorant would turn away from or, worse, destroy.

The young, newly ensconced couples, of course, also saw that the value of their real estate investments could be seriously imperiled by wanton development. The wrecking ball was being heard throughout the neighborhood. Willow Street was under siege. Groups of houses were being assembled for destruction. Stoops were being torn down, cornices stripped off and homely, bricked-up floors added. On State Street, low-cost, suburban style aluminum doors and canopies had made a startling appearance. To the new stewards' agony, an American architectural treasure was being debased, looted and demolished, right under our eyes.

A precedent had been set a few years earlier by a one-woman preservation effort which began in the late 1940s. The typewriter heiress Gladys Underwood James had bought a number of strategically located brownstones in an effort to thwart assemblages by would-be apartment house builders. Gossip had it that she was keen on reselling to preservation-minded newcomers. And even though her efforts were effective, they were far too limited and idiosyncratic to save the whole neighborhood.

But now gathering here was an odd mix of people, attracted variously by wrought iron railings and cherished buildings, commuting convenience, financial opportunity, urban culture and history and, for some, a sense that the future of the livable City itself was under siege. So it was decided: We would stay and fix and build, and fight for what we believed in. Now, it was time to get organized.

***URBAN IDEALISTS STOP MOSES  
WITH A BETTER IDEA***

This place was certainly extraordinary. The architectural beauty of the Heights had survived for a hundred years, lasting out the tides of immutable urban changes which, for a century, had swept unceasingly around this seemingly imperturbable enclave.

Yet, the possibility for drastic change and fatal loss had become dramatically clear in the early 1940s when the 'Master Builder,' Robert Moses, sought to run the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway right up Hicks Street, the neighborhood's central, north-south artery. This calamitous idea was fought vigorously by the Brooklyn Heights Association, which possessed both professionalism and impressive political connections. A much more agreeable route around the western, river side of the Heights, along Furman Street was settled on, though the BHA was persuaded to accept a half-mile long, public promenade instead of private gardens above the cantilevered roadways. Despite a lack of enthusiasm for opening up the view to the general public by some senior members of the Heights establishment, the promenade quickly proved a much-valued popular, public, community asset. Seen today, it is the one truly constructive thing for which the Heights and the entire City, owe a lasting and unqualified measure of thanks to Moses.

But, by his reckless proposal for cleaving the Heights in two, Moses had otherwise made clear his total lack of interest in Brooklyn Heights as a neighborhood worth worrying about. He had clearly demonstrated that making way for automobiles and trucks would command his highest priority. Now, a decade later, his slum clearance clouds were also gathering, and serious trouble was brewing for our 50-block neighborhood.

REAL ESTATE VALUES RISING

Meanwhile, Heights real estate values were beginning to recover. New buying pressure came about as more and more young couples calculated the practical ways in which they could stay in the city and afford to own more space in better housing in a strategically desirable neighborhood. Here, they were discovering, not only could they live their lives and pursue their careers without being slaves to suburban commuting, they could have history, living space, friendly neighbors, trees and even gardens, all just a few minutes from Manhattan. Luckily, their vision of the potential for the pre-Civil War housing was matched by the blindness of the numerous absentee landlords who had drained the houses dry during previous decades and were still selling at affordable and very attractive prices.

Many houses had been subdivided into rabbit warrens of tiny studio apartments. These were over-burdened and rundown but not beyond recapture and restoration, especially if you were willing to be both Lord-of-the-Town-House and weekend plumber/electrician/contractor/carpenter/and debris-removal-expert. And, after the restoration — although sometimes in the midst of it — there came the fitting-up and renting-out of the valuable spare space readily found in the capacious four- or five-

thousand-square-foot Greek Revival homes.

The years 1958 and 1959 were crystallizing ones for the new residents in Brooklyn Heights. Now, in addition to being a home-grown restoration-and-repair expert while, at the same time, working hard to develop a still-budding career, the breadwinner had also to worry about protecting and fixing up the neighborhood. At the time, many of the wives were stay-at-homes, preoccupied with the norm of rearing two or more young children, as well as dealing with much of the grunt work around the old house.

An additional concern were the lurking, large-scale "re-developers" who were beginning to wake up to the potential for making a real estate killing in the Heights. Replacing brownstones with apartment houses was their modus operandi. A parallel objective had already been put on the books a few years earlier by the ever-threatening Robert Moses who had slated the Heights for not just one but possibly two of his giant slum clearance projects.

#### THE BIG MOSES IDEA

The main clearance project was to be one fronting on Fulton Street, completing the civic center park which had been mapped many years earlier. At that time, the idea was born to rebuild the congested, decrepit and outmoded downtown area from Borough Hall to the Brooklyn Bridge approach. It was a massive effort and required the kind of exquisite coordination of public financing — Federal, State and City — that Robert Moses had totally mastered. The plans included removal of the blighting elevated train lines, building new court houses, providing for new office buildings, closing or widening streets, laying out new parks, and adding new housing were all to be part of a massive and intricate mix of public improvements.

For the Heights, it was the "Slum Clearance Plan under Title One of the Housing Act of 1949 as amended" which was to provide the heart of the new housing on a sliver of blocks along then Fulton Street, starting at Clark Street and running down Henry Street to its base at the Brooklyn Bridge. It was called Cadman Plaza, named — for reasons lost in the haze of Brooklyn log-rolling politics — after a popular radio minister of the 1920s and '30s, the Reverend S. Parkes Cadman. The Brooklyn pastor had distinguished himself by calling on God's blessings for American businessmen, especially insurance salesmen. God's blessings notwithstanding, Cadman Plaza did not look like a gift from heaven to most of us in Brooklyn Heights.

Opposition to it began shaping up as soon as the main outlines and objectives became clear. The opposition was based not so much on its general location in the northeast corner of the Heights, as on its stupefying, shadow-casting, single-slab, 20-story architecture stretching for 400 unbroken feet from Poplar to Clark Streets and beyond. Also stirring up a hornets nest of anger was the fact that it called for 64% of its apartments — all high rent — to be efficiencies and one-bedroom units, not the housing the Heights was looking for, at all. "A dormitory for transients..." was the term invoked to characterize the unneighborly project. That it also called for a total bulldozer

approach to the blocks involved was of concern, too, but the preservation issue was subsumed by the more immediate and readily grasped middle-income housing shortage.

#### A SECOND TARGET IN MOSES' SIGHTS

In addition to Cadman Plaza there had surfaced a strange companion "slum clearance" housing plan that targeted the part of the Heights known as Willowtown, the blocks outlined by Joralemon, Hicks, Atlantic and the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. Located in the southwest corner of Heights, its origins were suspect. Never proved, but seriously suspected by shocked residents and new homeowners on Willow Place and Hicks Street, was the idea that certain Heights nabobs had put this part of the neighborhood on Moses' hit list because it had a mixed-income population, including a large number of Basques who'd immigrated years earlier and a Puerto Rican community that had settled in that corner close to the docks. Indeed, Moses, while building the BQE, had acquired a number of strategic properties on State Street and Columbia Place which backed up to the charming Willow Place street. Some of these had already been knocked down.

The idea of harnessing the seemingly limitless source of Federal funds to buy up the remaining housing on those benighted blocks and practice slum-clearance on them must have been attractive to the ubiquitous Moses. But the project had sneaked up on those who, in early 1958, were busily buying and fixing up Willow Place houses and the brownstones and carriage houses lining the adjacent Hicks Street. One hapless couple discovered, the very day after they had bought their house on Willow Place, that they were on the Moses hit list.

Moses had by then figured out exactly what it took to shake the Federal money tree to cover the cost of acquiring land. The key to the funds was the ability to search out land which had housing on it that could be fitted into the official definition of "substandard housing," otherwise known as a "slum." If a desirable location such as one in Brooklyn Heights were offered to him for "improvement," he would hardly turn it down.

#### LURE OF LUXURY HOUSING TO CITY FATHERS

Improvement in city housing was interpreted by Moses to mean rebuilding on land in such a way as to mean what was technically termed "the highest and best use." In our case, it was called "luxury housing" and meant rental housing in packages that would pay the highest dollar for the land and the highest return per square foot to the private developer. It also paid the quickest profit.

Moses had consistently predicated his slum clearance plans on the 1949 Federal Housing Act, which was designed to clear slums and replace them with new developments, and nothing more. But in 1954, a striking and ultimately transformational new concept had been injected into the Act with an amendment that called for "urban renewal" and that added — and for the Heights this addition was to be crucial — the idea

that *renewal* projects should also include the "*rehabilitation and modernization of existing housing*." But Moses had no confidence in rehabilitation. In fact, he had already expressed his doubts about the new laws and regulations by dragging his feet and impeding the first city-proposed urban renewal project on the Upper West Side in 1955.

As far as Moses was concerned, his projects did not need to relate at all to the surrounding area nor did he trouble himself about the effects a project might have on present, owner-generated renewal efforts. He continued to be wedded to his simpler scheme, which was the application of the power of eminent domain to, in his own words, "eliminate substandard and deteriorating areas in the City and create in their stead sound, permanent reuse areas..." Period. It was with those chilling words that Moses defined the future for Brooklyn Heights, but that definition was not going to stand as an acceptable blueprint for the future of this neighborhood.

#### WILLOWTOWN FIGHTS BACK

Willowtown became the mouse that roared. This little corner of the Heights was primed for organization by the ready energy of its newcomers and its ability to stand together against those who would destroy it. A trained social worker living on the scene, Richard H. P. Mendes, was running a small settlement house at 62 Joralemon Street. He provided some of the initial direction and the neighbors quickly picked up the ball.

Soon there were meetings, resolutions, presentations, protests, and even a TV appearance (facilitated by a Heights resident who was a public affairs producer at WCBS-TV). As it turned out, the TV appearance drew some blood from the Moses apparatus. When he went looking for support from those Heights people who had quietly pointed him to Willowtown in the first place, they were nowhere to be found. Willowtown was taken off the Slum Clearance list, leaving Cadman Plaza as the sole focus of criticism.

There were a number of other ingredients in the simmering urban stew pot that were coming to the surface here. First there was the school situation. As 1958 had dawned, there was optimism about PS 8 which, only a few years earlier, had been identified as a school perilously close to non-usability. The Heights in the '40s and '50s had a preponderance of older individuals and families; not many children were to be seen in the streets. The parks, the few that were available then, were not actively patronized and there was no parent group boosting them. With a skimpy school-age population and a strong tradition of private and parochial schooling, combined with a rather decrepit public school plant built in 1907, the momentum was not in the direction of public schooling at all.

#### ADVOCATES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL

But the newcomers wanted to take a closer look at the situation since many of them shared the belief that public schooling was a democratic inheritance that deserved support and encouragement. And, very significantly, it would help make the Heights

more affordable. While these were desirable goals few newcomers were willing to send their children to a second-rate public school and, in effect, use their own children as pawns in the cause of building it up.

By early 1958 parents had already begun considering "... *whether to send the children to a private school or to PS 8, or to leave the neighborhood,*" as one parent put it to the *Brooklyn Heights Press*. The newspaper reported that six parents had met at 8 Monroe Place — the one-time refectory to the pre-Civil War church then on the corner of Clark and Monroe and which was soon to be scrapped for "slum clearance" purposes — to express their feelings about the desirability of "a broader base of social contacts" that would be available in a public school as against a private school. The phrase was a euphemism for children of lower income families, especially African-American children who were being bused in from nearby Farragut and Fort Greene public housing projects to help fill our underutilized classrooms while, at the same time, dealing with severe overcrowding in their own neighborhood schools.

As a liberal reaction, in part, to the recent historic racial events in Little Rock, Arkansas, a determination arose to try to make PS 8 work as a progressive and integrated example of public education. Little Rock and Governor Orval Faubus had just shown the country at its racially most divisive. Brooklyn Heights seemed to want to do the right thing. But the dilemma gnawed at the neighborhood: How could we ever build up a good school if we didn't have enough "young, growing families"? Not all the brownstones, even if converted, could provide the numbers that would fill PS 8 in the foreseeable future.

The answer had to lie in somehow dramatically increasing the supply of middle income housing. This pursuit would lead, inevitably, back to Moses' Cadman Plaza plan and its shortcomings as the plan's details, relating especially to apartment sizes and costs, began to emerge.

#### RISE OF REFORM POLITICS

There was another progressive movement afoot in early 1958. It was a time when "reform politics" was beginning to take root across the city having been triggered by the unsuccessful but, to many the thrillingly forward looking presidential campaigns of Adlai Stevenson. The entrenched Democratic party organization in Brooklyn was out of touch with the demands for fresh, new political thinking. Its leaders seemed to react the same way as some of the older residents of Heights: they were wary of newcomers and what changes they might bring to the old neighborhood.

Freshly minted and newly named as the West Brooklyn Independent Democrats, the group took its cue from the young Turks in Manhattan, including a certain Ed Koch, in Greenwich Village, who had succeeded in bringing down the notoriously powerful Carmine DeSapio of Tammany Hall. One of the first such risings in Brooklyn, their meager numbers at the start didn't deter them. With a mere 67 members, by their own count, out of 20,000 registered Democrats in the Assembly District, these newly

registered Brooklyn Democrats, like their neighbors, soon began to develop influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

Among the leaders of the insurgent movement were Philip Jessup, Jr., who lived on Garden Place, Joseph Broadwin (still in the Heights) and William Delano, who lived at 86 Joralemon. In February, 1958, they held a five-hour organizational meeting at Beverly Moss Spatt's apartment on Hicks Street. (Their meetings were famous for being on the long, lawyerly and thorough side.) The decision was made to put up a slate of County Committee candidates against the regulars in the June primary, a move that was both unprecedented and audacious.

Known as WBID, for West Brooklyn Independent Democrats, the group proved to be not, as some confidently expected a flash-in-the-pan. As it turned out, some of its founders rose, eventually, to prominence in public service. Bill Delano became Counsel to the Peace Corps under President Kennedy and Beverley Moss Spatt became a member of the City Planning Commission. She then served as Chairperson of the Landmarks Commission. A later member, Carol Bellamy, became State Senator in the district and then the first female president of the City Council.

#### GETTING THROUGH TO BOROUGH HALL

The political landscape was a tricky one for the Heights neighborhood to master. It was recognized that the responsiveness of Borough Hall — then formidably occupied by John Cashmore — would be essential to swing city policies our way, and any such efforts would surely be hamstrung without a line into the Borough President's office. Indeed, no slum clearance project could even be initiated without the prior approval of the Board of Estimate, which when it came to housing practices, was controlled by the wishes of the borough presidents. The Heights would be licked before it even started to fight Moses if it couldn't do something about Cashmore.

What a time! The Heights was faced with three crucial and completely interdependent concerns: The need for action on the school, the need for middle income housing for growing families and, the need for a political organization responsive to new attitudes toward urban life. Underlying them all, was the formidably complex, hot-button issue of historic preservation. Publicly, historic zoning had not yet been addressed. But by late in the summer of 1958 Otis Pearsall was preparing the groundwork for a new form of zoning that would, by law, stop the terrible destruction going forward in the neighborhood.

Missing from the scene was a single, organizing structure that could accommodate all of these progressive interests and fuse them into a community-wide movement. That gap was to be addressed in late 1958 when a half-dozen neighbors met in the comfortable study of the Rev. Donald W. McKinney, minister of the First Unitarian Church on Pierrepont Street. In attendance was Richard J. Margolis, who as publisher and editor of the *Brooklyn Heights Press*, was to play a central role in the battle for the Heights. In the next issue of the paper he captured the optimistic and inspirational

spirit of the meeting by writing, "*Over Mr. McKinney's study door was the Greek inscription, THOUGHT SHOP--the same inscription that Socrates is said to have had over his door.*" Many thoughts were to come together that fall, in what was to be the defining moment for giving shape to the coming strategic battles over the fate of Brooklyn Heights. Much more is to be said about this successful fusion effort as the battle lines formed up.

***A NEW ORGANIZATION COMES INTO EXISTENCE AND FUSES  
WITH THE OLD TO FORCE AN UNPRECEDENTED MOSES COMPROMISE***

Urban storm clouds had been brewing over the Heights in 1958. The newer residents, with their substantial investments in the brownstones which gave the Heights its unique character, watched in dismay as precious, pre-Civil War houses fell prey to the wrecking ball. Six townhouses on Willow Street were knocked down for a dormitory building of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Condemnation proceedings were rapidly moving ahead as the widening of Fulton Street — part of the grand plan for a new Brooklyn Civic Center — had begun to close down stores, restaurants and businesses, from Montague to Pierrepont to Clinton to Clark.

The stark, looming face of the huge, new State Supreme Court building provided a bleak outlook for the standard of architecture to come in the new Civic Center. In spite of these dire challenges, the Brooklyn Heights Association was failing to exert the necessary, aggressive leadership to come to grips with these myriad, often interrelated problems.

Out of frustration with the existing organization and filled with genuine fear for the future of their threatened and, for many, their newly adopted neighborhood, a small group of concerned individuals — lawyers, bankers, journalists, architects, media persons, business executives — began a series of evening discussions in the Rev. Donald C. McKinney's office in the First Unitarian Church at 50 Monroe Place. The first occurred on a rainy night in November, 1958.

