Neighborhood in northwestern Brooklyn, bounded to the north by Baltic Street, to the east by Fourth Avenue, to the south by 14th Street, and to the west by Smith Street. The area was settled by the Dutch about 1640. The population increased sharply with the construction in the 1840s of the Gowanus Canal, which provided jobs for most residents. In the late nineteenth century it was a busy if sometimes rowdy neighborhood: in a section 12 blocks long on Smith Street were 23 taverns and many rooming houses catering to transients, mostly sailors and laborers. In the twentieth century the neighborhood calmed. Smith Street, the principal commercial thoroughfare, was lined with family shops and large furniture outlets, notably J. Michaels (founded in 1886). A small Italian enclave lay to the east of the canal around Carroll Street, centered at Our Lady of Peace Roman Catholic Church and known until 1993 for Monte's Venetian Room, and Italian Restaurant. Landmarks in the neighborhood include the tallest subway viaduct in New York City (on the F line at Smith and Ninth streets with a clearance about the canal of 87.5 feet [26.7 meters]) and the Carroll Street Rail Bridge (1889), one of the few retractile bridges remaining in the United States. As of the early twenty-first century Gowanus remained a hub of industry and manufacturing, while its namesake canal struggled in recent years with environmental problems and the consequences of the decline of the shipping industry.
1. Describe the house in the image. Be specific.

2. **DOCUMENT 1** depicts a Dutch farmhouse that was located around Gowanus Creek in the early 18th century. Looking at the house and the surrounding detail, what do you imagine the rest of the area might look like?

3. Think about houses you might see in Brooklyn today. Compare **DOCUMENT 1** to those houses. What is different about them? What is the same?
1. Even though there is not a key attached to DOCUMENT 2, this document still provides information as to the **topography** and **terrain** of early Gowanus. Answer the following questions to better understand the map:

   - What color is the water?
   - What color is the muddy shoreline?
   - What color is the marshy land?
   - What color are the copses of trees?
   - What color are the open fields and farms?
   - What color are the houses?
   - Draw a line down Gowanus Creek.

2. Look at the References on the left side of the DOCUMENT 2. Locate #7. Whose house is it?

3. Locate house #7 on the map. Describe the area around the house using information from question 1.

4. Many of the early residents of the area were farmers who owned many acres of land. Using information from both DOCUMENT 1 and DOCUMENT 2, describe what you think life might have been like for Gowanus’ early residents.
The examination of Michael Johnson a colored man taken in the town of North Hempstead, before Joseph Dodger, Superintendent of the Poor of Queens County, the 23 day of Dec. 1831.

Who says he was brought up in Fosters Meadow – and sold a slave to John S. Bergen at Gowanus. He came from and came to Spring Field 9 years ago when his mother then lived. He has ever since moved about the County working wherever he could get employ. Never had a family nor had a House and has no home in any particular place. Appears not to understand the obligations of an Oath and none has been administered.

Michael Johnson
4 January 1832
Pauper

Filed the 21 day of February 1832

Upon due consideration of the facts and circumstances stated in the proceeding examination, the said Michael Johnson is judged and determined to be a pauper, on the 4 January 1832.

Signed:
Sam Miller
Joseph Dodger
Superintendents, County Poor
1. Describe DOCUMENT 3. What is most interesting about it?

2. Michael Johnson was born into slavery. What Gowanus planter purchased Michael Johnson when he was still enslaved?

3. Slavery was officially abolished in New York State in 1827. Do you think what happened to Michael Johnson might have happened to other formerly enslaved people? Why do you think that?

4. It is very challenging to read the document. How might that complicate the use of primary sources when doing research?

5. What are questions you have about slavery on the early Gowanus farms?
1. Using DOCUMENT 4 and the information you now know about the early Gowanus Creek, describe how the Gowanus Creek changed over the nineteenth century.

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

2. What type of cargo are the ships waiting for?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

3. Describe the cargo ships.

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________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

4. Do you think today’s Gowanus Creek is wider than it was in the 1880s? Why?

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________

1. How does the waterway in DOCUMENT 5a differ from that of DOCUMENT 4?

2. What types of factories line the Gowanus Canal?

3. What types of pollution do you think the factories dumped into the canal?

4. What do you imagine it might have been like living so close to the canal and all of the surrounding factories?
Gowanus Canal as a source of electric power for factories and traction lines is a possibility suggested by an official complaint to Governor Hughes by the Merchants Association committee that has been investigating the pollution of waters in New York harbor.

**Electro-chemical** forces have been discovered in the canal, according to the report to the Governor. These forces arise from the foul conditions of the canal, filled with filthy water, poisonous gases and powerful acids. At present these forces are exerting themselves to do harm, rather than good. The Merchants Association wants them abolished by the cleansing of the canal... The waters are so poisoned that yachts anchored quite a distance from the entrance to the canal have their paint blistered off in some mysterious fashion. Representatives of marine insurance companies said to-day that the waters of the canal had a strong deteriorating influence on metal sheathed hulls.

**The Menace of the Common Fly**

“The pollution of the rivers (though the medium of flies) is a grave menace to the foodstuff,” continues the complaint. “Most of the fish markets are near or over the sewer-laden waters of the rivers. Meat, fruit and vegetables are all exposed to the same peril. Flies travel from filth to food and are carried to the kitchen and diningroom though various delivery methods.

