Barren Island: New York’s Smelliest Island
The town of Flatlands with Barren Island. Ralph Irving Lloyd, 1875-1969, [Map of the town of Flatlands], 1873; lantern slides, V1981.15.166; Brooklyn Historical Society.
Barren Island: New York’s Smelliest Island

By the 2020 Young Scholars of PS 312

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Horse Rendering Factory on Barren Island.  
[Bergen beach glue factory], 1925, gelatin silver print, V1973.5.2908; Brooklyn Historical Society.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Note from Our Editor</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 Barren Island</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 Killer Stench</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 Pig Turk Wars</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 The Smells of Barren Island Create a Courageous Teacher</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 People of the Night</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 Clean Water</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7 The End of Barren</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Authors</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credits</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear Reader,

Brooklyn Historical Society’s Young Scholars afterschool program reinforces three valuable lessons: the importance of research, facts and fact-checking, the relevance of historical information to today’s world, and the unstoppable passion of youth as they discover their voice and power.

In late fall and early winter 2019, the over 80 Young Scholars who entered the sixth year of the Young Scholars program had no idea that their research on sewers and sanitation would become so relevant to their understanding of the spread of the Covid19 Virus. They studied archival documents from the earliest recorded history of Brooklyn in 1624 that revealed the impact of germs and viruses and the spread of cholera, yellow fever, and smallpox, to records of the 1918 Spanish Flu. As they dug deeper into information about local sanitation and environmental issues in the neighborhoods surrounding their schools, and visited the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant, they continued to deepen their knowledge about the importance of clean water and different strategies for minimizing the spread of germs.

This book represents the extraordinary work of the Young Scholars of PS 312. The book represents the combined efforts of these fourth- and fifth-grade students, their program educator, Janise Mitchell, and their cooperating teacher Debra Quigley. This cohort was close to finishing their book when NYC, the schools and BHS closed in response to the Covid19 pandemic. Using their second draft and notes, Janise, the students, their parents, and I completed their book about Barren Island and Dead Horse Bay.

Congratulations to the Young Scholars of PS 312. I enjoyed listening to their conversations as they discovered how Dead Horse Bay got its name, and the truth about what Barren Island used to be. Through their journals I saw their critical thinking skills grow and watched them expand their knowledge about sewers, dead animals, garbage, and water. This cohort “saw” how people could persevere under the smelliest of circumstances to help others thrive. As they explored their voices as writers, it was also clear that they were finding power in their role as citizens who have something to contribute.

I thank you, the parents, and guardians, for allowing them to participate in the program this year. To their educator, Janise Mitchell, thank you for all your hard work. I appreciate all of you. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Shirley Brown Alleyne
Manager of Teaching & Learning
Brooklyn Historical Society
In “The People of Barren Island,” the Young Scholars of PS 312 focused on a small island that no longer exists. Their school, located in Bergen Beach, Brooklyn, borders on Jamaica Bay, a body of water that contains numerous smaller islands. One island, Barren Island, which no longer exists, is where Floyd Bennett Field is now located.

While researching the history of Barren Island, the Young Scholars of PS 312 were shocked that the island once had a thriving community. During the first weeks, we looked over early maps from the area. The students were naturally curious about an area called Dead Horse Bay. Using primary and secondary sources from Brooklyn Historical Society and Brooklyn Public Library we investigated the many thriving horse rendering factories that gave the area its name.

The Young Scholars of PS 312 poured through documents to learn more about the lives of workers who worked in these early “nuisance industries.” Many of the articles that we read from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle archives were quite vivid in describing the putrid smells of the area, and the dangerous work conditions. They wondered how anyone could live or raise a family in such a miserable place.

Our visit to the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Facility was a highlight. The Young Scholars peppered the site educator with an array of questions. “Where do we get our clean water?” “Where does the sludge go after it is processed?” They were equally impressed by the quick tour of the control room at the treatment facility. The realization that there are jobs created solely for waste treatment gave students a different perspective about Barren Island. They asked for more articles on the people who lived and worked on the island. This led to a discovery of the rich lives of the people.