To be urgently addressed were three major needs which confronted the Heights at the time:

- historic preservation that would stop the destruction of 19th Century buildings;
- changes in the proposed Cadman Plaza Slum Clearance plan that would emphasize family living and architectural compatibility; and,
- how to make PS 8 a quality school that would serve the needs of this and nearby neighborhoods.

An intense round of informal discussions followed and by late December a public meeting was held in the undercroft at the Church as the organization went public. It adopted the name Community Conservation and Improvement Council (CCIC), pronounced "Kick." A printed statement declared "there must be an integrated, overall plan for the conservation and improvement of the Heights as an essentially residential community with related businesses." The Brooklyn Heights Press played up the meeting and, for the first time, publicized the new concept of "historic zoning."

But, for the time being, the drama belonged to the fight against Robert Moses. While reluctantly acceding to the inevitability of a "Slum Clearance" project on the Cadman Plaza site, CCIC called for cooperative, family-size apartments in place of the small-apartment, luxury rental housing Moses was dictating. It also called for

"rehabilitation" rather than the typical, Moses wholesale demolition. And it proposed that any new buildings take into account the special architectural character of the Heights.

These bold and very ambitious requirements might have been written off as the idle and hopeless wishes of some ephemeral and idealistic fringe group. But CCIC's organizers prided themselves on being strongly goal-oriented as well as political pragmatists. Coincidentally, at this time, negative reactions to the kind of slum clearance being practiced by Robert Moses were surfacing nationwide. No less an authority than *FORTUNE* magazine had recently published a new view of urban potential under the title of *THE EXPLODING METROPOLIS*, edited by William H. Whyte. Its six essays added up to a strong endorsement of precisely what the young people in Brooklyn Heights were saying.

Whyte, in his introduction, argued that so-called experts in planning and housing had wrested the destiny of cities away from the people who would live in them. The result, he wrote, was “[that] many cities suffer from sterile, repetitious design.” He noted that newspapers were following along as city after city called on urban patriots to fall in line with the professionally developed plans. And, he pointed out, the planners’ result was not designed to make the city a “good place to live.” But, from CCIC’s point of view, it was the very last chapter in the book that breathed new energy and determination into the group and which could not have been better timed. It was written by one of the seminal thinkers in the field, Jane Jacobs, and was titled, as if just for us, “*Downtown Is For People.*”

This outside endorsement gave us all a great lift and helped propel us to the essential next step, that of speaking with one voice. From the beginning it was well understood that, above all, the Heights had to present a unified front or else the Moses behemoth would find excuses for giving the Heights the same cold shoulder that it had perfected over the past few but intensive years of slum clearance programming. Accordingly, CCIC had established communications with the well-established Brooklyn Heights Association at the outset, and had told the older, prestigious organization that it would work toward goals fully compatible to both groups. The approach worked.

By January 13, 1959 — barely three months after the creation of CCIC — the Board of Governors of the Heights Association, in a remarkable concession to the new population, made CCIC, in its entirety, a "special committee" of the BHA. Now, it would be possible to confront any issue and any opponent with a unified front and under the banner of the "oldest neighborhood association in the City." Even the fearsome Moses himself would have to listen.

But slum clearance was only one of the key issues. Under the leadership of the local whirlwind, litigating attorney, co-chairman Otis Pratt Pearsall had taken on the task of incorporating historic zoning in CCIC’s goals. Behind the scenes and independently, he had spent the past year developing the legal basis and the architectural facts to underpin this daring objective. In fact, all of the efforts moved smoothly in tandem. Each had its group of champions, its heavy-lifting volunteers, a working schedule, public

relations, and a tightly coordinated timetable.

#### WORKING ON A TIGHT DEADLINE

Topping the list of priorities for the year 1959 was the need to beat Robert Moses to the punch. It was known that he was moving the plans for Cadman Plaza forward and, based on the patterns of previous slum clearance projects, would issue a full-blown brochure as soon as April. These colorful brochures had a way of transforming a mere proposal into a political fait accompli and Moses knew it. But so did we and planning was initiated for a mid-April, blockbuster community meeting. And the Heights had a deadline.

Things moved amazingly quickly. By mid-February a dozen architects had been mobilized to do a building-by-building preliminary inventory of the Heights' 50 square blocks. Malcolm Chesney of Willowtown, an economist at the Brooklyn Union Gas Company, helped design the effort, with architect Herbert Kaufman chairing the group. The resident architects had come forward to help with the survey, and focused on developing the data that eventually made it possible to create wall-size maps that would graphically quantify such things as building age and condition, absentee landlord or owner occupancy, architectural type, and other vital neighborhood signs. Taken together these would dramatically present the history and the status, for the first time, of the unique physical character of all of the buildings of the entire neighborhood.

The new information would be powerful ammunition for furthering the objectives of *"planning for the conservation of the best that we have here in the Heights, and to improve the neighborhood by making it a place for permanent family living,"* according to Kaufman. Chesney focused his expertise on potential school population, land values and acquisition costs. The Heights had to become a do-it-yourself urban planning academy in order to cope with the inexorable Moses machine.

Meanwhile, a raft of CCIC meetings with various city officials and potentially competitive developers had sent a message to slum clearance officials that the Heights was not going to roll over and submit. As if in retribution to the questioning of their authority, the slum clearance lords launched yet another threat. In February, a consulting architect to the City Slum Clearance Committee had let it slip that they were *"considering adding the east side of Monroe Place [up to the fine apartment building at number 24] to Cadman Plaza"* and that it *"seemed like a good idea."* (Full disclosure: That plan would have included the author's 1847 brownstone!)

Yet more emergency meetings were added to the schedule; petitions were written, signed and delivered. All protest mechanisms were activated. Thundered the Brooklyn Heights Press, with this *"preposterous"* idea, *"the city has made it clear that it is not competent to decide our destiny. We'll have to do it ourselves--and we'd better make haste."*

Eventually, Cadman Plaza was stopped dead at number 10 Monroe Place but not

until still more vast amounts of increasingly precious neighborhood energy had been expended.

#### MEETING ANOTHER MOSES CHALLENGE

During those early months of 1959, the main challenge Moses had thrown down to the community was whether the Heights could come up with an economically practical alternative to his own plan and to do it in time to avert the fait accompli syndrome. Fortunately, there had been recent, forward-thinking changes in certain city planning formulas which gave hope that any reasonable argument from the neighborhood would have to be given serious consideration.

The opening had been provided a couple of years earlier as a result of a controversial, massive slum clearance project on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Mayor Robert F. Wagner had commissioned a report designed to at least partially disarm the all-powerful Moses machinery but at the same time meet some of the growing criticism his high-handed methods incurred. As the report noted, Moses had "*grave doubts of the financial feasibility of the rehabilitation of brownstone structures*" in Manhattan's Upper West Side project. But in 1956 James Felt, chairman of the City Planning Commission, had found that, in fact, "*rehabilitation was a practical, desirable and economically feasible approach*" to rebuilding the west side area in question, which was a twenty-block, brownstone-saturated stretch from 87th to 97th Street. Thus, rehabilitation as public policy had been given legitimacy. It required new legislation that specifically added to the description of slum clearance imperatives the idea of "*rehabilitating and conserving*" neighborhoods. The rules of the game had changed. With that policy change, the Heights would have a real chance at stopping or, at least, slowing down the Moses plan based on the city's own, new formula. Nevertheless, a practical and competitive alternative was still needed to derail his well-oiled apparatus.

There followed yet another round of meetings but, this time, instead of government officials, they were with real estate developers. CCIC was looking for developers who would be interested in a cooperative housing scheme that offered a limited profit; that would pay the City the same taxes as the luxury rental plan; that would provide for a large percentage of two- and three-bedroom apartments; and that would meet higher, neighborhood-compatible standards of architectural design. Both the plan and the developers had to be above criticism, especially that of the Moses apparatus. Nothing less could survive the planned head-to-head confrontation at the big community meeting to be held in the Bossert Hotel on Montague Street in April. That meeting became the best attended, issue focused, community gathering in the Heights until that time.

The New York Times reported on the meeting on the front page of its second section on April 20, 1959. The headline announced that the Moses project was set for Brooklyn, but ominously, for Moses, the subheadings pointed out that a "*GROUP OPPOSES PLAN*" and further noted "*Cooperatives Urged on Site, With \$30 to \$40 Rates and More Family Apartments.*"

The CCIC argument was fully covered including the especially gratifying observation of the reporter, Charles Grutzner, that the Moses project “*drew criticism even before its details were announced.*” The column length article focused, as CCIC had dared to hope it would, on the family issue, noting that the Heights wanted “*cooperative apartments with larger units to accommodate families with children.*” CCIC’s spokesperson said they had informed Moses that they had a “*responsible developer,*” a term Moses loved to use in describing his hand-picked builders, and added that he was ready to carry out the alternative scheme and, furthermore, pay the same taxes as Moses’ developer.

#### A FACE TO FACE SHOWDOWN

Not wasting any time congratulating themselves on winning the first public battle, CCIC moved on to Moses’ turf directly. An unprecedented meeting was secured with the otherwise unreachable Slum Clearance Committee at its hard-to-reach aerie under the Triborough Bridge on Randall’s Island, the central headquarters of Moses many-faceted operations. A small group of representatives made the pilgrimage equipped with giant maps, the proposed developers, legal and social arguments and a raft of statistics.

At last it was actually happening, a face-to-face collision, with the Heights in the front row seats and, behind the large walnut conference table, Mr. Moses himself, flanked on either side by his supporting cast and ready rubber stamps. He heard the group out but was clearly unimpressed. When it was noted that certain other cities, including one in New Jersey, had been making slum clearance accommodations to neighborhood character and history, Moses blustered, “*New York does not take lessons from New Jersey!*” The meeting ended with the group feeling a bit like a wounded bull fighter, exhilarated and deflated at the same time but, nevertheless, determined to continue the encounter.

The sparring ran on throughout the rest of 1959. On December 24, the New York Times devoted a front page article to the battle. Their star real estate reporter, Wayne Phillips, wrote that the question of exactly what to build “*has never been more clearly drawn in New York City than in the Cadman Plaza project.*” Tracing the entire history of CCIC’s efforts he pointed out that the City now had an unprecedented dilemma on its hands with two competitive, commercially viable proposals, one sponsored by Moses and one by the community. “*Eventually,*” Phillips wrote, “*the Committee will have to decide how best to use the [urban renewal] subsidy involved in taking over a slum area at a reduced price to a developer.*” Hallelujah! This was precisely what the Heights had been yelling about for over a year.

Meanwhile, Borough President Cashmore, whose vote on the Board of Estimate would be essential to Moses, had blinked. No longer a sure thing, he was now “neutral” about Cadman. The usually recumbent Democratic organization in the district had actually endorsed the middle-income, cooperative plan as logical; the normally taciturn district leader, Frank Cunningham, put the question in simple terms: “*How can the Heights develop if they don’t give the young families a chance?*” Roger Starr, then head of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, had waded in with a strong statement in

favor of giving the Heights plan due consideration. In December the ministers of the community got into the act by signing a petition endorsing the idea of cooperative housing.

So ended 1959, with the momentum very much on the side of a highly modified Cadman project. The revised plan incorporated changes called for by the neighborhood which would go a long way towards meeting the needs and interests of the Heights community. By March 1, 1960, Robert Moses, reacting to mounting city-wide criticism from the press about this and other controversial projects, withdrew from the fields of housing, slum clearance and urban renewal.

#### A NEW LOOK EMERGES FOR 'URBAN RENEWAL'

But even with Moses out of the picture the new redevelopment authorities required a full two more years before finally supporting the goals originally set forth by CCIC and endorsed by the Heights Association and the great majority in the neighborhood.

Throughout the city, the newly created housing agencies were much more congenial to expressions of community concern and demands for participation. In 1961 the Federal government in effect acknowledged the good reasoning behind what CCIC had stood for since its beginning. The Housing and Home Finance Agency, headed by Robert C. Weaver, had adjusted its Title One policy toward the pricing of urban land acquisitions so that developers could negotiate the price of the land with the objective of being able to charge future tenants a lower rent.

Urban tracts no longer would necessarily be sold to the highest bidder at an auction — which in New York was tightly controlled by the Slum Clearance Committee — but instead could be sold at a price negotiated by the city. The new negotiations would take into account the long-term, ultimate value of the developed property to the residents who lived nearby. Weaver pointed out: "*Urban renewal is not simply a program to improve land values [a direct rejection of the long-standing philosophy of Robert Moses] it is, first of all, a program to improve living values.*"

Negotiations with city authorities by BHA/CCIC committees were now undertaken on a more or less amicable level. The earlier hostility was gone. The ultimate result, not to be announced until the end of 1961, was a redesign of the general appearance of the project into the four towers one now sees. In addition, two-story town houses were to be added, making at least part of the project more compatible with the scale of the existing neighborhood at Monroe Place and Clark Street and on Henry Street from Middagh to Cranberry.

Ultimately, the project development was divided between the original Moses appointee, Philadelphia lawyer and developer Sean Pierre Bonan, and the community-sponsored, non-profit coop developer, Mutual Housing Sponsors. However, the defining issues for the Heights — middle-income, cooperative versus high-rent housing, and

family-size versus studio apartments — were decided in the community's favor. In late November, 1961, the City designated the entire project for development as a full tax-paying cooperative with nearly a complete reversal of the original allocation of small vs. large units.

The project was divided virtually in half, with the design of the portion south of Pineapple Walk very much influenced by the community's preference. The lead architect for that portion was William Conklin of the Manhattan firm of M. Milton Glass and Whittlesey and Conklin. Their distinctive design distinguishes the two large towers, one facing Clark Street and, the other, connected by a street overpass, facing Clinton Street at the end of Tillary Street. Facing Clark Street and Monroe Place there are a number of walled-in, two-story town houses, an attempt to soften the impact of the new, tall intrusions on the neighborhood. (Conklin later served as Borough President Howard Golden's choice for supervising the magnificent rehabilitation of Brooklyn Borough Hall.)

The appearance of the Conklin-designed buildings, down to the color of the pre-cast, reticulated concrete facing, was done in close collaboration with Heights neighbors. The area north of Pineapple Walk was controlled by the original sponsors and designed separately and, with the exception of the town houses between Cranberry and Middagh Streets, adhered to the original, relatively plain pipe-rack, exterior design scheme.

CCIC's most immediate goals were thus realized—60% per cent of the new housing to be middle income and tax abated, leaving 40% full tax paying although historic preservation was still essentially a fighting matter with the outcome not entirely clear. Also, action was needed to assure a healthy future for PS 8.

Yet one more major challenge was to come in 1961, this time from inside rather than outside the neighborhood. This took the form of a totally new and supposedly better approach to Cadman Plaza, which was still not officially resolved. The new concept, called the "Goodman Plan" after its main designer, Percival Goodman of Columbia University, for a time threatened the very premise of the CCIC compromise itself. These were among the next pressing items to be put on the community's agenda.

***THE BEST HOUSING/SCHOOL MIX?  
A 'BETTER' PLAN FLARES AND DIES***

The dark shadow of Robert Moses began a slow fade out of the urban renewal scene in 1961. His own slum clearance committee's consultant had found that the competing plan of the Community Conservation and Improvement Council for partial tax-paying, middle-income, family-size co-op apartments deserved a full and fair hearing. It seemed that, finally, there was reasonable assurance that co-op housing with larger apartments would be the main characteristic of housing in Cadman Plaza. And, among other things, this would mean more "growing families" and more school children.

Community attention now turned to the public school, PS 8, which since 1907 had been a fixture on Hicks Street between Poplar and Middagh.

Schooling in the Heights had, traditionally, for the majority of residents, meant private school. But many of the new residents — brownstoners and apartment dwellers alike — were, for financial or social reasons, staunchly in favor of neighborhood public schooling. However, there was a knotty problem: Which neighborhood would this neighborhood school look like?

City-wide, in the early 1960s, there were many ideas about how best to improve public education in schools which, because of their location, effectively segregated students by income level. As it was, children from so-called "deprived" neighborhoods would be in schools that were, ipso facto, deprived. Better-off neighborhoods would, in contrast, and often with the aid of energetic, volunteer parent activities and lobbying, provide better equipped and maintained schools with better teaching.

In the Heights the issue seemed to boil down to the idea that if there could be enough of our "better-off" students in the school, it could successfully integrate a large number of students of color and different cultures, different, that is, from that of the predominantly white, middle and upper-middleclass population then beginning to grow in Brooklyn Heights. Admittedly, it would mean pioneering in urban education, but there was strong support for just such pioneering among some Heights residents.

The support, though vigorous, was nevertheless undercut in the neighborhood by the fact that there were available and desirable alternatives to PS 8, namely two long-established private schools, Packer and Friends, and a third, Saint Ann's, then in the process of being organized. Many parents, as much as their hearts wanted them to participate in a wholesomely democratic and definitely integrated public school system, couldn't accept the idea of imposing an educational experiment on their children. When the private Saint Ann's school was founded in the basement of Saint Ann's Church at Livingston and Clinton, it found many ready takers. Saint Ann's and other private schools began to drain off a substantial number of white students whose presence would have helped maintain the public school's racial balance.

