

History of Bushwick

Early Days

The areas now called Williamsburg, Greenpoint, and Bushwick (Community Boards 1 and 4) were originally one Dutch settlement, the Town of Bushwick. The land was purchased from the Canarsee Indians in 1638 and officially chartered by Governor Peter Stuyvesant in 1660. He also gave it the name of Boswyck (refuge or town in the woods).

The early settlers were Dutch, French, Scandinavians, and English farmers from the Plymouth Colony. They and their descendants for the next two centuries produced tobacco and food for themselves and the New York market, using their own and slave labor until 1827. (Kings County was the largest slave holding county in the north).

Dutch was the daily language until the 19th century. From 1758 to 1800, Dutch and English were taught in the schools and then English was taught exclusively. (Bilingualism is not a new issue in New York life).

Present day Bushwick, just one small part of the Town of Bushwick, was for a long time a jointly owned woodland used for grazing animals and gathering firewood. The road to the woods ran parallel to today's Bushwick Avenue.

The area closest to the East River, today's Williamsburg, developed early, while Bushwick remained rural until the 1850's. The entire area was then mapped by a descendant of the original Lefferts and Suydam families and sold for homes. The former Town of Bushwick merged with the City of Brooklyn in 1855 and from then on the population doubled and tripled every 20 years. Shipping and ship construction, oil, ironworks, pottery, clothing, printing, and every type of industry flourished along the waterfront.

About this period, over a million Germans and Austrians came to the United States, many settling in northern Brooklyn and creating an important "Little Germany". They opened breweries, beer halls and restaurants (to encourage beer consumption), organized singing societies, and built many Lutheran and Catholic churches. St. Barbara's, a magnificent Baroque building on Central Avenue, is the most outstanding example of the brewers l'gasse. In 1880 there were 11 breweries in Bushwick and Williamsburg, and in 1904 there were 44.

Rapid Development

Numerous transportation advances starting in the 1880's created a continuous building boom. Elevated lines went up along Myrtle Avenue and Broadway. Then the electrified streetcars connected Bushwick to downtown Brooklyn and to Manhattan via the Brooklyn Bridge. When the Williamsburg Bridge began to carry trolleys in 1905 and subways in 1908, the direct connections with Manhattan were complete. Two to six family houses were built throughout the area. Bushwick Avenue, the street of mansions for brewers and doctors, was developed between 1880 and 1915: the Irving Avenue area between 1900 and 1913. Bushwick High School at 400 Irving Avenue was opened in 1913 and counts among its former students, Joseph Hirshorn and Irving Thalberg. The few large apartment houses were a product of the 1920's. From then on no new housing was built in Bushwick in any quantity until the 1980's.

Bushwick homes were designed in the Italianate, Neo Greco, Romanesque Revival, and Queen Anne styles by well known architects. The New York City Landmarks Commission considered two sections worthy of Historic District Status in the 1970's and described the corner of Bushwick Avenue and Linden Street as "one of the finest groups of Romanesque Revival architecture in the City." It is worth mentioning these facts, because people often assume that today's slums were always that way, and thus they fail to understand that neighborhoods decline because of complicated outside forces.

The build-up of the neighborhood brought in many new residents in addition to the Germans and Austrians - English, Irish, Russians, Poles, Jews, and Italians. Bushwick was for a time the second largest Italian American community in Brooklyn.

Between the wars was Bushwick's period of greatest affluence. Streets were spotlessly clean, homes beautifully maintained. It was a popular entertainment district, and the Bushwick theatre on Broadway between Palmetto and Woodbine was famous as the second most important vaudeville theatre after the Palace in Manhattan. The Claridge Hotel provided excellent accommodations to guests seeking a comfortable weekend in a country-like setting.

The Black Out

By the time of the Backout on July 13, 1977, Bushwick was in far worse condition that it had been in 1969. On that fateful night and the following days, hundreds of Bushwick stores were looted, many were destroyed permanently and fires burned everywhere. Flatbush, Pitkin, Utica and other shopping streets were looted, but none suffered as much as Bushwick's Broadway or took as long to recover. One third of the stores closed after the Blackout and a year later 43% were vacant. An arson fire in an abandoned factory at Knickerbocker and Bleecker destroyed 4 blocks and 45 homes, the second worst fire in the history of New York.

Many people, including city officials, were quoted afterwards as doubting whether Bushwick could be rebuilt, or if it were even worth the effort to try. Some believe that that attitude resulted in wholesale demolition of far too many buildings.

Bushwick's other shopping strip, Knickerbocker Avenue, lost fewer stores, because many of the owners lived in the area and spent Blackout night protecting their stores with the help of neighbors. Broadway merchants lived outside Bushwick, and few could get back in time to head off the looters, who appeared almost immediately after the lights went out, ready with their shopping carts to "get theirs".

Broadway, from Flushing Avenue to Eastern Parkway, had been losing stores and its market population for years. By 1977 it was no longer a continuous strip, but three distinct strips separated by abandoned stores and factories. Stores regularly went out of business between 1975 and 1977, but the Blackout was the final blow.

The results of the Blackout can be quickly summarized in the population figures:

- 138,000 residents in 1970
- 122,000 in 1975
- 93,000 in 1980

Parochial schools were closing before the Blackout and even a church like St. Barbara's was in danger of closing in 1979. Fortunately, it did not.