The story of the courageous teacher, Jane Shaw, became everyone’s favorite. While the rest of Brooklyn had fresh water, indoor plumbing and paved streets, the people of Barren Island were ignored cut off from the rest of Brooklyn. Despite these hardships, they created a self-sustaining community.

The Young Scholars appreciated the work that the residents did in helping with waste and trash disposal. More importantly, the Young Scholars of PS 312 made connections to the importance of protecting our natural resources, and reinforced their appreciation for people who work in industries that are vital in maintaining public health.

To my wonderful Young Scholars of PS 312, thank you for your perseverance. You welcomed me into your classroom, making every session special. Each week you came prepared to work, peppering me with endless questions. Your infectious enthusiasm is something I will always remember about each of you.

Janise Mitchell
PS 312 Young Scholars Program Educator
Brooklyn Historical Society
Did you know that there used to be an island in Jamaica Bay, Brooklyn called Barren Island? Hundreds of years ago, Barren Island was a place where the Lenni-Lenape would fish and harvest oysters. The island was called Equindito which means “Broken Lands.”

The part of Jamaica Bay that surrounded Barren Island was called Dead Horse Bay. When it existed, people said that Barren Island/Dead Horse Bay was smelly, filthy, and putrid. Hogs roamed freely through the marshes. If you are thinking there are dead horses in the bay, then you are correct. People searching for relics may still find pieces of horse skeletons that wash up on the shore. Dead Horse Bay is now part of Floyd Bennett Field, a National Park.

Since it was an island, traveling to Barren Island was difficult. The only way to get there was by boat, so it remained isolated for a very long time.

Because it was located far from the rest of Brooklyn and Manhattan, Barren Island went from being a fishing area to a dumping ground. As New York City grew, so did the amount of trash and garbage. By the late 1800s, the cities of New York and Brooklyn had a mess on their hands, and that mess was garbage from dead horses and other animals.
Before there were cars, people used horses for transportation. Horses died daily as well as other animals such as dogs, cats, and pigs. Barren Island became a solution for a big problem; “How do you dispose of the carcasses of dead animals?”

Barren Island became a center of “nuisance factories.” The most important job was using dead animals to make something people can use. The carcasses of dead animals were melted and turned into glue, fertilizers, and

DID YOU KNOW

Barren Island was rumored to hide pirate’s treasure.
even buttons. There were a lot of horses that pulled the carriages and early trolleys in New York City. When a horse died, they sent most of the bodies to the “nuisance factories” on Barren Island, and the skeletons were tossed into the bay. That’s why the body of water next to Barren Island became known as Dead Horse Bay.

Every day, the carcasses of dead animals and piles of garbage were shipped by barges to Barren Island. It may sound disgusting, but Barren Island played a role in keeping the rest of the city clean. Instead of dead animals and garbage being tossed in the ocean, they were turned into useful products in the factories on Barren Island.

You could say that Barren Island was one big area for recycling. The horses and other animals were chopped up. The carcasses were skinned and chopped into smaller pieces. All these materials were boiled in a large, iron vat equipped with a tightly fitted cover that did not entirely eliminate the escape of noxious gasses. Boiling separated the meat from the bones and the fat was used as grease. Larger bones were charred and used as a filter for refining sugar. Smaller bones were cut up for button manufacturing.

DID YOU KNOW

More nuisance factories were located in Barren Island than any other place in the city. Other nuisance factories were located near Newtown Creek on the Brooklyn and Queens border, but those workers lived in separate communities away from the factories.

When animal bones are heated at incredibly hot temperatures they are reduced to carbon. The carbon is used as part of the filtration process to whiten sugar.
Working in a nuisance factory was hard, dangerous work. It had many hazards.

**DANGERS OF A NUISANCE FACTORY WORKER**

Workers loaded the dead animals into large containers filled with boiling acid. The fumes and smells from the carcasses were enough to make you faint. Men could be burned or crushed to death. The oil in the machinery made the floors slippery. One worker was almost killed when he slipped, and got his head stuck in the garbage and the machinery. Another worker rushed over right before the man was crushed to death. The workers of Barren Island were mostly poor immigrants from Europe and African American men from the South. The pay was low, but this was the only work available for poor people.