## RACE-BALANCING PROPOSALS

But not everybody wanted or could afford private school, so there came a series of proposals, some from people in the Heights, and some from Board of Education authorities aimed at making PS 8 work for everyone. One formula called for "pairing" PS 8 with PS 7 in the Farragut Houses area just north of the Manhattan Bridge which was tried and then dropped after less than two years. Another plan called for re-districting PS 8 to include numbers of the increasingly middle-class, white Cobble Hill children. Still another plan would make PS 8 a kindergarten-to-eighth-grade-school, which would have solved the vexing junior high school problem, inasmuch as there was no "desirable" JHS for PS 8 graduates.

Finally, there were bold plans tied to the Cadman Plaza project that involved taking more Heights land — namely, the two blocks bounded by Middagh, Hicks, Fulton and Henry and including Poplar — in the North Heights. This could be done under Urban Renewal and would accommodate a new and larger school, new recreation grounds, and additional housing, either for the elderly as one plan had it, or public housing as another called for. These various approaches led to a kind of climactic uproar in the Fall of 1963.

### 'MIDDLE CLASS' QUOTIENT

While the efforts to modify the original Cadman Plaza slum clearance plan and achieve historic preservation had tended to bring the neighborhood together, the school issue split it wide apart. For a time, there were proponents everywhere and each seemed to have just the right, or the most fair, or the most practical solution. As different as they were, all proposals did share one principle: That for a Heights school to have a viable future it had to be racially integrated but with a majority, or at least a near-majority, of the students being "middle class." One hypothesis had it that effective schools have effective parent associations, and effective parent associations in New York City, at that time, could only be those which drew their energy and drive from an educated, middle-class, in other words, white parents who had the time and the resources to actively participate in supporting the public school.

But, how to create that perfect white/black/hispanic mix of parents? That was the vexing question. If they were to be solely from the Heights, then the "others" would have to be brought in from outside. That could be done by joining what would be a mostly-white PS 8 to a mostly-minority, sister-school as envisioned by the short-lived "school pairing" idea which paired PS 8 with the decrepit, soon-to-be-demolished, PS 7 in the Farragut Houses district and was briefly fostered by the Board of Education.

The Board of Ed itself approached pairing with great caution; selecting just three such pairs in the entire city. While there was some support for pairing there was also fierce opposition, locally and by the city-wide United Parents Association which, in addition to other objections, considered the idea an evasion of financial responsibility for building up schools where they were.

In another short-lived attempt at salvaging PS 8 and giving it the needed population and racial balance, one group focused on expanding the school district to include the mostly white population in neighboring Cobble Hill. This was opposed by newcomers to Cobble Hill where no public housing posed the Heights kind of racial imbalance. When young Heights mothers Dorothy Jessup and Dianne Margolis put a Cobble Hill merger idea to the school authorities in Livingston Street headquarters, they were accused of being racist by an irate minority administrator and they left the meeting in near tears. Thus, were the hope-filled integration ideas shot down in flames.

#### A FEDERAL FUNDS INCENTIVE

The community divisiveness over the school issue did not end with inclusive zoning proposals. It seemed to come to a head in October and November, 1963, when the City's newly constituted Housing and Redevelopment Board, under the enlightened leadership of Milton Mollen (future Chief Judge of the Appellate Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Department), announced a plan that coupled the thorny public school question with public housing. What would lead HRB to take these incredibly controversial issues on? Basically, they saw an opportunity to expand the urban renewal site for Cadman Plaza, and in one fell swoop, acquire land for City purposes with the help of valuable Federal dollars, gratify the Heights by adding recreation space to the neighborhood and building a totally new, larger school. Plus, and this was the capstone of the concept, they could add some form of socially desirable "low cost housing" to the Cadman Plaza site, now dominated by the strictly middle-income housing mix. This would help meet the increasing demands of civil rights advocates in the Heights and elsewhere, for breaking the distressing urban pattern of huge and completely segregated public housing projects.

This combination, while intended as a progressive and creative solution to the multi-faceted needs of Brooklyn Heights, created a firestorm of neighborhood opposition along with a flurry of support.

First to explode were those in the immediately contiguous North Heights who, two years earlier, in 1961, had joined in the movement to reject all compromise with the basic Cadman Plaza plan and foster instead the so-called "Goodman Plan."

The Goodman Plan, though but a comet across the urban planning sky, had opened the door to public housing in the Heights by calling for "*decent housing on the [Cadman Plaza] site for the present residents at rentals within their means,*" and, while any new housing should be predominantly "*for middle income families*" it should also provide "*some lower [charges] to assure a reasonable economic, social and racial mixture.*" The ideologically correct Goodman alternative was well-aired in the Heights and received substantial support from outsiders, including a polemic by, of all people, the renowned theater critic, Brooks Atkinson, in The New York Times. Atkinson had been sold on the debatable idea that there were many salvageable buildings in the Cadman Plaza site and that it "*...can be restored by replacing the buildings that have no character and by renovating those that have.*"

## LOOKED GOOD ON PAPER

On paper the late-arriving Goodman plan looked attractive enough. It included such radical proposals as building a new PS 8 in the park across what was then Fulton Street. This would have been in Cadman Plaza Memorial Park on the site between Tillary and Pineapple Street. On the then existing Cadman site there was to be a mix of rehabilitated houses and stores, new apartments, a theater, a rehabilitated church, and studios. The work of Columbia University professor of architecture, Percival Goodman, F.A.I.A., together with a group of four Heights residents, the plan was announced in June, 1961. Reflecting the talent and energy which had come to typify Heights counter proposals at the time, it attracted considerable attention. By the Fall, the plan had begun to threaten the laboriously wrought Cadman compromise with the city. Many feared that it was a case of the basically good and workable, though not perfect, plan being sidetracked by a socially attractive but undoable and undesired one.

On November 16, 1961, following an emergency meeting of the board of governors of the Brooklyn Heights Association, the president, Bill Fisher, issued a statement which sharply criticized the Goodman plan for its impracticality and strongly warned the community of the dangers inherent in endorsing it at this late date. Citing their responsibility to the 1,400 members of the BHA, Fisher warned that at a meeting the same week with officials of the Housing and Redevelopment Board, including Milton Mollen, the HRB indicated they would probably refuse to develop Cadman Plaza altogether if the community "*switched its support to the Goodman Plan.*" HRB had found it "*totally unworkable,*" Fisher continued. Accordingly, he went on, "*the whole northeast corner of the Heights [would be thrown] to the real estate wolves.*"

This forceful message was contained in a four-page summary of the three-year Cadman controversy, including its apparently successful resolution, which was mailed to the entire membership and backed up by a full-page ad in the *Brooklyn Heights Press*. This finally took the wind out of the sails of the Goodman enterprise, but they had planted the idea among city officialdom that some public housing might actually be welcomed in the Heights.

It was this idea to which HRB had returned when, two years later, it proposed low income housing on the site of PS 8 to be coupled with a new PS 8 on block 207 in the proposed extension of the Cadman site. It was this inclusion that blew Chairman Mollen's proposal out of the water. It also caused a widely publicized and dramatic rift in the Heights Association over yet another PS 8 plan.

## TO GAIN A NEW SCHOOL AND A PARK

I can report on this fracas personally because at the time I was the chairman of the education committee of the Brooklyn Heights Association. (I had been among a number of CCIC organizers who were added to the board of the BHA.) The committee had been authorized to study the possibilities of expanding the Cadman site to include the blocks between Middagh and Poplar and somehow make use of the additional space to build a new school.

The expansion, which never occurred, would have allowed space for a school, a park and, here was the rub, additional housing. The education committee, which had for its architectural expert Lo Yi Chan, of the well-known and national award-winning firm of Prentice Chan and Olhausen, looked at the two blocks and concluded that a larger school could be built, and with it park space could be added to the Heights, and that there would be ample room left over for some form of low-cost housing, preferably for the elderly, to be fitted in under a tax-subsidized, federally-aided scheme.

The committee was aware that there was the possibility of the City mishandling the housing end of the idea. Nevertheless, it concluded that, with solid support from the community, any danger that some massive public housing project would be plunked down there could be avoided.

The very attractive upside to the idea was that, finally, the Heights would be getting the size and kind of school it needed to attract those who would otherwise resort to private schooling for their children. It was a gamble, and some in the BHA felt strongly that it was a dangerous and bad gamble.

### A 'DISLOYALTY' ACCUSATION

News of the 1963 flare-up broke out in The New York World Telegram and Sun under the headline, "*The Battle for PS 8*," on November 4. Nina McCain wrote of the split in the BHA, quoting the committee report as saying that, "*a site for PS 8 is the most urgent concern*" and that "*opposition to public housing*" shouldn't be allowed to block progress on the school front.

Paul Windels, Sr., a prominent and distinguished Heights resident, who had been the City's Corporation Counsel and was serving as president of the BHA, the article goes on, "*angrily denounced the committee report and accused its chairman, Martin Schneider, of 'disloyalty'.*" This raised the dispute to a new level of acrimony. The front-page article observed that nearly everyone in the Heights agreed that a new PS 8 was needed and that the present building is "*already inadequate and will be even more so ... when children from the new Cadman Plaza middle-income development come pouring in.*"

The newspaper article also noted the various, sometimes conflicting, positions taken by HRB, the State Housing Commission, the local school board, the Board of

Education, the group promoting public housing, and the Parents Association of PS 8, which had just voted 50 to 3 in favor of building a new school on block 207.

#### SCHOOL DEMAND HARDLY GREW

In the end this tumultuous upwelling of passions and ideas in the neighborhood over various school choices and opportunities died down. Federal monies evaporated and city officials, interested in avoiding the community cross-fire, decided to do nothing on those two blocks. With the help of private school expansions and gradual demographic changes, any increase in neighborhood demand for PS 8 was put off for nearly 40 years.

In fact, by 1990, the number of persons under age 18 living in the Heights actually declined. Nevertheless, the new Saint Ann's school grew and grew. It won a near national reputation for excellence and offered a complete program from pre-school through high school. Packer Collegiate Institute also expanded, modernized and likewise flourished.

Meanwhile, PS 8 began, slowly, to upgrade the quality of its offerings. A subsequent but smaller-scale flap in the 1970s led to the adding of grades 7 and 8 which was a move that was canceled a few years later because the additional grades had failed to attract enough junior-high-school-age students from the Heights.

Thanks to asbestos, the school, originally built in 1906, had to be completely refurbished in the early 1990's. By its centennial, PS 8 had become a cheerful, sprightly and even over-crowded place run by Seth Phillips, a youthful, energetic principal who exudes good spirit and prides himself on the school's disciplined, creative, cheerful atmosphere.

Today, the school sports the full name **PS 8-The Robert Fulton School and The Magnet School for Exploration, Research and Design**. In its new incarnation, it has won solid support in the Heights to the point where it required temporary extra classrooms. So, despite the hand-wringing and dolorous forecasts of 40-odd years ago, the school, like the neighborhood, has survived and prevailed.

In a real sense, the PS 8 controversy was finally resolved by the local citizenry, changing demographics and the increasing cost of private school. But, back in the 1960s that future could hardly be foreseen and the community pulled itself together and refocused its collective mind on the great looming question of historic preservation. Its time was finally at hand.

## **THE CAPSTONE IN THE BATTLE, SAVING AN ENTIRE BROWNSTONE NEIGHBORHOOD**

In the fall of 1958, Brooklyn Heights had been confronting three major problems, one more challenging than the next and, in some ways, each menacing the neighborhood's future existence. While different sectors of the community had its own emphasis, from the beginning there had been virtually unanimous agreement that we had to deal quickly with three urgent priorities: middle income housing, school improvement, and architectural preservation.

The intertwined issues that would define the physical future of our fifty blocks reflected a seeming conflict that was bedeviling the entire city: How to preserve the best of its historic and aesthetic buildings while coping with the need for family-size, middle-income housing and providing decent public schools?

But, of the three issues before us, historic preservation was going to require the newest and the boldest thinking. Otis Pratt Pearsall — Wall Street lawyer and architectural history buff — had taken on the leadership of that crucial effort.

By combining the housing and school problems with historic preservation, we were in a unique position to galvanize a wide swath of the community. This, in turn, made it possible to attract an unprecedented outpouring of volunteer effort which provided the foot soldiers who were to develop the massive amounts of new documentation and up-to-date information about buildings and population in the neighborhood.

### VOLUNTEERS MAP THE HEIGHTS

With missionary zeal Pearsall took on the task and promptly began organizing the effort. His wife Nancy became the part-time, coordinating executive. Soon, a number of architects along with non-professionals were surveying the entire neighborhood and reporting their findings to Nancy who was in charge of creating a series of wall-size graphics which, for the first time, would provide a physical and economic profile of every building.

The historic facts and current building information were consolidated on huge, colorful maps that were to come into play at meetings with various city officials over the next few years. Unique contributions to visualizing the Heights and its more than 600 pre-civil war houses, they conveyed a true sense of what was at stake in the neighborhood.

Pearsall had come to CCIC armed with information gleaned over a period of a few years about national efforts at historic zoning. From the National Trust for Historic Preservation he had obtained a package of information which, among other things, pointed him to the successful experience of Beacon Hill, Boston, in 1956. But, in the

materials he'd received, he discovered that New York State had, in 1956, passed a law — a simple one-paragraph act authored by Albert S. Bard — which empowered cities to adopt regulations to protect *"places, buildings, structures, works of art, and other objects having a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value..."* This was the key he'd been looking for. New York City had lagged in making use of Bard. Over the years, the Municipal Art Society had designated certain buildings for preservation but not groups of buildings and certainly not entire neighborhoods.

For us, the key word in the Bard Law was *"places,"* which could be taken to mean a neighborhood. It was also in our favor that a building which had no particular historic value — George Washington might never have slept there — could nevertheless qualify for protection because of its contextual *"aesthetic"* value. Thus could pre-civil war brownstones qualify.

Pearsall then orchestrated a determined and systematic campaign to contact anyone with influence in the City's power structure and possible interest in the cause of historic preservation. The group was moved by a sense of dire urgency in the Heights at the time; buildings were being torn down on Willow Street, menaced on Orange Street, and some great landmarks such as the Brooklyn Savings Bank at Pierrepont and Clinton had already been tagged for demolition. Others were being defaced with cheap, fake stone facades and suburban aluminum canopies.

Richard Margolis captured the need for action in a February, 1959, editorial advocating the use of the Bard law under the heading, *"How To Make History"* *"...If accepted [by the City]"*, Margolis vividly wrote of the law's promise, *"The community would be free of all the predatory monsters that traditionally devour a neighborhood..."*

Gladys Underwood (Mrs. Darwin S. James), a board member of the Municipal Art Society and one of the grand dames of Brooklyn Heights — long-concerned about preserving the Heights, she had purchased a handful of brownstones to save them from imminent destruction — hosted a meeting for Pearsall and representatives of the MAS, including architectural historians Alan Burnham and Henry Hope Reed. Also present was 92-year-old Albert Bard himself. Pearsall has noted that he left that meeting *"with a euphoric sense that we were onto an idea that was truly meant to be."*

#### A CRUCIAL RESOURCE FOUND

Soon afterwards, Pearsall was told by several of the architectural historians with whom he'd been in touch that one of their most distinguished and well-published colleagues, Clay Lancaster, was living virtually next door on Cranberry Street. Realizing the potential impact of a scholarly study of the buildings of the Heights, Pearsall hand-delivered a one-page letter to Lancaster's apartment on Cranberry Street on April 1, 1959. In it he asked whether Lancaster would consider doing a "survey" which would assist in the community's zoning effort to "preserve the esthetic and historic charm of Brooklyn Heights."

Miraculously, Lancaster proved to be available at that very time and, in fact, had been contemplating not merely a survey but a book to be embellished with his professional photography. He launched himself into the task nearly immediately. The book, *Old Brooklyn Heights/ New York's First Suburb*, was published by Charles Tuttle in October, 1961, a mere two years from its conception, probably something of a speed record for such a scholarly work. But well before its publication, Lancaster's detailed facts about hundreds of pre-civil war homes and other buildings in the Heights played a major role in making the case for preservation. (The book has since gone through five printings and a Dover edition, which contains an invaluable, detailed history of the struggle for historic preservation in Brooklyn Heights, along with the analyses of 619 pre-Civil War houses that give the Heights its unique 19th century quality.)

Meanwhile, back in April, 1959, with so much happening on so many fronts, the time was finally ripe to enlist the entire community in the effort. A major hall in the Bossert Hotel was rented anticipating a full house. By including historic preservation on an agenda which also featured the high drama of going toe-to-toe with Robert Moses on the Cadman Plaza housing proposal, an exceptional turnout was assured. A four-page spread was published in the Brooklyn Heights Press replete with maps, facts and essays on the many issues confronting the Heights. CCIC and the Brooklyn Heights Association were teamed up for a large-scale, carefully orchestrated presentation on April 21, 1959.. That morning, Charles Grutzner of The New York Times wrote about the forthcoming meeting under the headline "*Brooklynites Set Action on Heights.*" And so, that night, some 400 extremely interested neighbors turned out and heard Pearsall outline an action plan for stopping the wrecking ball for good in a Heights "Historic District."

As a testament to the CCIC's recognition — Republican State Senator MacNeil Mitchell, famed as the co-author of the middle-income housing law known as Mitchell-Lama housing — was the 'featured' speaker. Other speakers reported on the formal submission during the previous week of a BHA memorandum, drafted in part by Arden Rathkopf, an expert on zoning and supporter of the effort. The memo, presented at a hearing of the City Planning Commission, outlined the necessary details of what could become an historic zoning resolution.

