

History 101

Searching for Williamsburg's Past

by Kirsten Hively

There are many places you can learn about Williamsburg's rich history. A good place to start is the Brooklyn Historical Society's booklet: *Williamsburg Neighborhood History Guide*, written by Marcia Reiss. You can request a free copy by calling the Brooklyn Historical Society at (718) 222-4111. Unfortunately the Historical Society's library and museum are closed during the renovation of the historic Brooklyn Heights building (scheduled to reopen in the spring), but their fascinating searchable digital archive of photographs, drawings, and illustrations of Brooklyn's people and places is available during the renovation (at a separate location). Call (718) 222-4111 extension 24 for information or to make an appointment. You can learn more about the programs and collections of the Brooklyn Historical Society at their website (brooklynhistory.org).

Although *Williamsburg Neighborhood History Guide* (part of a series focusing on Brooklyn's waterfront neighborhoods) starts out sounding more like a guide for tourists than a handbook for locals, referring to the Northside as one of Williamsburg's "ethnic villages" and warning visitors not to be fooled by the "small-town feeling" there. But keep reading and you'll learn fascinating facts, like the name of those wide-brimmed fur hats Hasidic men wear (they're called *shtreimels*), who lived in Williamsburg first (the Lenape people), what business the Havemeyers were in (sugar refining), who McCarren Park is named for (Senator Patrick McCarren, who proposed building the Williamsburg Bridge), how Keap street got its name (it was intended to be named after Declaration of Independence signer McKean, but was accidentally transcribed as Keap) and who Berry Street was named after (Dr. Abraham Berry, the first mayor of Williamsburg). In addition, some small but fascinating photos and drawings illustrate the text, including an 1875 drawing of Broadway from Bedford to Driggs, a 1907 photo of the Williamsburg ferry hub at the foot of Broadway, and a stereoscopic view of the construction of the BQE. The end of the booklet also features a lengthy walking tour that attempts to take in a little bit of each of the many facets of the neighborhood (although I would add a stop at Bruno's or Fortunato Brother's for an Italian coda). Unfortunately, several of the stops on the tour have either closed up shop or moved, so it could use some updating. It's too bad the whole series isn't available as an updated website.

If you want to brush up on more recent history, local artist Ward Shelley's *Williamsburg Time Line Drawing* will show you what you need to know. The drawing is made up of many intertwining timelines of individuals and institutions, and includes neighborhood events like the Salon of the Mating Spiders (with over 600 artists), Pierogi 2000's explosive entrance into the neighborhood, and yes—even the birth of wburg.com. Prints of the Williamsburg Time Line Drawing can be found at both Roebling Hall and Pierogi.

Whether you like to cook or just read about food, *The Brooklyn Cookbook* (Knopf, 1991) will show you Williamsburg's culinary history (along with the rest of the County of Kings). You'll find chapters on Brooklyn Italian, Jewish, Orthodox Jewish, Puerto

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

Rican, Mexican, and Polish food, including a special Calzone recipe from the Giglio feast and a meatloaf recipe from Manhattan Ave. And don't miss the great pic of ex-Borough President Howard Golden in the front.

If you want to put the history of Williamsburg in context with Brooklyn's history, pick up *Brooklyn! An Illustrated History*, by Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier for the Brooklyn Historical Society (Temple University Press, 1996). An even broader historical context can be found in Margaret Mittelbach & Michael Crewdson's *Wild New York*. While not specifically about Williamsburg, it will give you a good introduction to the area's natural history, including several walks where you can see it up close. Learn about how the Wisconsin Ice Sheet shaped Brooklyn in the last great Ice Age and why all of North America is overrun with European house sparrows (it all began in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery).

To learn more about Williamsburg's built environment, check out the hefty but indispensable American Institute of Architect's Guide to New York (why isn't this broken down into volumes by borough?). 44 buildings in Williamsburg (and 28 more in Greenpoint) are described and located (historically and geographically) in detail. While there aren't many pictures, you can easily copy the relevant pages and go see the buildings for yourself.

The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York, the famous tome by Robert A Caro, tells about the politics behind the planning of Moses' many urban projects, including the BQE which tore Williamsburg apart in the 1950s.

Online, you can get general historical background at Brooklyn Online (brooklynonline.com/cgi-bin/wmsbghistory), listen to a WNYC show all about the history of the McCarren Pool (wnyc.org/shows/tnbt/episodes/08252002), or read about the history of the Williamsburg Bridge (nycroads.com/crossings/williamsburg/).

To see a piece of Williamsburg's art history in person, go to the Brooklyn Museum of Art to see showed Ilya Bolotowsky's 1936 WPA Williamsburg Mural, formerly located in the Williamsburg Houses (at 179 Maujer between Leonard Street and Bushwick Avenue). 22 years ago the Washburn Gallery in midtown showed Bolotowsky's reconstruction of his mural, which helped inspire renewed interest in his work. Since then, the original mural was brought out of the housing project, the coats of white paint which covered (and luckily preserved) it were removed from the surface, and the mural is now on loan to the Brooklyn Museum from the New York City Housing Authority (it's on the first floor near the elevators behind the gift shop). Learn more about Bolotowsky at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts website (utah.edu/umfa/hansenbios.html).

Don't forget that long-time residents are the best source of Williamsburg history. Talk to you neighbors and local shopkeepers to find out about the stories that didn't make it into print.

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