*Caught in a Garbage Press.*

The people of Barren Island kept lots of pigs. There were thousands of pigs on Barren Island that went about their business. The pigs broke fences ate residents’ vegetable gardens and garbage and caused all types of nuisances. The smell from the pigs and the nuisance factories made vacation goers in Brighton Beach and Coney Island complain.

The smell from the pigs also created a dangerous stench. Some people blamed the fecal matter from the pigs as the source of many diseases including diphtheria. Some of the children on the island were also becoming sick from diphtheria.

One day the Department of Health came to Barren Island with police officers. They decided the pigs were a public menace and that they had to kill all of the pigs. The people on the island began to hide the pigs everywhere. Some people even hid the pigs in their bedrooms. The children were kept in school as the police started shooting the pigs. Families did not want the students to get upset. Some pigs managed to escape and hide in the marsh, but by the end of the day, hundreds of pigs were killed.

DID YOU KNOW

Some of the residents hid pigs in their kitchens and bedrooms to keep them safe.

Diphtheria is a highly contagious disease that infects the nose and throat.
Besides the smell, Barren Island had another problem. The children who lived on the island needed to find a teacher. Most teachers refused to work on Barren Island. They complained about the smell, distance, and housing. Well, in the 1920s and 1930s, there was a teacher who loved Barren Island and her name was Jane F. Shaw. People called her the “Angel of Barren Island” and “Lady Jane.”

Lady Jane was kind, helpful and nonjudgmental. Jane Shaw started out as a teacher, then became the principal of PS 120. Jane Shaw taught almost every subject for almost every grade.

Teaching at PS 120 wasn’t easy. There was no indoor plumbing or fresh drinking water. The fumes from the nuisance factories were terrible. Rainwater was used to provide drinking water at the school. Later a well was built that provided water for students and the rest of the Barren Island residents.

**DID YOU KNOW**

*When it existed, PS 120 had the highest attendance rate in Brooklyn. PS 120 was demolished during the construction of the Marine Parkway Bridge.*
Jane Shaw was interviewed by a Brooklyn Daily Eagle reporter in 1930. The island, according to Miss Shaw, “is the most moral spot in New York City. People never lock their doors, nor is there ever the slightest jeopardy to life or limb. Barren Island is to these laborers exactly what Long Island is to wealthy people,” she said. “They live here because nowhere else in the city can they raise their children under such economical and healthy conditions...When the city refused to build a road in from the causeway, they chipped in to the extent of $800 and built a board road, which everyone uses. They get their water from artesian wells, which we’ve built ourselves. The ground is exceedingly fertile— thanks to the old garbage plant that used to be on the island. Everyone raises his own vegetables. The school children have their own large and well-kept garden, from which they take home enough vegetables for lunch two or three times a week. Most of the residents have their own chickens, ducks, and cows. Sunday is still the day for chicken dinners. It is a most self-contained community.”

Ms. Shaw supplied school materials with her own money. She even bought a piano so that students could learn music. When Ms. Shaw broke her hip, she could not go to school, so the school came to her. All of the students from her class came to her house to be taught. They moved her desk to her home and the students used the living room as a classroom. The students appreciated Ms. Shaw’s hard work. They would bring her candy and chocolate. Many students became very successful in life.
Chapter 5  People of the Night

Barren Island was surrounded by water, but it was saltwater. Most of Brooklyn was getting fresh water from reservoirs, but because Barren Island was not connected to the rest of Brooklyn, freshwater was not available. The drinking water came from wells dug by the people who lived on the island. Without water, the people of Barren Island did not have indoor plumbing.

Before homes had indoor plumbing, instead of toilets, people used “outhouses.” If they did not want to go outside, the community used decorated bowls called chamber pots. The “pots” were left underneath the bed until they were dumped into an outhouse. Pots had to be emptied constantly to control the smell inside. The waste in the decorated pots even had a fancy name, “night soil.”