Over the next months and several years the Heights Press featured article after article covering every twist and turn in the effort. Brooklyn Heights was going to distinguish itself by becoming the first community in New York City to whole-heartedly embrace the idea of voluntarily accepting limitations on the control of real estate in order to preserve the character of its neighborhood.

Harmon H. Goldstone, chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission from 1968 to 1973, wrote about this trail-blazing phenomenon in his book *History Preserved*, noting that the Heights was so "*anxious to protect its own neighborhood*" that it lobbied to obtain recognition as a federally identified historic district even before the city took action.

## ACTION POSTPONED

But the Heights effort was forced to follow a most frustrating, zigzag course. At first it focused on persuading Planning Commissioner James Felt — then in the midst of a long-needed and arduous updating of the city's entire zoning code —to include a provision for historic district zoning. Though interested and supportive of the cause, and impressed with the homework the Heights had done, Felt turned the proposal aside, in favor of keeping the spotlight on his politically sensitive and problematic main goals.

An alternative course, to develop a singular law, applying only to Brooklyn Heights, also failed to gain support at the city government level as being elitist, narrow and self-serving. The Heights had no choice but to wait until a more propitious time in the political climate.

Still, there were some hopeful signs grounded in the threatened destruction of Carnegie Hall and such disastrous demolition as the loss of the Brokaw mansion on Fifth Avenue. The continuing, painful loss of major landmarks helped to galvanize civic feelings about preservation. In June, 1961, Mayor Wagner had established the progenitor of the Landmarks Commission in the form of a "Committee for the Preservation of Structures of Historic and Aesthetic Importance." Geoffrey Platt, son of the distinguished early 20th century New York artist and architect Charles Adams Platt, was appointed chairman.

The new committee had been created specifically to deal with the notorious bulldozer urban renewal methods that had stained the Robert Moses slum clearance era. It was going to identify, protect and encourage the rehabilitation of good buildings in urban renewal sites. But from the perspective of the Heights it seemed clear that, as Pearsall argued, in view of "*continual instances of demolition and defacement, and united in its readiness to accept immediate historic zoning, [the Heights] should not be made to wait indefinitely for resolution of the city-wide problem.*" But Platt, too, could not be persuaded to go it alone with the Heights, fearing charges of elitism and special favors.

## A STRONG TURN FOR THE BETTER

Things moved ahead, but painfully slowly. In April, 1962, the Landmarks Preservation Commission was created and Platt was appointed chairman. At least now there was an agency in place within the city government which held the responsibility for working on the problem. And there was at long last a commitment to prepare, within a year, a detailed legislative program. Things took a strong turn for the better that fall when William R. Fisher, who had worked with both the Brooklyn Heights Association and CCIC from the outset, was appointed to the commission. Fisher, who served as president of the BHA from 1960 to 1962, and then as president of the Long Island (now Brooklyn) Historical Society, provided a new level of access to the city power brokers.

The pace quickened in 1963 and 1964 as the intricate legislation made its way through various drafts and finally was introduced to the City Council in October.

Meanwhile, condemnation of the Cadman Plaza Slum Clearance Site had begun.

### KEEPING PRESERVATION IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Pearsall, led by his appreciation of all that could be lost in the old buildings, arranged for permission from the developers for a small group to explore the emptied buildings and search them for salvageable architectural features such as fireplace mantels and pier mirrors. The New York Times, in a feature article, described the group as "*pick[ing] their way through fallen plaster and discarded furniture*" and marking items to be spared from the wreckers' hammers. Eventually 32 handsome 19<sup>th</sup> Century marble mantels and fireplaces were rescued and sold at a nominal price to brownstone owners in the Heights and Cobble Hill who were working on restoring their buildings.

The introduction of the legislation to the City Council in late 1964 was followed by a stormy public hearing. Heartfelt support from the Heights distinguished the neighborhood as a veritable hotbed of historic preservation. In the end, the one serious local objector was the Watchtower Society, which had made sizable acquisitions and was bent on putting up more dormitory-style buildings for its growing membership.

In March, 1965, The New York Times worried editorially at the delay while noting that "the law on landmark preservation is complex" and urged action because "Treasured old buildings have steadily hit the dust." Finally, on April 19, 1965, the Landmarks Law was signed into effect by Mayor Wagner. It specified immediate action on recommendations for three historic districts including the Heights. Here is how The New York Times, on April 26, 1965, described the culminating event in words that were music to the ears of those who had devoted the better part of a decade to help bring it about:

*When the City Council last week approved a landmark preservation law it acknowledged—as have other city governments in recent years—that preserving a community's architectural heritage is a legitimate function of government.*

*The primary means of compelling preservation, which is accomplished by restricting the rights of property owners, is through use of the police power and the right of eminent domain, in the same manner as the city's zoning law.*

*Thus, New York at last has joined a preservation movement that has spread throughout the country under the impetus of public opinion aroused by landmarks vanishing in the explosive growth of cities.*

As Pearsall records in his unpublished notes, "*the goal line was in sight,*" and the Heights was ready, in fact, far readier than either of the other two proposed districts — Greenwich Village and the Cast Iron District in SoHo — for the process of designation. This suited the newly empowered Preservation Commission just fine since it was eager to show how effectively it could work. After a hearing at City Hall, attended by nearly 300 "Brooklyn Heights property owners, and members of local civic groups," the commission issued its three-page designation decision, and on November 23, 1965, just a few days before Thanksgiving, New York City had its first Historic District.

## FINISHED, BUT NOT QUITE.

But soon after what appeared to be the final victory, Pearsall was again called into action when a potential loophole was discovered. It seemed that under the newly promulgated regulations, the Watchtower Society — which stood virtually alone in its opposition to the preservation law and which had been accumulating property in the neighborhood — was interested in building an out-of-scale, 12-story building on the Columbia Heights block-front from Clark Street to Pineapple Street. Pearsall had found out, to his dismay, that under the law as written, the Watchtower Society or any developer — if vacant land should become available — arguably had the right build to whatever height was allowable under the then generally applicable zoning laws, overriding any historic preservation regulations. For the Heights this meant the real possibility that developers could exceed the very limits the Historic District regulation was intended to put in place.

This multi-story loophole needed to be closed and closed quickly. Fortunately, by that time another neighbor, Beverly Moss Spatt, had been appointed to the City Planning Commission. Dr. Spatt was a fierce believer in protecting the historic continuity of the City. With her strong support the necessary technical research was marshaled. A strategic amendment to the zoning resolution was prepared, debated in public hearings, and narrowly approved — over the most vigorous real estate industry opposition — by the Board of Estimate.

Yet again, with another battle won, now came time to win the war by having the amendment applied to this neighborhood by the Planning Commission. This happened in June, 1967.

The salutary effect of the height-limitation amendment can be witnessed today by visiting the corner of Pineapple Street and Columbia Heights where the Watchtower Society erected a "community facility" designed by Ulrich Franzen, an award-winning architect, who managed to build a clearly 20th century structure which, most would agree, is, nevertheless, in keeping with the general character of the neighborhood, including its limited height.

Otis Pearsall's crucial role in the city's preservation movement was given public recognition in 1993, when the Historic Districts Council named him a Landmark Lion.

In the spring of 1995, as the ever more potent Brooklyn Heights Association held a community meeting to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Pearsall remarked that, *"since the Heights had been made an Historic District, not a house or a single stoop or a cornice has been lost."* In fact, he has observed, we have gained some stoops and cornices, here and there.

And, as one tours the Heights today, as many from around the country and the world do, following the [AIA Guide to New York City](#) or the [Guide Michelin](#), one sees

example after example of original and handsomely restored facades, stoops, windows, shutters, and even iron work, representative of the best of 19th century design and craftsmanship. All to be viewed while often walking on the same bluestone sidewalks which were laid down when horse and buggies traveled the streets.

But much more has been preserved than physical details. As Harmon Goldstone has noted, in a time characterized more by high mobility than permanence, more by fickle tastes than lasting values, the Historic District offers a sense of identity, continuity and community pride that, though not tangible, affects all those who come to the Heights, whether to seek a permanent place in it, or just to pass through. These most fundamental human values surely have been worth preserving.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### A NOTE ON SOURCES AND ASSISTANCE

Memories dim and I was fortunate to be able to reach a number of fellow eyewitnesses to the transformational events recorded here. They agreed to read the manuscript and encouraged my efforts. I do want to thank Otis Pratt Pearsall, Dr. Beverly Moss Spatt, Joseph Broadwin, and the long-time resident and newspaper man, Henrik Krogius for taking the time to plow through my writings and catch me up where needed.

I have drawn upon a large number of sources for help in recollecting as accurately as possible the many details of what occurred during those crucial nine years--1958 to 1967. The following is a partial list: Origins of New York's Historic Districting by Otis Pearsall, unpublished typescript; Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb, Clay Lancaster, Dover Publications, NY 1979 (originally published 1961, Tuttle Company, Vermont); History Preserved: A Guide to New York City Landmarks and Historic Districts, Goldstone and Dalrymple, Simon and Schuster, NY 1974; Mary Ellen and Mark Murphy with Ralph Weld, ed. A Treasury of Brooklyn, William Sloan Associates, New York, 1949; Pamphlet, Old Brooklyn Heights: To Commemorate the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the Brooklyn Savings Bank, 1927; Pamphlet, B. Meredith Langstaff, Brooklyn Heights- Yesterday Today Tomorrow, Published under the Auspices of the Brooklyn Heights Association with the Financial Aid of Its Commercial Associates, 1927; James Felt, Chairman, NYC Planning Commission, Rezoning New York City, A Guide to the Proposed Comprehensive Amendment to the Zoning Resolution of the City of New York, December, 1959; Robert Caro, The Power Broker and the Fall of New York, 1974, Alfred A. Knopf; Yesterdays on Brooklyn Heights, James H. Callender, The Dorland Press, 1927, NY; The Brooklyn Heights Press, 1958 to 1961, and various New York City newspaper clippings from the author's file and on microfilm, Brooklyn Heights Branch, Brooklyn Public Library.

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*Prologue*

My wife-to-be and I were extremely lucky. The first time we saw the Heights was in late 1956. It had just begun to snow. We had taken the subway from the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The sky was turning dark as we came out of the Clark Street station and made our way toward Willow Street to look at what would be our first apartment. The snow seemed whiter than usual as it dusted the black wrought-iron fences lining the sidewalks and running up the stoops. It was uncannily quiet and peaceful. We could not believe this was New York City. We fell in love with Brooklyn Heights.

Years later, Nick Barnett, a friend from Los Angeles, was visiting us and during the late morning went with me on a brief walk. There were a few morning "how-are-you's?" to neighbors and friends. Then, a greeting to one of the regular "supers" who spends a good deal of time out on the sidewalk, keeping an eye on things. And there came Mr. Johnson, our mailman. Mr. Johnson and I exchanged strong ideas about the weather, good or bad or getting better. Nick was astounded, "I've lived in L.A. for 20 years and never even laid eyes on my mailman, let alone greeted him by name!" What a place to live.

How familiar it has become, and how that familiarity grows on us. It connects us with our next-door friends and all of the people who passed this very way, for two centuries or so. It links us to this country's history. Our pre-Civil War buildings, the details around the windows, the shutters, the bluestone sidewalks, the bricks and the replanted old curb stones in the backyards, the marble fireplaces and decorated plaster ceilings, all seem to radiate the past. The following is the story of how it came to be that Brooklyn Heights— a beautiful, sheltering and comforting neighborhood— would survive virtually intact into the next millennium. The turning point came a little over a half century ago.

Much has been written about the sweeping urban demographic events in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America; they helped to change the course of history in the Heights. At the time, historic preservation regulations affecting city blocks existed only in a handful of American cities, most notably Boston's Beacon Hill and the Vieux Carré in New Orleans. The very idea of legally protecting an entire neighborhood was but a gleam in the eyes of some far-sighted Brooklyn locals.

The activities of a community of newcomers who were bent on recapturing a declining, central urban area was to dominate the neighborhood for several years. Their intense dedication paid off victoriously — for the neighborhood and for the City — in April, 1965, with the enactment of the Landmarks Preservation Act by the City Council of New York and its signing by Mayor Robert F. Wagner. But getting to that juncture involved a long, frustrating, often exasperating trial of the civic commitment of those who, for the most part, only recently had chosen to make the Heights their permanent home.

These are some personal notes on how it all started, what it was like to live

through it, and on the drudgery and the disappointments along with the excitement and gratification of being on both the right side *and* the winning side of a notable urban dust-up. For help in recalling and documenting those times, I am indebted especially to two sources:

The Brooklyn Heights Press, which, during the action-packed late-1950s was owned and edited by the late Richard J. Margolis. The Press was the newspaper that provided the absolutely essential social and political connecting point in a pre-computerized, blogless neighborhood. It also set a new, and award-winning, standard for a New York City neighborhood weekly and;

Our □ good neighbor, attorney Otis Pratt Pearsall, who on the occasion of receiving the prestigious *Landmark Lion Award* in 1993 from the Historic Districts Council, prepared a detailed chronology of the designation of the Heights as New York's first Historic Landmark District.

Another vital source is found in: Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb, by Clay Lancaster (1917-2000) (New York: Dover Publications, 1979) originally published in December, 1961, by Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, VT. As with so many of the people involved in this struggle, it was personal choice that had brought Lancaster to the neighborhood and a historians' deeply felt concern for its preservation that led to the book. The book itself helped pave the way for the laws that protect the Heights today.

In the course of preparing this personal view, I was able to talk with people who are still neighbors today and also to track down a few who have moved away but carried their memories of those days with them.

For the definitive history of New York's struggles to protect its landmarks, including that of Brooklyn Heights, one has to see Anthony C. Wood Preserving New York /Winning the Right to Protect a City's Landmark, Taylor and Francis Group, 2008.

But, for a truly full accounting of what has been contributed to our lives, one can take a slow, meandering walk anywhere in the strikingly pleasing, fifty blocks that make up the neighborhood and look around.



## Battling for Brooklyn Heights

### *How a Post-War Generation Found and Fought For a City Neighborhood*

In the 1950s Brooklyn Heights was a distinctly fading beauty. It was down at the heels, dingy at the edges, and plain worn through in spots. Its residents were aging. The boom in its transient population, brought on by the war effort of the 1940s, and sustained by a post-war influx of migrants from around the country and Puerto Rico, had a powerful impact on the old neighborhood. Single-room-occupancy quarters were not uncommon in the outmoded housing stock. For absentee landlords, SROs provided an economically attractive answer to the capacious but "completely impractical" apartments the brownstones offered.

Soot from incinerators, cheap heating oil and smoky trucks and cars had created an overall grayness. It was not a good idea to leave your windows open for very long if you were finicky about gritty sootfall. The ubiquitous dirt and grime had turned the once handsome-looking pre-Civil War houses into dark-stained and seemingly worn out oldtimers. Here and there were inappropriate commercial and light industrial incursions scattered along Fulton Street and near the borders at Atlantic Avenue and down by the Brooklyn Bridge. Some of the houses were scarred by tacky, superficial attempts at modernization. In the cold glare of day Brooklyn Heights did not offer an obviously promising outlook to the casual beholder.

If you were in the market for a permanent place to call home, the sharp contrast between this core city location and the greener grass of the suburbs was compelling. The urban term "white flight" had just been invented. But, as far back as February, 1910, when the Brooklyn Heights Association was organized, concern for the future of the basic housing stock was being discussed. One of the organizing speakers at the meeting put it that "Our rich move away and our young find locations elsewhere." The New York Times wrote on April 24 of that year that "A great many elegant dwellings have been razed..." and that "...the wealthy residents of Brooklyn ..." have been forced to seek housing further out in Brooklyn and Long Island. The article carried the subhead "Old Residential Character of the Heights Giving Way to Business."

Yet, forty-odd years later, under the dust and soot and decrepitude, a lot of history and urban potential palpitated. This was still, for many, an extremely attractive and human-scale place to put down roots. Its convenience to Manhattan was compelling. The great promenade flanking its west side with world-class views of the lower bay and, in the distance, the Statue of Liberty, was breath-taking. The friendly visages of row on row of 19<sup>th</sup> century town houses seemed welcoming. Antiques stores clustered on the old Fulton Street across from a new ten-acre, heavily treed park. There were friendly, locally-owned shops, small supermarkets, specialty meat and fish stores and a couple of traditional, mom-and-pop newspaper/candy stores.

For the discerning, the ambitious and the optimistic, the potential was tangible and the soon-to-be pejoratively named yuppies — young, upwardly mobile professionals — had begun gathering. They had career and family plans and, as it turned out, shared a vision of perfectibility for Brooklyn Heights. In fact, city-wide in the mid-1950s, a new mood of urban betterment and political reform generated a good feeling about the city's future. There was a widening sense that the city was everyone's to improve and perfect.

But even the most dedicated neighborhood re-builders could not ignore the clouds on the horizon. Looming most menacingly for the Heights was the great Robert Moses behemoth: *SLUM CLEARANCE!* However, even Moses could be stopped, as had been shown in 1956 by the Mommies in Central Park, who, at the famous 'Battle of the Tavern on the Green,' had blocked a parking lot from replacing a favorite playground and had embarrassed (and infuriated) the previously unstoppable bureaucrat-tycoon.