“On ferryboats, on recreation piers, on bulkheads and docks mothers can be seen during the summer with flies crawling over the mouth, nostrils and eyes of infants on their laps, trailing the deposits of nearby sewers.

“The **public bath house** records show that in 1905 five million bathers availed themselves of the privileges of a sewer bath, tens of thousands of boys and young men were to be seen swimming from boats, piers and shores, swallowing the filth, absorbing the infection and conveying it home to other members of their families.
1. What happened to the yachts and the boats with metal sheathed hulls?

2. What reasons does the article give for flies being a major concern?

3. What had the young men and boys been doing that made the Merchants Association so concerned?

4. It was a common practice to use river water in bathhouses and public showers. What might the original reasons have been for using river water? Why was the Merchant’s Association concerned about using the waters of the Gowanus as bath water?
The flushing system, which will clean the Gowanus Canal of its accumulated filth and change a pestilential region into a fine residence district, is bound to stand as one of the great triumphs of twentieth century engineering skill. This great system of tunnels and electrical machinery, powerful enough to change the water of the entire canal several times a day, has been installed at a cost of $1,000,000.

But there is every prospect that money has been well spent. Already the air about the canal has been changed, the water has assumed a clearer color, and there is a noticeable current helping the loaded barges to their docks. This has come about, although the flushing system has only been running a few hours a day in a preliminary tryout of the machinery. To-day, Wednesday, June 21, the motors will be turned on to the full and a continuous stream of clean sea water will hereafter flow from Gowanus Bay though the canal and out through the flushing tunnel into the Buttermilk Channel.
1. What did the city build to help clean the Gowanus Canal? How did it work?

2. Where did the water in the Gowanus Canal go?

3. How much did the project cost?

4. Is the author of the article excited about the new system? Support your answer with evidence.
1. Who are the people in DOCUMENT 8? What are they doing?

2. Most of the people in the photograph look like adults? Using the information from the introductory reading and this photo, why do you think so many Italian adults in Gowanus didn’t know English?

3. The photo was taken at Gregg Chapel, a Protestant Church at the corner of 4th Avenue and Degraw Street. Describe the room that the photo was taken in. What else might it have been used for?

4. What are two questions do you have about Gregg Chapel or the Italian community of Gowanus?
1. What is happening in the image?

2. What season was the photo taken in? How do you know?

3. Project houses were built in areas where the buildings were often old unsafe. What can you infer about the state of the Gowanus neighborhood in the 1940s from looking at the photo?
The $177 million renovation of the 1.2-mile-long tunnel allows it to push 252 million gallons — or about 30% more fresh water than it could before the upgrade — from Buttermilk Channel to the head of the highly toxic waterway each day, officials said. The tunnel was partially re-activated in December, but prior to that had been completely shut down for repairs since 2010.

Call it a royal flush.

The city has fully re-activated the Gowanus Canal’s on-again, off-again flushing tunnel after a four-year, $177 million rehabilitation, officials announced Thursday.

The renovation of the 1.2-mile-long tunnel allows it to push 252 million gallons — or about 30% more fresh water than it could before the upgrade — from Buttermilk Channel to the head of the highly toxic waterway each day, officials said.

The tunnel, equipped with three turbine pumps, works to flush polluted water out of the stagnant canal, into the tidal currents of the New York Harbor, and oxygenate the waterway with cleaner water.

It was partially re-activated in December, but prior to that had been completely shut down for repairs since 2010.

“The $177 million upgrade of the flushing tunnel is a significant milestone in the city’s efforts to improve the health and cleanliness of the Gowanus Canal,” said Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Emily Lloyd.

Built in 1911, the tunnel was designed to pump polluted water from the head of the canal into Buttermilk Channel, but since the late 1990s it has sent water in the opposite direction.

The city will also reactivate a pumping station in June to improve water quality.
1. After reading the article, how well did the system described in DOCUMENT 7 work? Why do you think that?

2. How much did the original system cost to build? How much did the upgrade cost?

3. What effect did the upgrade have on the system?

4. Do more research on the current state of the Gowanus Canal. How is the system working today?
GLOSSARY

**Canal:** an artificial waterway for boats or draining land

**Copses:** a small group of trees

**Electro-chemical:** relating to the science of chemical reactions

**Employ:** to give work to someone

**Enclave:** a portion of territory within or surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct

**Marsh:** an area of low-lying land that is flooded in wet seasons or at high tide, and typically remains waterlogged at all times

**Oath:** a serious promise, often with a witness

**Oxygenate:** to add oxygen

**Pauper:** a very poor person; often one supported by charity

**Pestilential:** causing or likely to cause a sickness

**Public bath house:** a facility for people without showers and bathtubs to bathe

**Retractile:** able to be retracted

**Stagnant:** unmoving

**Terrain:** the surface features of an area of land

**Topography:** the shape, height, and depth of land

**Transient:** something that only lasts a short time or is not permanent

**Viaduct:** a long bridgelike structure, typically a series of arches, carrying a road or railroad across a valley or other low ground.