In other parts of Brooklyn there were special companies that collected night soil that they would dump into the river or ocean. Since Barren Island was completely isolated, the people had to collect and get rid of their own night soil. Collecting night soil was a hazardous job. You could get exposed to disease and the smell was terrible. Even children at some point had to collect it.
What happens when you flush the toilet, take a shower, or wash your clothes? The water goes down into the sewer. New York has underground pipes that travel to different parts of the city removing solid and liquid waste. All of this waste goes into a water treatment plant. The water treatment plants are large factories where the wastewater goes to get processed. The dirty water gets purified. The workers at the plants use chemicals to disinfect the liquid waste before it is emptied into the river. The stuff that is left over is called sludge. The sludge is kept in large containers called digester eggs. Finally, good bacteria eat the sludge. The leftovers are used as fertilizer.

Have you ever wondered where your water comes from? Before New York became a big city, people collected freshwater in buckets from wells and ponds. The people of Barren Island did not have water from reservoirs or indoor plumbing. Drinking water was collected from rain barrels. Wells on the island also provided fresh water.

As the city grew, wooden pipes were used to transport water. There is a problem with using wood pipes for water. Eventually, the pipes will rot and break apart. Another problem was that the water in the wells and ponds were becoming too dirty.
Today many people think that New York has some of the best tasting water in the country. Our drinking water comes from the Delaware and Catskill watershed.

The Croton watershed, in upstate New York, also supplies the city with clean drinking water. The water is pure because it is filtered by rocks, dirt, and tree roots as it travels almost 100 miles to New York. Afterward, the water is stored in reservoirs. The water from the reservoirs is transported by pipes buried deep in the ground. Gravity moves the water through the pipes giving us clean water every day.
The end of Barren Island began with the invention of the automobile. When cars began to replace horses as the main method of transportation, horse rendering factories were no longer needed. As industry left, many of the residents left the island. By 1930, only a few hundred people still lived on the island. The area around the island was filled in to connect it to the mainland of Brooklyn.

**DID YOU KNOW**

The extension became part of the privately owned Barren Island Airport. Barren Island Airport was later expanded to become New York City’s first municipal airport.
EDUCATOR’S NOTE:
WHY BARREN ISLAND MATTERED?

The Young Scholars of 312 visited Floyd Bennett Field on many occasions. There is a popular sports complex where you can go ice skating, play soccer, hike, and tour the Ryan Center where artifacts about pioneers of aviation are stored. While researching the history of Barren Island, they were shocked that a thriving community once existed in the area.

The people of Barren Island supported themselves with limited support from the city. They worked in industries that provided essential services for the rest of Brooklyn. While the rest of Brooklyn had fresh water, indoor plumbing and paved streets, the people of Barren Island were ignored. Despite these hardships, they created a community, cut off from the rest of Brooklyn. The Young Scholars appreciated the work that they did in helping with waste and trash disposal. All were fascinated by the dedication of the teacher, Ms. Jane Shaw, the “Angel of Barren Island.” More importantly, the Young Scholars of PS 312 made connections of the importance of protecting our natural resources, and an appreciation of people who work in industries that are vital in maintaining public health.

DID YOU KNOW

Robert Moses was a builder. He planned and constructed many public parks, highways, tunnels, and bridges. A large part of Jamaica Bay was managed by Robert Moses. Parts of Barren Island were filled in to create a recreational area where people could enjoy the natural resources of the area. The Marine Parkway Bridge connected the former Barren Island with the Rockaway Peninsula. Today, the area where Barren Island once existed is part of Gateway National Area.

A photo of an early water pipe in New York. Photograph courtesy of Anna Rathkopf.
Charred  Burned and blackened.

digester eggs  Containment areas where bacteria are digesting sewage.

diphtheria  A very serious bacterial infection of the nose and throat.

hazardous  Dangerous.


marsh  An area of low-lying land which is flooded in wet seasons or at high tide, and typically always remains waterlogged.

nonjudgmental  Not criticizing, neutral, not taking sides.

noxious  Harmful, poisonous, or very unpleasant.

outhouse  An outdoor building containing a toilet.

pure  Clean, free of any contamination.

reservoirs  A large natural or artificial lake used as a source of water supply.

watershed  Area of land where all water drains into the same region, such as a lake, river, or reservoir.
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