Another menace was the traditional autocratic exercise of power at Borough Hall. There, the established political and moneyed interests had their eyes on the strategically valuable, "downtown" location. Any desirable changes in the Heights would, they reasoned, involve bulldozing the old to make way for commercial progress and more economically efficient, new construction. Robert Moses himself had declared, "You can't make omelets without breaking eggs." Yet Borough Hall, too, had its weaknesses. Political reform was in the air and such power centers were being challenged throughout the city.

In the mid-1950s the Heights was of various minds. At one end of the spectrum were those who believed that the "bad parts" of the Borough could be, almost literally, walled out. Paul Windels, president of the Brooklyn Heights Association in 1960 — and a commanding figure with an outstanding record as one of the key architects of Fiorello La Guardia's successful Fusion campaign — represented an isolationist approach to preserving the Heights; he spoke hopefully at the time of a "wall of high buildings separating the Heights from the rest of Brooklyn..."

Then there were those 'practical' politicians and developers on the outside, for the most part, who saw no value at all in living with what were, in their thinking, clearly obsolete buildings. 'Knock 'em down and build up proper, modern, safe and sanitary and, most importantly, profitable housing,' was their philosophy. In fact, Borough President John Cashmore — at the time committed to realizing his long-held dream for a new Brooklyn Civic Center — spoke plainly about the wrongheadedness of trying "to raise children in downtown Brooklyn when you could move out to Coney Island." Out there, his good buddy, Fred Trump (Donald's dad), was putting up thousands of units of state-aided, tax-abated, middle-income housing.

### **ONLY IN BROOKLYN**

In philosophical opposition to such naysayers were those residents — mostly but

not exclusively the newer ones — who envisioned the idealistic possibilities of having poor and rich and in-between, of all colors and faiths, living here happily in peace and harmony. These urban optimists could foresee the kind of poetic future for Brooklyn that inspired Walt Whitman, in the previous century, to describe it as "... the new city of Friends."

Francis Morrone, the distinguished architectural historian and Brooklyn expert, reminds us that as early as 1861, Walt Whitman had favorably observed that the kind of housing being built in the Heights was already showing the way for Brooklyn's "architectural greatness." Whitman lauded the spread of "...hundreds of thousands of superb private dwellings, for the comfort and luxury of the great body of middle class people — a kind of architecture unknown until comparatively late times, and no where known to such an extent as in Brooklyn," he wrote in *The Brooklyn Standard*.

Through the intervening hundred years, Whitman was followed by others who had publicly boosted the Heights as an exceptional place. One of the many important American writers who had lived and worked here was Carson McCullers. "Brooklyn," she wrote in *Vogue* in 1941, "in a dignified way, is a fantastic place. The street where I live has a quietness and sense of permanence that seem to belong to the nineteenth century. .... It is strange in New York to find yourself living in a real neighborhood." McCullers had captured exactly the special quality of the neighborhood whose inspiring essence had managed to survive well into the 1950s.

By then many of us had shared the thrill of McCullers' discovery that the Heights — and that was the part of Brooklyn she was writing about — was a fantastic place with lovable characteristics that were indeed very strange to New York City. But you didn't have to be a hard-core, urban romantic to love the Heights; there were also those who simply believed it to be an excellent and affordable place to raise a family, especially if the schools could be improved.

So it was that these numerous and diverse factors were to come into play a dozen or years after the end of World War II. As in any unorganized crowd, the feelings and hopes of these many neighbors were amorphous, unformed, and just waiting for the right catalyst to set off a series of actions that ultimately would make important urban history.

In fact, it took three triggers to detonate what became the revolt of the Heights against the array of threats to its very survival as a neighborhood:

- Two large-scale slum clearance projects;
- A clearly inadequate public school; and,
- The accelerating loss of pre-Civil War brownstones to thoughtless 'modernizers' and looming apartment buildings.

Then it was 1958.

### ***Dedicated Preservationists Face Down the Wrecker's Ball***

The 1950s represented a centennial of sorts for Brooklyn Heights. On Saturday, November 25, 1854, *Gleason's Pictorial*, a distinguished, pre-Civil War weekly publication out of Boston, there appeared a cover article. A wood engraving showed the foot of Montague Street from the river looking up a fairly steep ramp to the Heights with an observation platform straddling it roughly where the Promenade is now located. The headline read, simply: "Brooklyn Heights." The text complimented this singular part of New York in terms that would warm a real estate promoter's heart: "... *there is no place that commands a better view of New York than the Heights; and the stranger who pays them a visit is well recompensed...*"

[INSERT GLEASON PIC]

But it is more than topography that makes the Heights special, Gleason's goes on: "*Perhaps no city in the country is better built than Brooklyn. The houses are very generally marked by chasteness and elegance of design, and many of them are splendid specimens of architectural beauty.*"

Unfortunately, one hundred years later, it had become clear to everyone in Brooklyn Heights that this once-lauded, exceptionally fine neighborhood was, in fact, precariously balanced on a tight rope between restoration and decay.

On the restoration and preservation end, many of the newcomers had strained their resources to buy their first homes. Often the purchases were financially feasible only because of their willingness to spend seemingly endless weekends and evenings working at fixing up their hundred-year-plus, urban handyman's specials. In addition, the excess space in the roomy 19th century homes could be put out to rent. For most of the young couples making such investments in the future of the Heights, this was a perilous journey. When their optimistic vision of the future of the neighborhood — into which they'd already sunk a considerable amount of their personal resources — was seemingly jeopardized, they reacted accordingly. They were not about to take any such threats lying down.

For some, there were also children involved. To be urban-with-child at that time meant one usually had to count on a decent public school. What it would take to assure such schooling was another fundamental and daunting question of the day.

As it turned out, it wasn't until 2005 that quality, public elementary schooling became available in the Heights. The turn-around of the venerable PS 8 on Hicks Street proved to be another stirring example of determined neighbors banding together for progress. But such long-range positive action was not at all foreseeable to the newly hatched home owners of the late 1950's. Though, as we shall see, the need for decent public schooling and for additional educational choices led to positive results anyway. Most notable was the creation in 1965, from scratch — in a large, disused white elephant of a building at the corner of Clinton Street and Pierrepont Street — of the private, highly respected St. Ann's School for gifted children.

Thus, by a combination of pragmatism and visionary, local leadership, there formed a consensus that the first priority had to be the neighborhood's outstanding physical legacy. So, the same people who'd made their personal commitment to their homes became the dedicated stewards of our jointly inherited architectural history. Their battlements were the brownstones themselves which provided superb reminders of what the Heights had been in the mid-nineteenth century. These ranks upon ranks of pre-Civil War buildings — grimy and outmoded for conventional living as they seemed to be — nevertheless represented something extremely desirable; they were constant, everlasting connections to a people's past and a nation's progress.

Beverly Moss Spatt, a Heights resident since the early 1940s, who was to become a helpful member of the City Planning Commission and then Chairperson of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, spoke of the importance of "continuity with the past" and firmly believed that these living connections to history added substantially to the civility of a place.

These hundred-year-old townhouses — clearly numbering in the many hundreds, although at the time no one had done an inventory — presented a potent physical argument that we had inherited and become responsible for a vital and valuable asset. It was a past which only the reckless and ignorant would turn away from or, worse, destroy.

The young, newly ensconced couples, of course, also saw that the value of their real estate investments could be seriously imperiled by wanton development. The wrecking ball was being heard throughout the neighborhood. Willow Street was under siege. Groups of houses were being assembled for destruction. Stoops were being torn down, cornices stripped off and homely, bricked-up floors added. On State Street, low-cost, suburban style aluminum doors and canopies had made a startling appearance. To the new stewards' agony, an American architectural treasure was being debased, looted and demolished, right under our eyes.

A precedent had been set a few years earlier by a one-woman preservation effort which began in the late 1940s. The typewriter heiress Gladys Underwood James had bought a number of strategically located brownstones in an effort to thwart assemblages by would-be apartment house builders. Gossip had it that she was keen on reselling to preservation-minded newcomers. And even though her efforts were effective, they were far too limited and idiosyncratic to save the whole neighborhood.

But now gathering here was an odd mix of people, attracted variously by wrought iron railings and cherished buildings, commuting convenience, financial opportunity, urban culture and history and, for some, a sense that the future of the livable City itself was under siege. So it was decided: We would stay and fix and build, and fight for what we believed in. Now, it was time to get organized.

***URBAN IDEALISTS STOP MOSES  
WITH A BETTER IDEA***

This place was certainly extraordinary. The architectural beauty of the Heights had survived for a hundred years, lasting out the tides of immutable urban changes which, for a century, had swept unceasingly around this seemingly imperturbable enclave.

Yet, the possibility for drastic change and fatal loss had become dramatically clear in the early 1940s when the 'Master Builder,' Robert Moses, sought to run the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway right up Hicks Street, the neighborhood's central, north-south artery. This calamitous idea was fought vigorously by the Brooklyn Heights Association, which possessed both professionalism and impressive political connections. A much more agreeable route around the western, river side of the Heights, along Furman Street was settled on, though the BHA was persuaded to accept a half-mile long, public promenade instead of private gardens above the cantilevered roadways. Despite a lack of enthusiasm for opening up the view to the general public by some senior members of the Heights establishment, the promenade quickly proved a much-valued popular, public, community asset. Seen today, it is the one truly constructive thing for which the Heights and the entire City, owe a lasting and unqualified measure of thanks to Moses.

But, by his reckless proposal for cleaving the Heights in two, Moses had otherwise made clear his total lack of interest in Brooklyn Heights as a neighborhood worth worrying about. He had clearly demonstrated that making way for automobiles and trucks would command his highest priority. Now, a decade later, his slum clearance clouds were also gathering, and serious trouble was brewing for our 50-block neighborhood.

**REAL ESTATE VALUES RISING**

Meanwhile, Heights real estate values were beginning to recover. New buying pressure came about as more and more young couples calculated the practical ways in which they could stay in the city and afford to own more space in better housing in a strategically desirable neighborhood. Here, they were discovering, not only could they live their lives and pursue their careers without being slaves to suburban commuting, they could have history, living space, friendly neighbors, trees and even gardens, all just a few minutes from Manhattan. Luckily, their vision of the potential for the pre-Civil War housing was matched by the blindness of the numerous absentee landlords who had drained the houses dry during previous decades and were still selling at affordable and very attractive prices.

Many houses had been subdivided into rabbit warrens of tiny studio apartments. These were over-burdened and rundown but not beyond recapture and restoration, especially if you were willing to be both Lord-of-the-Town-House and weekend plumber/electrician/contractor/carpenter/and debris-removal-expert. And, after the restoration — although sometimes in the midst of it — there came the fitting-up and renting-out of the valuable spare space readily found in the capacious four- or five-

thousand-square-foot Greek Revival homes.

The years 1958 and 1959 were crystallizing ones for the new residents in Brooklyn Heights. Now, in addition to being a home-grown restoration-and-repair expert while, at the same time, working hard to develop a still-budding career, the breadwinner had also to worry about protecting and fixing up the neighborhood. At the time, many of the wives were stay-at-homes, preoccupied with the norm of rearing two or more young children, as well as dealing with much of the grunt work around the old house.

An additional concern were the lurking, large-scale "re-developers" who were beginning to wake up to the potential for making a real estate killing in the Heights. Replacing brownstones with apartment houses was their modus operandi. A parallel objective had already been put on the books a few years earlier by the ever-threatening Robert Moses who had slated the Heights for not just one but possibly two of his giant slum clearance projects.

#### THE BIG MOSES IDEA

The main clearance project was to be one fronting on Fulton Street, completing the civic center park which had been mapped many years earlier. At that time, the idea was born to rebuild the congested, decrepit and outmoded downtown area from Borough Hall to the Brooklyn Bridge approach. It was a massive effort and required the kind of exquisite coordination of public financing — Federal, State and City — that Robert Moses had totally mastered. The plans included removal of the blighting elevated train lines, building new court houses, providing for new office buildings, closing or widening streets, laying out new parks, and adding new housing were all to be part of a massive and intricate mix of public improvements.

For the Heights, it was the "Slum Clearance Plan under Title One of the Housing Act of 1949 as amended" which was to provide the heart of the new housing on a sliver of blocks along then Fulton Street, starting at Clark Street and running down Henry Street to its base at the Brooklyn Bridge. It was called Cadman Plaza, named — for reasons lost in the haze of Brooklyn log-rolling politics — after a popular radio minister of the 1920s and '30s, the Reverend S. Parkes Cadman. The Brooklyn pastor had distinguished himself by calling on God's blessings for American businessmen, especially insurance salesmen. God's blessings notwithstanding, Cadman Plaza did not look like a gift from heaven to most of us in Brooklyn Heights.

Opposition to it began shaping up as soon as the main outlines and objectives became clear. The opposition was based not so much on its general location in the northeast corner of the Heights, as on its stupefying, shadow-casting, single-slab, 20-story architecture stretching for 400 unbroken feet from Poplar to Clark Streets and beyond. Also stirring up a hornets nest of anger was the fact that it called for 64% of its apartments — all high rent — to be efficiencies and one-bedroom units, not the housing the Heights was looking for, at all. "A dormitory for transients..." was the term invoked to characterize the unneighborly project. That it also called for a total bulldozer

approach to the blocks involved was of concern, too, but the preservation issue was subsumed by the more immediate and readily grasped middle-income housing shortage.

#### A SECOND TARGET IN MOSES' SIGHTS

In addition to Cadman Plaza there had surfaced a strange companion "slum clearance" housing plan that targeted the part of the Heights known as Willowtown, the blocks outlined by Joralemon, Hicks, Atlantic and the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. Located in the southwest corner of Heights, its origins were suspect. Never proved, but seriously suspected by shocked residents and new homeowners on Willow Place and Hicks Street, was the idea that certain Heights nabobs had put this part of the neighborhood on Moses' hit list because it had a mixed-income population, including a large number of Basques who'd immigrated years earlier and a Puerto Rican community that had settled in that corner close to the docks. Indeed, Moses, while building the BQE, had acquired a number of strategic properties on State Street and Columbia Place which backed up to the charming Willow Place street. Some of these had already been knocked down.

The idea of harnessing the seemingly limitless source of Federal funds to buy up the remaining housing on those benighted blocks and practice slum-clearance on them must have been attractive to the ubiquitous Moses. But the project had sneaked up on those who, in early 1958, were busily buying and fixing up Willow Place houses and the brownstones and carriage houses lining the adjacent Hicks Street. One hapless couple discovered, the very day after they had bought their house on Willow Place, that they were on the Moses hit list.

Moses had by then figured out exactly what it took to shake the Federal money tree to cover the cost of acquiring land. The key to the funds was the ability to search out land which had housing on it that could be fitted into the official definition of "substandard housing," otherwise known as a "slum." If a desirable location such as one in Brooklyn Heights were offered to him for "improvement," he would hardly turn it down.

#### LURE OF LUXURY HOUSING TO CITY FATHERS

Improvement in city housing was interpreted by Moses to mean rebuilding on land in such a way as to mean what was technically termed "the highest and best use." In our case, it was called "luxury housing" and meant rental housing in packages that would pay the highest dollar for the land and the highest return per square foot to the private developer. It also paid the quickest profit.

Moses had consistently predicated his slum clearance plans on the 1949 Federal Housing Act, which was designed to clear slums and replace them with new developments, and nothing more. But in 1954, a striking and ultimately transformational new concept had been injected into the Act with an amendment that called for "urban renewal" and that added — and for the Heights this addition was to be crucial — the idea

that *renewal* projects should also include the "*rehabilitation and modernization of existing housing*." But Moses had no confidence in rehabilitation. In fact, he had already expressed his doubts about the new laws and regulations by dragging his feet and impeding the first city-proposed urban renewal project on the Upper West Side in 1955.

As far as Moses was concerned, his projects did not need to relate at all to the surrounding area nor did he trouble himself about the effects a project might have on present, owner-generated renewal efforts. He continued to be wedded to his simpler scheme, which was the application of the power of eminent domain to, in his own words, "eliminate substandard and deteriorating areas in the City and create in their stead sound, permanent reuse areas..." Period. It was with those chilling words that Moses defined the future for Brooklyn Heights, but that definition was not going to stand as an acceptable blueprint for the future of this neighborhood.

#### WILLOWTOWN FIGHTS BACK

Willowtown became the mouse that roared. This little corner of the Heights was primed for organization by the ready energy of its newcomers and its ability to stand together against those who would destroy it. A trained social worker living on the scene, Richard H. P. Mendes, was running a small settlement house at 62 Joralemon Street. He provided some of the initial direction and the neighbors quickly picked up the ball.

Soon there were meetings, resolutions, presentations, protests, and even a TV appearance (facilitated by a Heights resident who was a public affairs producer at WCBS-TV). As it turned out, the TV appearance drew some blood from the Moses apparatus. When he went looking for support from those Heights people who had quietly pointed him to Willowtown in the first place, they were nowhere to be found. Willowtown was taken off the Slum Clearance list, leaving Cadman Plaza as the sole focus of criticism.

There were a number of other ingredients in the simmering urban stew pot that were coming to the surface here. First there was the school situation. As 1958 had dawned, there was optimism about PS 8 which, only a few years earlier, had been identified as a school perilously close to non-usability. The Heights in the '40s and '50s had a preponderance of older individuals and families; not many children were to be seen in the streets. The parks, the few that were available then, were not actively patronized and there was no parent group boosting them. With a skimpy school-age population and a strong tradition of private and parochial schooling, combined with a rather decrepit public school plant built in 1907, the momentum was not in the direction of public schooling at all.

#### ADVOCATES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOL

But the newcomers wanted to take a closer look at the situation since many of them shared the belief that public schooling was a democratic inheritance that deserved support and encouragement. And, very significantly, it would help make the Heights

more affordable. While these were desirable goals few newcomers were willing to send their children to a second-rate public school and, in effect, use their own children as pawns in the cause of building it up.

By early 1958 parents had already begun considering "... *whether to send the children to a private school or to PS 8, or to leave the neighborhood,*" as one parent put it to the *Brooklyn Heights Press*. The newspaper reported that six parents had met at 8 Monroe Place — the one-time refectory to the pre-Civil War church then on the corner of Clark and Monroe and which was soon to be scrapped for "slum clearance" purposes — to express their feelings about the desirability of "a broader base of social contacts" that would be available in a public school as against a private school. The phrase was a euphemism for children of lower income families, especially African-American children who were being bused in from nearby Farragut and Fort Greene public housing projects to help fill our underutilized classrooms while, at the same time, dealing with severe overcrowding in their own neighborhood schools.

As a liberal reaction, in part, to the recent historic racial events in Little Rock, Arkansas, a determination arose to try to make PS 8 work as a progressive and integrated example of public education. Little Rock and Governor Orval Faubus had just shown the country at its racially most divisive. Brooklyn Heights seemed to want to do the right thing. But the dilemma gnawed at the neighborhood: How could we ever build up a good school if we didn't have enough "young, growing families"? Not all the brownstones, even if converted, could provide the numbers that would fill PS 8 in the foreseeable future.

The answer had to lie in somehow dramatically increasing the supply of middle income housing. This pursuit would lead, inevitably, back to Moses' Cadman Plaza plan and its shortcomings as the plan's details, relating especially to apartment sizes and costs, began to emerge.

#### RISE OF REFORM POLITICS

There was another progressive movement afoot in early 1958. It was a time when "reform politics" was beginning to take root across the city having been triggered by the unsuccessful but, to many the thrillingly forward looking presidential campaigns of Adlai Stevenson. The entrenched Democratic party organization in Brooklyn was out of touch with the demands for fresh, new political thinking. Its leaders seemed to react the same way as some of the older residents of Heights: they were wary of newcomers and what changes they might bring to the old neighborhood.

Freshly minted and newly named as the West Brooklyn Independent Democrats, the group took its cue from the young Turks in Manhattan, including a certain Ed Koch, in Greenwich Village, who had succeeded in bringing down the notoriously powerful Carmine DeSapio of Tammany Hall. One of the first such risings in Brooklyn, their meager numbers at the start didn't deter them. With a mere 67 members, by their own count, out of 20,000 registered Democrats in the Assembly District, these newly

registered Brooklyn Democrats, like their neighbors, soon began to develop influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

Among the leaders of the insurgent movement were Philip Jessup, Jr., who lived on Garden Place, Joseph Broadwin (still in the Heights) and William Delano, who lived at 86 Joralemon. In February, 1958, they held a five-hour organizational meeting at Beverly Moss Spatt's apartment on Hicks Street. (Their meetings were famous for being on the long, lawyerly and thorough side.) The decision was made to put up a slate of County Committee candidates against the regulars in the June primary, a move that was both unprecedented and audacious.

Known as WBID, for West Brooklyn Independent Democrats, the group proved to be not, as some confidently expected a flash-in-the-pan. As it turned out, some of its founders rose, eventually, to prominence in public service. Bill Delano became Counsel to the Peace Corps under President Kennedy and Beverley Moss Spatt became a member of the City Planning Commission. She then served as Chairperson of the Landmarks Commission. A later member, Carol Bellamy, became State Senator in the district and then the first female president of the City Council.

#### GETTING THROUGH TO BOROUGH HALL

The political landscape was a tricky one for the Heights neighborhood to master. It was recognized that the responsiveness of Borough Hall — then formidably occupied by John Cashmore — would be essential to swing city policies our way, and any such efforts would surely be hamstrung without a line into the Borough President's office. Indeed, no slum clearance project could even be initiated without the prior approval of the Board of Estimate, which when it came to housing practices, was controlled by the wishes of the borough presidents. The Heights would be licked before it even started to fight Moses if it couldn't do something about Cashmore.

What a time! The Heights was faced with three crucial and completely interdependent concerns: The need for action on the school, the need for middle income housing for growing families and, the need for a political organization responsive to new attitudes toward urban life. Underlying them all, was the formidably complex, hot-button issue of historic preservation. Publicly, historic zoning had not yet been addressed. But by late in the summer of 1958 Otis Pearsall was preparing the groundwork for a new form of zoning that would, by law, stop the terrible destruction going forward in the neighborhood.

Missing from the scene was a single, organizing structure that could accommodate all of these progressive interests and fuse them into a community-wide movement. That gap was to be addressed in late 1958 when a half-dozen neighbors met in the comfortable study of the Rev. Donald W. McKinney, minister of the First Unitarian Church on Pierrepont Street. In attendance was Richard J. Margolis, who as publisher and editor of the *Brooklyn Heights Press*, was to play a central role in the battle for the Heights. In the next issue of the paper he captured the optimistic and inspirational

spirit of the meeting by writing, "*Over Mr. McKinney's study door was the Greek inscription, THOUGHT SHOP--the same inscription that Socrates is said to have had over his door.*" Many thoughts were to come together that fall, in what was to be the defining moment for giving shape to the coming strategic battles over the fate of Brooklyn Heights. Much more is to be said about this successful fusion effort as the battle lines formed up.

***A NEW ORGANIZATION COMES INTO EXISTENCE AND FUSES  
WITH THE OLD TO FORCE AN UNPRECEDENTED MOSES COMPROMISE***

Urban storm clouds had been brewing over the Heights in 1958. The newer residents, with their substantial investments in the brownstones which gave the Heights its unique character, watched in dismay as precious, pre-Civil War houses fell prey to the wrecking ball. Six townhouses on Willow Street were knocked down for a dormitory building of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Condemnation proceedings were rapidly moving ahead as the widening of Fulton Street — part of the grand plan for a new Brooklyn Civic Center — had begun to close down stores, restaurants and businesses, from Montague to Pierrepont to Clinton to Clark.

The stark, looming face of the huge, new State Supreme Court building provided a bleak outlook for the standard of architecture to come in the new Civic Center. In spite of these dire challenges, the Brooklyn Heights Association was failing to exert the necessary, aggressive leadership to come to grips with these myriad, often interrelated problems.

Out of frustration with the existing organization and filled with genuine fear for the future of their threatened and, for many, their newly adopted neighborhood, a small group of concerned individuals — lawyers, bankers, journalists, architects, media persons, business executives — began a series of evening discussions in the Rev. Donald C. McKinney's office in the First Unitarian Church at 50 Monroe Place. The first occurred on a rainy night in November, 1958.

To be urgently addressed were three major needs which confronted the Heights at the time:

- historic preservation that would stop the destruction of 19th Century buildings;
- changes in the proposed Cadman Plaza Slum Clearance plan that would emphasize family living and architectural compatibility; and,
- how to make PS 8 a quality school that would serve the needs of this and nearby neighborhoods.

An intense round of informal discussions followed and by late December a public meeting was held in the undercroft at the Church as the organization went public. It adopted the name Community Conservation and Improvement Council (CCIC), pronounced "Kick." A printed statement declared "there must be an integrated, overall plan for the conservation and improvement of the Heights as an essentially residential community with related businesses." The Brooklyn Heights Press played up the meeting and, for the first time, publicized the new concept of "historic zoning."

But, for the time being, the drama belonged to the fight against Robert Moses. While reluctantly acceding to the inevitability of a "Slum Clearance" project on the Cadman Plaza site, CCIC called for cooperative, family-size apartments in place of the small-apartment, luxury rental housing Moses was dictating. It also called for

"rehabilitation" rather than the typical, Moses wholesale demolition. And it proposed that any new buildings take into account the special architectural character of the Heights.

These bold and very ambitious requirements might have been written off as the idle and hopeless wishes of some ephemeral and idealistic fringe group. But CCIC's organizers prided themselves on being strongly goal-oriented as well as political pragmatists. Coincidentally, at this time, negative reactions to the kind of slum clearance being practiced by Robert Moses were surfacing nationwide. No less an authority than *FORTUNE* magazine had recently published a new view of urban potential under the title of *THE EXPLODING METROPOLIS*, edited by William H. Whyte. Its six essays added up to a strong endorsement of precisely what the young people in Brooklyn Heights were saying.

Whyte, in his introduction, argued that so-called experts in planning and housing had wrested the destiny of cities away from the people who would live in them. The result, he wrote, was “[*that*] many cities suffer from sterile, repetitious design.” He noted that newspapers were following along as city after city called on urban patriots to fall in line with the professionally developed plans. And, he pointed out, the planners’ result was not designed to make the city a “*good place to live.*” But, from CCIC’s point of view, it was the very last chapter in the book that breathed new energy and determination into the group and which could not have been better timed. It was written by one of the seminal thinkers in the field, Jane Jacobs, and was titled, as if just for us, “*Downtown Is For People.*”

This outside endorsement gave us all a great lift and helped propel us to the essential next step, that of speaking with one voice. From the beginning it was well understood that, above all, the Heights had to present a unified front or else the Moses behemoth would find excuses for giving the Heights the same cold shoulder that it had perfected over the past few but intensive years of slum clearance programming. Accordingly, CCIC had established communications with the well-established Brooklyn Heights Association at the outset, and had told the older, prestigious organization that it would work toward goals fully compatible to both groups. The approach worked.

By January 13, 1959 — barely three months after the creation of CCIC — the Board of Governors of the Heights Association, in a remarkable concession to the new population, made CCIC, in its entirety, a "special committee" of the BHA. Now, it would be possible to confront any issue and any opponent with a unified front and under the banner of the "oldest neighborhood association in the City." Even the fearsome Moses himself would have to listen.

But slum clearance was only one of the key issues. Under the leadership of the local whirlwind, litigating attorney, co-chairman Otis Pratt Pearsall had taken on the task of incorporating historic zoning in CCIC’s goals. Behind the scenes and independently, he had spent the past year developing the legal basis and the architectural facts to underpin this daring objective. In fact, all of the efforts moved smoothly in tandem. Each had its group of champions, its heavy-lifting volunteers, a working schedule, public

relations, and a tightly coordinated timetable.

#### WORKING ON A TIGHT DEADLINE

Topping the list of priorities for the year 1959 was the need to beat Robert Moses to the punch. It was known that he was moving the plans for Cadman Plaza forward and, based on the patterns of previous slum clearance projects, would issue a full-blown brochure as soon as April. These colorful brochures had a way of transforming a mere proposal into a political fait accompli and Moses knew it. But so did we and planning was initiated for a mid-April, blockbuster community meeting. And the Heights had a deadline.

Things moved amazingly quickly. By mid-February a dozen architects had been mobilized to do a building-by-building preliminary inventory of the Heights' 50 square blocks. Malcolm Chesney of Willowtown, an economist at the Brooklyn Union Gas Company, helped design the effort, with architect Herbert Kaufman chairing the group. The resident architects had come forward to help with the survey, and focused on developing the data that eventually made it possible to create wall-size maps that would graphically quantify such things as building age and condition, absentee landlord or owner occupancy, architectural type, and other vital neighborhood signs. Taken together these would dramatically present the history and the status, for the first time, of the unique physical character of all of the buildings of the entire neighborhood.

The new information would be powerful ammunition for furthering the objectives of *"planning for the conservation of the best that we have here in the Heights, and to improve the neighborhood by making it a place for permanent family living,"* according to Kaufman. Chesney focused his expertise on potential school population, land values and acquisition costs. The Heights had to become a do-it-yourself urban planning academy in order to cope with the inexorable Moses machine.

Meanwhile, a raft of CCIC meetings with various city officials and potentially competitive developers had sent a message to slum clearance officials that the Heights was not going to roll over and submit. As if in retribution to the questioning of their authority, the slum clearance lords launched yet another threat. In February, a consulting architect to the City Slum Clearance Committee had let it slip that they were *"considering adding the east side of Monroe Place [up to the fine apartment building at number 24] to Cadman Plaza"* and that it *"seemed like a good idea."* (Full disclosure: That plan would have included the author's 1847 brownstone!)

Yet more emergency meetings were added to the schedule; petitions were written, signed and delivered. All protest mechanisms were activated. Thundered the Brooklyn Heights Press, with this *"preposterous"* idea, *"the city has made it clear that it is not competent to decide our destiny. We'll have to do it ourselves--and we'd better make haste."*

Eventually, Cadman Plaza was stopped dead at number 10 Monroe Place but not

until still more vast amounts of increasingly precious neighborhood energy had been expended.

#### MEETING ANOTHER MOSES CHALLENGE

During those early months of 1959, the main challenge Moses had thrown down to the community was whether the Heights could come up with an economically practical alternative to his own plan and to do it in time to avert the *fait accompli* syndrome. Fortunately, there had been recent, forward-thinking changes in certain city planning formulas which gave hope that any reasonable argument from the neighborhood would have to be given serious consideration.

The opening had been provided a couple of years earlier as a result of a controversial, massive slum clearance project on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Mayor Robert F. Wagner had commissioned a report designed to at least partially disarm the all-powerful Moses machinery but at the same time meet some of the growing criticism his high-handed methods incurred. As the report noted, Moses had "*grave doubts of the financial feasibility of the rehabilitation of brownstone structures*" in Manhattan's Upper West Side project. But in 1956 James Felt, chairman of the City Planning Commission, had found that, in fact, "*rehabilitation was a practical, desirable and economically feasible approach*" to rebuilding the west side area in question, which was a twenty-block, brownstone-saturated stretch from 87th to 97th Street. Thus, rehabilitation as public policy had been given legitimacy. It required new legislation that specifically added to the description of slum clearance imperatives the idea of "*rehabilitating and conserving*" neighborhoods. The rules of the game had changed. With that policy change, the Heights would have a real chance at stopping or, at least, slowing down the Moses plan based on the city's own, new formula. Nevertheless, a practical and competitive alternative was still needed to derail his well-oiled apparatus.

There followed yet another round of meetings but, this time, instead of government officials, they were with real estate developers. CCIC was looking for developers who would be interested in a cooperative housing scheme that offered a limited profit; that would pay the City the same taxes as the luxury rental plan; that would provide for a large percentage of two- and three-bedroom apartments; and that would meet higher, neighborhood-compatible standards of architectural design. Both the plan and the developers had to be above criticism, especially that of the Moses apparatus. Nothing less could survive the planned head-to-head confrontation at the big community meeting to be held in the Bossert Hotel on Montague Street in April. That meeting became the best attended, issue focused, community gathering in the Heights until that time.

The New York Times reported on the meeting on the front page of its second section on April 20, 1959. The headline announced that the Moses project was set for Brooklyn, but ominously, for Moses, the subheadings pointed out that a "*GROUP OPPOSES PLAN*" and further noted "*Cooperatives Urged on Site, With \$30 to \$40 Rates and More Family Apartments.*"

The CCIC argument was fully covered including the especially gratifying observation of the reporter, Charles Grutzner, that the Moses project “*drew criticism even before its details were announced.*” The column length article focused, as CCIC had dared to hope it would, on the family issue, noting that the Heights wanted “*cooperative apartments with larger units to accommodate families with children.*” CCIC’s spokesperson said they had informed Moses that they had a “*responsible developer,*” a term Moses loved to use in describing his hand-picked builders, and added that he was ready to carry out the alternative scheme and, furthermore, pay the same taxes as Moses’ developer.

#### A FACE TO FACE SHOWDOWN

Not wasting any time congratulating themselves on winning the first public battle, CCIC moved on to Moses’ turf directly. An unprecedented meeting was secured with the otherwise unreachable Slum Clearance Committee at its hard-to-reach aerie under the Triborough Bridge on Randall’s Island, the central headquarters of Moses many-faceted operations. A small group of representatives made the pilgrimage equipped with giant maps, the proposed developers, legal and social arguments and a raft of statistics.

At last it was actually happening, a face-to-face collision, with the Heights in the front row seats and, behind the large walnut conference table, Mr. Moses himself, flanked on either side by his supporting cast and ready rubber stamps. He heard the group out but was clearly unimpressed. When it was noted that certain other cities, including one in New Jersey, had been making slum clearance accommodations to neighborhood character and history, Moses blustered, “*New York does not take lessons from New Jersey!*” The meeting ended with the group feeling a bit like a wounded bull fighter, exhilarated and deflated at the same time but, nevertheless, determined to continue the encounter.

The sparring ran on throughout the rest of 1959. On December 24, the New York Times devoted a front page article to the battle. Their star real estate reporter, Wayne Phillips, wrote that the question of exactly what to build “*has never been more clearly drawn in New York City than in the Cadman Plaza project.*” Tracing the entire history of CCIC’s efforts he pointed out that the City now had an unprecedented dilemma on its hands with two competitive, commercially viable proposals, one sponsored by Moses and one by the community. “*Eventually,*” Phillips wrote, “*the Committee will have to decide how best to use the [urban renewal] subsidy involved in taking over a slum area at a reduced price to a developer.*” Hallelujah! This was precisely what the Heights had been yelling about for over a year.

Meanwhile, Borough President Cashmore, whose vote on the Board of Estimate would be essential to Moses, had blinked. No longer a sure thing, he was now “neutral” about Cadman. The usually recumbent Democratic organization in the district had actually endorsed the middle-income, cooperative plan as logical; the normally taciturn district leader, Frank Cunningham, put the question in simple terms: “*How can the Heights develop if they don’t give the young families a chance?*” Roger Starr, then head of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, had waded in with a strong statement in

favor of giving the Heights plan due consideration. In December the ministers of the community got into the act by signing a petition endorsing the idea of cooperative housing.

So ended 1959, with the momentum very much on the side of a highly modified Cadman project. The revised plan incorporated changes called for by the neighborhood which would go a long way towards meeting the needs and interests of the Heights community. By March 1, 1960, Robert Moses, reacting to mounting city-wide criticism from the press about this and other controversial projects, withdrew from the fields of housing, slum clearance and urban renewal.

#### A NEW LOOK EMERGES FOR 'URBAN RENEWAL'

But even with Moses out of the picture the new redevelopment authorities required a full two more years before finally supporting the goals originally set forth by CCIC and endorsed by the Heights Association and the great majority in the neighborhood.

Throughout the city, the newly created housing agencies were much more congenial to expressions of community concern and demands for participation. In 1961 the Federal government in effect acknowledged the good reasoning behind what CCIC had stood for since its beginning. The Housing and Home Finance Agency, headed by Robert C. Weaver, had adjusted its Title One policy toward the pricing of urban land acquisitions so that developers could negotiate the price of the land with the objective of being able to charge future tenants a lower rent.

Urban tracts no longer would necessarily be sold to the highest bidder at an auction — which in New York was tightly controlled by the Slum Clearance Committee — but instead could be sold at a price negotiated by the city. The new negotiations would take into account the long-term, ultimate value of the developed property to the residents who lived nearby. Weaver pointed out: "*Urban renewal is not simply a program to improve land values [a direct rejection of the long-standing philosophy of Robert Moses] it is, first of all, a program to improve living values.*"

Negotiations with city authorities by BHA/CCIC committees were now undertaken on a more or less amicable level. The earlier hostility was gone. The ultimate result, not to be announced until the end of 1961, was a redesign of the general appearance of the project into the four towers one now sees. In addition, two-story town houses were to be added, making at least part of the project more compatible with the scale of the existing neighborhood at Monroe Place and Clark Street and on Henry Street from Middagh to Cranberry.

Ultimately, the project development was divided between the original Moses appointee, Philadelphia lawyer and developer Sean Pierre Bonan, and the community-sponsored, non-profit coop developer, Mutual Housing Sponsors. However, the defining issues for the Heights — middle-income, cooperative versus high-rent housing, and

family-size versus studio apartments — were decided in the community's favor. In late November, 1961, the City designated the entire project for development as a full tax-paying cooperative with nearly a complete reversal of the original allocation of small vs. large units.

The project was divided virtually in half, with the design of the portion south of Pineapple Walk very much influenced by the community's preference. The lead architect for that portion was William Conklin of the Manhattan firm of M. Milton Glass and Whittlesey and Conklin. Their distinctive design distinguishes the two large towers, one facing Clark Street and, the other, connected by a street overpass, facing Clinton Street at the end of Tillary Street. Facing Clark Street and Monroe Place there are a number of walled-in, two-story town houses, an attempt to soften the impact of the new, tall intrusions on the neighborhood. (Conklin later served as Borough President Howard Golden's choice for supervising the magnificent rehabilitation of Brooklyn Borough Hall.)

The appearance of the Conklin-designed buildings, down to the color of the pre-cast, reticulated concrete facing, was done in close collaboration with Heights neighbors. The area north of Pineapple Walk was controlled by the original sponsors and designed separately and, with the exception of the town houses between Cranberry and Middagh Streets, adhered to the original, relatively plain pipe-rack, exterior design scheme.

CCIC's most immediate goals were thus realized—60% per cent of the new housing to be middle income and tax abated, leaving 40% full tax paying although historic preservation was still essentially a fighting matter with the outcome not entirely clear. Also, action was needed to assure a healthy future for PS 8.

Yet one more major challenge was to come in 1961, this time from inside rather than outside the neighborhood. This took the form of a totally new and supposedly better approach to Cadman Plaza, which was still not officially resolved. The new concept, called the "Goodman Plan" after its main designer, Percival Goodman of Columbia University, for a time threatened the very premise of the CCIC compromise itself. These were among the next pressing items to be put on the community's agenda.

***THE BEST HOUSING/SCHOOL MIX?  
A 'BETTER' PLAN FLARES AND DIES***

The dark shadow of Robert Moses began a slow fade out of the urban renewal scene in 1961. His own slum clearance committee's consultant had found that the competing plan of the Community Conservation and Improvement Council for partial tax-paying, middle-income, family-size co-op apartments deserved a full and fair hearing. It seemed that, finally, there was reasonable assurance that co-op housing with larger apartments would be the main characteristic of housing in Cadman Plaza. And, among other things, this would mean more "growing families" and more school children.

Community attention now turned to the public school, PS 8, which since 1907 had been a fixture on Hicks Street between Poplar and Middagh.

Schooling in the Heights had, traditionally, for the majority of residents, meant private school. But many of the new residents — brownstoners and apartment dwellers alike — were, for financial or social reasons, staunchly in favor of neighborhood public schooling. However, there was a knotty problem: Which neighborhood would this neighborhood school look like?

City-wide, in the early 1960s, there were many ideas about how best to improve public education in schools which, because of their location, effectively segregated students by income level. As it was, children from so-called "deprived" neighborhoods would be in schools that were, ipso facto, deprived. Better-off neighborhoods would, in contrast, and often with the aid of energetic, volunteer parent activities and lobbying, provide better equipped and maintained schools with better teaching.

In the Heights the issue seemed to boil down to the idea that if there could be enough of our "better-off" students in the school, it could successfully integrate a large number of students of color and different cultures, different, that is, from that of the predominantly white, middle and upper-middleclass population then beginning to grow in Brooklyn Heights. Admittedly, it would mean pioneering in urban education, but there was strong support for just such pioneering among some Heights residents.

The support, though vigorous, was nevertheless undercut in the neighborhood by the fact that there were available and desirable alternatives to PS 8, namely two long-established private schools, Packer and Friends, and a third, Saint Ann's, then in the process of being organized. Many parents, as much as their hearts wanted them to participate in a wholesomely democratic and definitely integrated public school system, couldn't accept the idea of imposing an educational experiment on their children. When the private Saint Ann's school was founded in the basement of Saint Ann's Church at Livingston and Clinton, it found many ready takers. Saint Ann's and other private schools began to drain off a substantial number of white students whose presence would have helped maintain the public school's racial balance.

## RACE-BALANCING PROPOSALS

But not everybody wanted or could afford private school, so there came a series of proposals, some from people in the Heights, and some from Board of Education authorities aimed at making PS 8 work for everyone. One formula called for "pairing" PS 8 with PS 7 in the Farragut Houses area just north of the Manhattan Bridge which was tried and then dropped after less than two years. Another plan called for re-districting PS 8 to include numbers of the increasingly middle-class, white Cobble Hill children. Still another plan would make PS 8 a kindergarten-to-eighth-grade-school, which would have solved the vexing junior high school problem, inasmuch as there was no "desirable" JHS for PS 8 graduates.

Finally, there were bold plans tied to the Cadman Plaza project that involved taking more Heights land — namely, the two blocks bounded by Middagh, Hicks, Fulton and Henry and including Poplar — in the North Heights. This could be done under Urban Renewal and would accommodate a new and larger school, new recreation grounds, and additional housing, either for the elderly as one plan had it, or public housing as another called for. These various approaches led to a kind of climactic uproar in the Fall of 1963.

### 'MIDDLE CLASS' QUOTIENT

While the efforts to modify the original Cadman Plaza slum clearance plan and achieve historic preservation had tended to bring the neighborhood together, the school issue split it wide apart. For a time, there were proponents everywhere and each seemed to have just the right, or the most fair, or the most practical solution. As different as they were, all proposals did share one principle: That for a Heights school to have a viable future it had to be racially integrated but with a majority, or at least a near-majority, of the students being "middle class." One hypothesis had it that effective schools have effective parent associations, and effective parent associations in New York City, at that time, could only be those which drew their energy and drive from an educated, middle-class, in other words, white parents who had the time and the resources to actively participate in supporting the public school.

But, how to create that perfect white/black/hispanic mix of parents? That was the vexing question. If they were to be solely from the Heights, then the "others" would have to be brought in from outside. That could be done by joining what would be a mostly-white PS 8 to a mostly-minority, sister-school as envisioned by the short-lived "school pairing" idea which paired PS 8 with the decrepit, soon-to-be-demolished, PS 7 in the Farragut Houses district and was briefly fostered by the Board of Education.

The Board of Ed itself approached pairing with great caution; selecting just three such pairs in the entire city. While there was some support for pairing there was also fierce opposition, locally and by the city-wide United Parents Association which, in addition to other objections, considered the idea an evasion of financial responsibility for building up schools where they were.

In another short-lived attempt at salvaging PS 8 and giving it the needed population and racial balance, one group focused on expanding the school district to include the mostly white population in neighboring Cobble Hill. This was opposed by newcomers to Cobble Hill where no public housing posed the Heights kind of racia; imbalance. When young Heights mothers Dorothy Jessup and Dianne Margolis put a Cobble Hill merger idea to the school authorities in Livingston Street headquarters, they were accused of being racist by an irate minority administrator and they left the meeting in near tears. Thus, were the hope-filled integration ideas shot down in flames.

#### A FEDERAL FUNDS INCENTIVE

The community divisiveness over the school issue did not end with inclusive zoning proposals. It seemed to come to a head in October and November, 1963, when the City's newly constituted Housing and Redevelopment Board, under the enlightened leadership of Milton Mollen (future Chief Judge of the Appellate Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Department), announced a plan that coupled the thorny public school question with public housing. What would lead HRB to take these incredibly controversial issues on? Basically, they saw an opportunity to expand the urban renewal site for Cadman Plaza, and in one fell swoop, acquire land for City purposes with the help of valuable Federal dollars, gratify the Heights by adding recreation space to the neighborhood and building a totally new, larger school. Plus, and this was the capstone of the concept, they could add some form of socially desirable "low cost housing" to the Cadman Plaza site, now dominated by the strictly middle-income housing mix. This would help meet the increasing demands of civil rights advocates in the Heights and elsewhere, for breaking the distressing urban pattern of huge and completely segregated public housing projects.

This combination, while intended as a progressive and creative solution to the multi-faceted needs of Brooklyn Heights, created a firestorm of neighborhood opposition along with a flurry of support.

First to explode were those in the immediately contiguous North Heights who, two years earlier, in 1961, had joined in the movement to reject all compromise with the basic Cadman Plaza plan and foster instead the so-called "Goodman Plan."

The Goodman Plan, though but a comet across the urban planning sky, had opened the door to public housing in the Heights by calling for "*decent housing on the [Cadman Plaza] site for the present residents at rentals within their means,*" and, while any new housing should be predominantly "*for middle income families*" it should also provide "*some lower [charges] to assure a reasonable economic, social and racial mixture.*" The ideologically correct Goodman alternative was well-aired in the Height s and received substantial support from outsiders, including a polemic by, of all people, the renowned theater critic, Brooks Atkinson, in The New York Times. Atkinson had been sold on the debatable idea that there were many salvageable buildings in the Cadman Plaza site and that it "*...can be restored by replacing the buildings that have no character and by renovating those that have.*"

## LOOKED GOOD ON PAPER

On paper the late-arriving Goodman plan looked attractive enough. It included such radical proposals as building a new PS 8 in the park across what was then Fulton Street. This would have been in Cadman Plaza Memorial Park on the site between Tillary and Pineapple Street. On the then existing Cadman site there was to be a mix of rehabilitated houses and stores, new apartments, a theater, a rehabilitated church, and studios. The work of Columbia University professor of architecture, Percival Goodman, F.A.I.A., together with a group of four Heights residents, the plan was announced in June, 1961. Reflecting the talent and energy which had come to typify Heights counter proposals at the time, it attracted considerable attention. By the Fall, the plan had begun to threaten the laboriously wrought Cadman compromise with the city. Many feared that it was a case of the basically good and workable, though not perfect, plan being sidetracked by a socially attractive but undoable and undesired one.

On November 16, 1961, following an emergency meeting of the board of governors of the Brooklyn Heights Association, the president, Bill Fisher, issued a statement which sharply criticized the Goodman plan for its impracticality and strongly warned the community of the dangers inherent in endorsing it at this late date. Citing their responsibility to the 1,400 members of the BHA, Fisher warned that at a meeting the same week with officials of the Housing and Redevelopment Board, including Milton Mollen, the HRB indicated they would probably refuse to develop Cadman Plaza altogether if the community "*switched its support to the Goodman Plan.*" HRB had found it "*totally unworkable,*" Fisher continued. Accordingly, he went on, "*the whole northeast corner of the Heights [would be thrown] to the real estate wolves.*"

This forceful message was contained in a four-page summary of the three-year Cadman controversy, including its apparently successful resolution, which was mailed to the entire membership and backed up by a full-page ad in the *Brooklyn Heights Press*. This finally took the wind out of the sails of the Goodman enterprise, but they had planted the idea among city officialdom that some public housing might actually be welcomed in the Heights.

It was this idea to which HRB had returned when, two years later, it proposed low income housing on the site of PS 8 to be coupled with a new PS 8 on block 207 in the proposed extension of the Cadman site. It was this inclusion that blew Chairman Mollen's proposal out of the water. It also caused a widely publicized and dramatic rift in the Heights Association over yet another PS 8 plan.

## TO GAIN A NEW SCHOOL AND A PARK

I can report on this fracas personally because at the time I was the chairman of the education committee of the Brooklyn Heights Association. (I had been among a number of CCIC organizers who were added to the board of the BHA.) The committee had been authorized to study the possibilities of expanding the Cadman site to include the blocks between Middagh and Poplar and somehow make use of the additional space to build a new school.

The expansion, which never occurred, would have allowed space for a school, a park and, here was the rub, additional housing. The education committee, which had for its architectural expert Lo Yi Chan, of the well-known and national award-winning firm of Prentice Chan and Olhausen, looked at the two blocks and concluded that a larger school could be built, and with it park space could be added to the Heights, and that there would be ample room left over for some form of low-cost housing, preferably for the elderly, to be fitted in under a tax-subsidized, federally-aided scheme.

The committee was aware that there was the possibility of the City mishandling the housing end of the idea. Nevertheless, it concluded that, with solid support from the community, any danger that some massive public housing project would be plunked down there could be avoided.

The very attractive upside to the idea was that, finally, the Heights would be getting the size and kind of school it needed to attract those who would otherwise resort to private schooling for their children. It was a gamble, and some in the BHA felt strongly that it was a dangerous and bad gamble.

## A 'DISLOYALTY' ACCUSATION

News of the 1963 flare-up broke out in The New York World Telegram and Sun under the headline, "*The Battle for PS 8*," on November 4. Nina McCain wrote of the split in the BHA, quoting the committee report as saying that, "*a site for PS 8 is the most urgent concern*" and that "*opposition to public housing*" shouldn't be allowed to block progress on the school front.

Paul Windels, Sr., a prominent and distinguished Heights resident, who had been the City's Corporation Counsel and was serving as president of the BHA, the article goes on, "*angrily denounced the committee report and accused its chairman, Martin Schneider, of 'disloyalty'.*" This raised the dispute to a new level of acrimony. The front-page article observed that nearly everyone in the Heights agreed that a new PS 8 was needed and that the present building is "*already inadequate and will be even more so ... when children from the new Cadman Plaza middle-income development come pouring in.*"

The newspaper article also noted the various, sometimes conflicting, positions taken by HRB, the State Housing Commission, the local school board, the Board of

Education, the group promoting public housing, and the Parents Association of PS 8, which had just voted 50 to 3 in favor of building a new school on block 207.

#### SCHOOL DEMAND HARDLY GREW

In the end this tumultuous upwelling of passions and ideas in the neighborhood over various school choices and opportunities died down. Federal monies evaporated and city officials, interested in avoiding the community cross-fire, decided to do nothing on those two blocks. With the help of private school expansions and gradual demographic changes, any increase in neighborhood demand for PS 8 was put off for nearly 40 years.

In fact, by 1990, the number of persons under age 18 living in the Heights actually declined. Nevertheless, the new Saint Ann's school grew and grew. It won a near national reputation for excellence and offered a complete program from pre-school through high school. Packer Collegiate Institute also expanded, modernized and likewise flourished.

Meanwhile, PS 8 began, slowly, to upgrade the quality of its offerings. A subsequent but smaller-scale flap in the 1970s led to the adding of grades 7 and 8 which was a move that was canceled a few years later because the additional grades had failed to attract enough junior-high-school-age students from the Heights.

Thanks to asbestos, the school, originally built in 1906, had to be completely refurbished in the early 1990's. By its centennial, PS 8 had become a cheerful, sprightly and even over-crowded place run by Seth Phillips, a youthful, energetic principal who exudes good spirit and prides himself on the school's disciplined, creative, cheerful atmosphere.

Today, the school sports the full name **PS 8-The Robert Fulton School and The Magnet School for Exploration, Research and Design**. In its new incarnation, it has won solid support in the Heights to the point where it required temporary extra classrooms. So, despite the hand-wringing and dolorous forecasts of 40-odd years ago, the school, like the neighborhood, has survived and prevailed.

In a real sense, the PS 8 controversy was finally resolved by the local citizenry, changing demographics and the increasing cost of private school. But, back in the 1960s that future could hardly be foreseen and the community pulled itself together and refocused its collective mind on the great looming question of historic preservation. Its time was finally at hand.

## **THE CAPSTONE IN THE BATTLE, SAVING AN ENTIRE BROWNSTONE NEIGHBORHOOD**

In the fall of 1958, Brooklyn Heights had been confronting three major problems, one more challenging than the next and, in some ways, each menacing the neighborhood's future existence. While different sectors of the community had its own emphasis, from the beginning there had been virtually unanimous agreement that we had to deal quickly with three urgent priorities: middle income housing, school improvement, and architectural preservation.

The intertwined issues that would define the physical future of our fifty blocks reflected a seeming conflict that was bedeviling the entire city: How to preserve the best of its historic and aesthetic buildings while coping with the need for family-size, middle-income housing and providing decent public schools?

But, of the three issues before us, historic preservation was going to require the newest and the boldest thinking. Otis Pratt Pearsall — Wall Street lawyer and architectural history buff — had taken on the leadership of that crucial effort.

By combining the housing and school problems with historic preservation, we were in a unique position to galvanize a wide swath of the community. This, in turn, made it possible to attract an unprecedented outpouring of volunteer effort which provided the foot soldiers who were to develop the massive amounts of new documentation and up-to-date information about buildings and population in the neighborhood.

### VOLUNTEERS MAP THE HEIGHTS

With missionary zeal Pearsall took on the task and promptly began organizing the effort. His wife Nancy became the part-time, coordinating executive. Soon, a number of architects along with non-professionals were surveying the entire neighborhood and reporting their findings to Nancy who was in charge of creating a series of wall-size graphics which, for the first time, would provide a physical and economic profile of every building.

The historic facts and current building information were consolidated on huge, colorful maps that were to come into play at meetings with various city officials over the next few years. Unique contributions to visualizing the Heights and its more than 600 pre-civil war houses, they conveyed a true sense of what was at stake in the neighborhood.

Pearsall had come to CCIC armed with information gleaned over a period of a few years about national efforts at historic zoning. From the National Trust for Historic Preservation he had obtained a package of information which, among other things, pointed him to the successful experience of Beacon Hill, Boston, in 1956. But, in the

materials he'd received, he discovered that New York State had, in 1956, passed a law — a simple one-paragraph act authored by Albert S. Bard — which empowered cities to adopt regulations to protect "*places, buildings, structures, works of art, and other objects having a special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value...*" This was the key he'd been looking for. New York City had lagged in making use of Bard. Over the years, the Municipal Art Society had designated certain buildings for preservation but not groups of buildings and certainly not entire neighborhoods.

For us, the key word in the Bard Law was "*places*," which could be taken to mean a neighborhood. It was also in our favor that a building which had no particular historic value — George Washington might never have slept there — could nevertheless qualify for protection because of its contextual "*aesthetic*" value. Thus could pre-civil war brownstones qualify.

Pearsall then orchestrated a determined and systematic campaign to contact anyone with influence in the City's power structure and possible interest in the cause of historic preservation. The group was moved by a sense of dire urgency in the Heights at the time; buildings were being torn down on Willow Street, menaced on Orange Street, and some great landmarks such as the Brooklyn Savings Bank at Pierrepont and Clinton had already been tagged for demolition. Others were being defaced with cheap, fake stone facades and suburban aluminum canopies.

Richard Margolis captured the need for action in a February, 1959, editorial advocating the use of the Bard law under the heading, "*How To Make History*" "*...If accepted [by the City]*", Margolis vividly wrote of the law's promise, "*The community would be free of all the predatory monsters that traditionally devour a neighborhood...*"

Gladys Underwood (Mrs. Darwin S. James), a board member of the Municipal Art Society and one of the grand dames of Brooklyn Heights — long-concerned about preserving the Heights, she had purchased a handful of brownstones to save them from imminent destruction — hosted a meeting for Pearsall and representatives of the MAS, including architectural historians Alan Burnham and Henry Hope Reed. Also present was 92-year-old Albert Bard himself. Pearsall has noted that he left that meeting "*with a euphoric sense that we were onto an idea that was truly meant to be.*"

#### A CRUCIAL RESOURCE FOUND

Soon afterwards, Pearsall was told by several of the architectural historians with whom he'd been in touch that one of their most distinguished and well-published colleagues, Clay Lancaster, was living virtually next door on Cranberry Street. Realizing the potential impact of a scholarly study of the buildings of the Heights, Pearsall hand-delivered a one-page letter to Lancaster's apartment on Cranberry Street on April 1, 1959. In it he asked whether Lancaster would consider doing a "survey" which would assist in the community's zoning effort to "preserve the esthetic and historic charm of Brooklyn Heights."

Miraculously, Lancaster proved to be available at that very time and, in fact, had been contemplating not merely a survey but a book to be embellished with his professional photography. He launched himself into the task nearly immediately. The book, *Old Brooklyn Heights/ New York's First Suburb*, was published by Charles Tuttle in October, 1961, a mere two years from its conception, probably something of a speed record for such a scholarly work. But well before its publication, Lancaster's detailed facts about hundreds of pre-civil war homes and other buildings in the Heights played a major role in making the case for preservation. (The book has since gone through five printings and a Dover edition, which contains an invaluable, detailed history of the struggle for historic preservation in Brooklyn Heights, along with the analyses of 619 pre-Civil War houses that give the Heights its unique 19th century quality.)

Meanwhile, back in April, 1959, with so much happening on so many fronts, the time was finally ripe to enlist the entire community in the effort. A major hall in the Bossert Hotel was rented anticipating a full house. By including historic preservation on an agenda which also featured the high drama of going toe-to-toe with Robert Moses on the Cadman Plaza housing proposal, an exceptional turnout was assured. A four-page spread was published in the Brooklyn Heights Press replete with maps, facts and essays on the many issues confronting the Heights. CCIC and the Brooklyn Heights Association were teamed up for a large-scale, carefully orchestrated presentation on April 21, 1959.. That morning, Charles Grutzner of The New York Times wrote about the forthcoming meeting under the headline "*Brooklynites Set Action on Heights.*" And so, that night, some 400 extremely interested neighbors turned out and heard Pearsall outline an action plan for stopping the wrecking ball for good in a Heights "Historic District."

As a testament to the CCIC's recognition — Republican State Senator MacNeil Mitchell, famed as the co-author of the middle-income housing law known as Mitchell-Lama housing — was the 'featured' speaker. Other speakers reported on the formal submission during the previous week of a BHA memorandum, drafted in part by Arden Rathkopf, an expert on zoning and supporter of the effort. The memo, presented at a hearing of the City Planning Commission, outlined the necessary details of what could become an historic zoning resolution.

Over the next months and several years the Heights Press featured article after article covering every twist and turn in the effort. Brooklyn Heights was going to distinguish itself by becoming the first community in New York City to whole-heartedly embrace the idea of voluntarily accepting limitations on the control of real estate in order to preserve the character of its neighborhood.

Harmon H. Goldstone, chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission from 1968 to 1973, wrote about this trail-blazing phenomenon in his book *History Preserved*, noting that the Heights was so "*anxious to protect its own neighborhood*" that it lobbied to obtain recognition as a federally identified historic district even before the city took action.

## ACTION POSTPONED

But the Heights effort was forced to follow a most frustrating, zigzag course. At first it focused on persuading Planning Commissioner James Felt — then in the midst of a long-needed and arduous updating of the city's entire zoning code —to include a provision for historic district zoning. Though interested and supportive of the cause, and impressed with the homework the Heights had done, Felt turned the proposal aside, in favor of keeping the spotlight on his politically sensitive and problematic main goals.

An alternative course, to develop a singular law, applying only to Brooklyn Heights, also failed to gain support at the city government level as being elitist, narrow and self-serving. The Heights had no choice but to wait until a more propitious time in the political climate.

Still, there were some hopeful signs grounded in the threatened destruction of Carnegie Hall and such disastrous demolition as the loss of the Brokaw mansion on Fifth Avenue. The continuing, painful loss of major landmarks helped to galvanize civic feelings about preservation. In June, 1961, Mayor Wagner had established the progenitor of the Landmarks Commission in the form of a "Committee for the Preservation of Structures of Historic and Aesthetic Importance." Geoffrey Platt, son of the distinguished early 20th century New York artist and architect Charles Adams Platt, was appointed chairman.

The new committee had been created specifically to deal with the notorious bulldozer urban renewal methods that had stained the Robert Moses slum clearance era. It was going to identify, protect and encourage the rehabilitation of good buildings in urban renewal sites. But from the perspective of the Heights it seemed clear that, as Pearsall argued, in view of "*continual instances of demolition and defacement, and united in its readiness to accept immediate historic zoning, [the Heights] should not be made to wait indefinitely for resolution of the city-wide problem.*" But Platt, too, could not be persuaded to go it alone with the Heights, fearing charges of elitism and special favors.

## A STRONG TURN FOR THE BETTER

Things moved ahead, but painfully slowly. In April, 1962, the Landmarks Preservation Commission was created and Platt was appointed chairman. At least now there was an agency in place within the city government which held the responsibility for working on the problem. And there was at long last a commitment to prepare, within a year, a detailed legislative program. Things took a strong turn for the better that fall when William R. Fisher, who had worked with both the Brooklyn Heights Association and CCIC from the outset, was appointed to the commission. Fisher, who served as president of the BHA from 1960 to 1962, and then as president of the Long Island (now Brooklyn) Historical Society, provided a new level of access to the city power brokers.

The pace quickened in 1963 and 1964 as the intricate legislation made its way through various drafts and finally was introduced to the City Council in October.

Meanwhile, condemnation of the Cadman Plaza Slum Clearance Site had begun.

### KEEPING PRESERVATION IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Pearsall, led by his appreciation of all that could be lost in the old buildings, arranged for permission from the developers for a small group to explore the emptied buildings and search them for salvageable architectural features such as fireplace mantels and pier mirrors. The New York Times, in a feature article, described the group as "*pick[ing] their way through fallen plaster and discarded furniture*" and marking items to be spared from the wreckers' hammers. Eventually 32 handsome 19<sup>th</sup> Century marble mantels and fireplaces were rescued and sold at a nominal price to brownstone owners in the Heights and Cobble Hill who were working on restoring their buildings.

The introduction of the legislation to the City Council in late 1964 was followed by a stormy public hearing. Heartfelt support from the Heights distinguished the neighborhood as a veritable hotbed of historic preservation. In the end, the one serious local objector was the Watchtower Society, which had made sizable acquisitions and was bent on putting up more dormitory-style buildings for its growing membership.

In March, 1965, The New York Times worried editorially at the delay while noting that "the law on landmark preservation is complex" and urged action because "Treasured old buildings have steadily hit the dust." Finally, on April 19, 1965, the Landmarks Law was signed into effect by Mayor Wagner. It specified immediate action on recommendations for three historic districts including the Heights. Here is how The New York Times, on April 26, 1965, described the culminating event in words that were music to the ears of those who had devoted the better part of a decade to help bring it about:

*When the City Council last week approved a landmark preservation law it acknowledged—as have other city governments in recent years—that preserving a community's architectural heritage is a legitimate function of government.*

*The primary means of compelling preservation, which is accomplished by restricting the rights of property owners, is through use of the police power and the right of eminent domain, in the same manner as the city's zoning law.*

*Thus, New York at last has joined a preservation movement that has spread throughout the country under the impetus of public opinion aroused by landmarks vanishing in the explosive growth of cities.*

As Pearsall records in his unpublished notes, "*the goal line was in sight,*" and the Heights was ready, in fact, far readier than either of the other two proposed districts — Greenwich Village and the Cast Iron District in SoHo — for the process of designation. This suited the newly empowered Preservation Commission just fine since it was eager to show how effectively it could work. After a hearing at City Hall, attended by nearly 300 "Brooklyn Heights property owners, and members of local civic groups," the commission issued its three-page designation decision, and on November 23, 1965, just a few days before Thanksgiving, New York City had its first Historic District.

## FINISHED, BUT NOT QUITE.

But soon after what appeared to be the final victory, Pearsall was again called into action when a potential loophole was discovered. It seemed that under the newly promulgated regulations, the Watchtower Society — which stood virtually alone in its opposition to the preservation law and which had been accumulating property in the neighborhood — was interested in building an out-of-scale, 12-story building on the Columbia Heights block-front from Clark Street to Pineapple Street. Pearsall had found out, to his dismay, that under the law as written, the Watchtower Society or any developer — if vacant land should become available — arguably had the right build to whatever height was allowable under the then generally applicable zoning laws, overriding any historic preservation regulations. For the Heights this meant the real possibility that developers could exceed the very limits the Historic District regulation was intended to put in place.

This multi-story loophole needed to be closed and closed quickly. Fortunately, by that time another neighbor, Beverly Moss Spatt, had been appointed to the City Planning Commission. Dr. Spatt was a fierce believer in protecting the historic continuity of the City. With her strong support the necessary technical research was marshaled. A strategic amendment to the zoning resolution was prepared, debated in public hearings, and narrowly approved — over the most vigorous real estate industry opposition — by the Board of Estimate.

Yet again, with another battle won, now came time to win the war by having the amendment applied to this neighborhood by the Planning Commission. This happened in June, 1967.

The salutary effect of the height-limitation amendment can be witnessed today by visiting the corner of Pineapple Street and Columbia Heights where the Watchtower Society erected a "community facility" designed by Ulrich Franzen, an award-winning architect, who managed to build a clearly 20th century structure which, most would agree, is, nevertheless, in keeping with the general character of the neighborhood, including its limited height.

Otis Pearsall's crucial role in the city's preservation movement was given public recognition in 1993, when the Historic Districts Council named him a Landmark Lion.

In the spring of 1995, as the ever more potent Brooklyn Heights Association held a community meeting to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Landmarks Preservation Commission, Pearsall remarked that, *"since the Heights had been made an Historic District, not a house or a single stoop or a cornice has been lost."* In fact, he has observed, we have gained some stoops and cornices, here and there.

And, as one tours the Heights today, as many from around the country and the world do, following the [AIA Guide to New York City](#) or the [Guide Michelin](#), one sees

example after example of original and handsomely restored facades, stoops, windows, shutters, and even iron work, representative of the best of 19th century design and craftsmanship. All to be viewed while often walking on the same bluestone sidewalks which were laid down when horse and buggies traveled the streets.

But much more has been preserved than physical details. As Harmon Goldstone has noted, in a time characterized more by high mobility than permanence, more by fickle tastes than lasting values, the Historic District offers a sense of identity, continuity and community pride that, though not tangible, affects all those who come to the Heights, whether to seek a permanent place in it, or just to pass through. These most fundamental human values surely have been worth preserving.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### A NOTE ON SOURCES AND ASSISTANCE

Memories dim and I was fortunate to be able to reach a number of fellow eyewitnesses to the transformational events recorded here. They agreed to read the manuscript, provide corrective facts, and encouraged my efforts. I do want to thank Otis Pratt Pearsall, Dr. Beverly Moss Spatt, Joseph Broadwin, and the long-time resident and newspaper man, Henrik Krogius for taking the time to plow through my writings and catch me up where needed. Naturally, any remaining errors are strictly mine.

I have drawn upon a large number of printed sources for help in recollecting as accurately as possible the many details of what occurred during those crucial nine years--1958 to 1967. The following is a partial list: Origins of New York's Historic Districting by Otis Pearsall, unpublished typescript; Old Brooklyn Heights: New York's First Suburb, Clay Lancaster, Dover Publications, NY 1979 (originally published 1961, Tuttle Company, Vermont); History Preserved: A Guide to New York City Landmarks and Historic Districts, Goldstone and Dalrymple, Simon and Schuster, NY 1974; Mary Ellen and Mark Murphy with Ralph Weld, ed. A Treasury of Brooklyn, William Sloan Associates, New York, 1949; Pamphlet, Old Brooklyn Heights: To Commemorate the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of the Brooklyn Savings Bank, 1927; Pamphlet, B. Meredith Langstaff, Brooklyn Heights- Yesterday Today Tomorrow, published under the Auspices of the Brooklyn Heights Association with the Financial Aid of Its Commercial Associates, 1927; James Felt, Chairman, NYC Planning Commission, Rezoning New York City, A Guide to the Proposed Comprehensive Amendment to the Zoning Resolution of the City of New York, December, 1959; Robert Caro, The Power Broker and the Fall of New York, 1974, Alfred A. Knopf;. Yesterdays on Brooklyn Heights, James H. Callender, The Dorland Press, 1927, NY; The Brooklyn Heights Press, 1958 to 1961, and various New York City newspaper clippings from the author's files, microfilm, Brooklyn Heights Branch, Brooklyn Public Library and from The New York Times, digital archives..

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