NEWTOWN CREEK
PROJECT PACKET

Name: __________________________________________

Adaptation

Newtown Creek is a tributary of the East River. It extends inland for a distance of 3.5 miles, including a number of canals into Brooklyn, and it is the boundary between Brooklyn and Queens. The creek was the route by which European colonists first reached Maspeth in 1642. During the American Revolution the British spent the winter near the creek.

Commercial vessels and small boats sailed the creek in the early nineteenth century. About 1860 the first oil and coal oil refineries opened along the banks and began dumping sludge and acids into the water; sewers were built to accommodate the growing neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Greenpoint and discharged their wastes directly into the creek, which by 1900 was known for pollution and foul odors. The water corroded the paint on the undersides of ships, and noxious deposits were left on the banks by the tides.

High-level bridges were built from 1903 (some remain). State and city commissions sought unsuccessfully to improve the creek as it became of the busiest commercial waterways in the country, second only to the Mississippi River. The creek was dredged constantly and widened by the federal government to accommodate marine traffic; the creek’s natural depth was between 4 and 12 feet.

After World War II the creek’s importance as a shipping route decreased, but it continued to be the site of many industrial plants. During the 1940s and 1950s, leaks at oil refineries including ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco precipitated one of the largest underground oil spills in history. The spill was not discovered until 1978, and no action was taken until 1990 when ExxonMobil entered into consent decrees with the state to clean it up. The cleanup moved at a slow pace through the early twenty-first century, when the oil spill covered more than 50 acres underground.

In 2004 residential property owners filed a lawsuit against the oil companies, and in 2008 efforts were under way to have the creek designated a federal Superfund site to speed the cleanup process. The Newtown Creek Alliance, Riverkeeper, and other organizations attempted to restore and protect the creek and students reintroduced oysters, which act as natural filters, to its waters.
Its shores presented a beautiful sight. In the background were the hills covered with trees. In the swamps below, the stream and its tributaries had their rise. Broadening on its way, the stream flowed quietly between the wooded elevations and further along through lowlands until it mingled its waters with the East River.

—Eugene Armbruster, Brooklyn’s Eastern District
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is DOCUMENT 1a and what year does it come from?

2. Find Newtown Creek on DOCUMENT 1a. Describe where it’s located, including bordering boroughs, neighborhoods and waterways:

3. DOCUMENT 1b is a quote describing what Newtown Creek was like before industry came to the area. Summarize it in your own words:

4. Draw a picture of what you think the area around Newtown Creek looked like at the time period the quote describes:
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **DOCUMENT 2** depicts one of the earliest scenes of industrialization on Newtown Creek. Describe what you see in this drawing:

2. What kind of businesses do you think worked in this complex?

3. Why do you think Newtown Creek was an attractive setting for industrial businesses? What natural resources were available that made this area ideal?
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. DOCUMENT 3 is a picture of Newtown Creek from many years after the drawing depicted in DOCUMENT 2. Use the T-Chart below to list the similarities and differences you see between DOCUMENT 2 and DOCUMENT 3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIMILARITIES</th>
<th>DIFFERENCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What do you think was responsible for the change in Newtown Creek between when DOCUMENT 2 was drawn in the early to mid-19th century and when DOCUMENT 3 was taken in the early 20th century?

3. Do you think the change was good or bad for Newtown Creek? Explain why:
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Find Newtown Creek on DOCUMENT 4. How has the area around Newtown Creek changed since you last saw it in DOCUMENT 1a?

2. The black dots and specks around Newtown Creek represent various industrial complexes and businesses. List 3 reasons why companies might have chosen to build their businesses on Newtown Creek’s water:

3. The red lines on DOCUMENT 4 represent highways and large roads. Would the building of these make Newtown Creek’s waterway more or less essential to businesses? Explain why:

**DOCUMENT 5a**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard Industrial Classification</th>
<th>Number Employees</th>
<th>Percent Total</th>
<th>Number Firms</th>
<th>Percent Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16,009</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>11,370</td>
<td>71.0</td>
<td>331</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale Trade*</td>
<td>1,570</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>1,125</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service **</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Trade***</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| FIRE
| 170                              | 1.9             | 11           | 1.9          |
| Public Admin.                     | 42               | .3           | 2            | .3           |
| No SIC Reported                   | 183              | 1.2          | 8            | 1.4          |

*Includes Communications, Electric and Gas Services.
**Includes only retail trade located in industrial buildings.
***Finance, Insurance and Real Estate

*Skill level data was not obtained from all reporting firms.

Source: Department of City Planning Survey (1982)

**DOCUMENT 5b**

Greenpoint-Williamsburg industries supported thousands of jobs held by residents of Brooklyn and other New York City neighborhoods. Notably, thirty percent of the workforce resided within the general community and seventy percent lived in Brooklyn. Of every ten area workers, nine lived in New York City.
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Study **DOCUMENT 5a** and list the number of employees and firms that were surveyed for this graph:

2. Which “Industrial Classification” do the majority of the employees surveyed fall under (i.e. what trade do they work under)?

3. Look at **DOCUMENT 5b**. Write the “Skill Level” that possesses the least number of employees:

4. What do **DOCUMENTS 5a and 5b** tell us about the kinds of people that worked at Newtown Creek's industrial complexes during this time?
Immense bubbles of varied hues flow from the sewer’s mouth and after drifting a distance, burst like miniature bombs, emitting puffs of vile gasses. These combined vapors are wafted to every quarter with the changes in the wind, carrying sickness and death in turn to all parts. Nuisances are like buzzards: when one comes, others are sure to follow and if they are allowed to increase as they have, the consequences to Newtown and Brooklyn must become serious.

—Letter to the editor, Newtown Register, March 27, 1884
Committee of Greenpointers inspecting sewer emptying into English Kills, an arm of Newtown Creek, at Morgan and Johnson Aves. Inset is Martin Neuman, assistant U.S. District Attorney in charge of pollution complaints to whom the taxpayers have directed their protests against the Newtown condition.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What problem is the quote from DOCUMENT 6a describing?

2. According to the same quote, what are some of the negative effects of this problem?

3. Analyze DOCUMENT 6b and its caption. Describe what is happening in this photo:

4. How do you think Newtown Creek became so polluted?
NEWTON MEN TO FIGHT.

MAY TRY TO RESTRAIN GOV.

ERNOR MORTON.

It Is Said a Supreme Court Injunction to Prevent Interference With the Offensive Factories Will Be Applied For.

Members of the Fifteenth Ward Citizens’ organization for the abolishing of Newton creek nuisances were informed last night that the proprietors of stench emitting establishments on Newton creek who are included in the protest sent to Sheriff Huntington and District Attorney Ridgeway by Governor Morton yesterday, had instructed lawyers to apply to the supreme court for an injunction to restrain the governor from interfering with their businesses on the grounds that they are not nuisances and do not come under chapter 661 of the laws of 1895.

The members of the citizens’ organization have almost reached success several times, but it has been ready with counsel only to find some obstacle between them and to oppose a motion for an injunction should any supreme court entertain it, and while they are in doubt as to whether the supreme court could or could not grant an injunction to restrain the governor from acting in such a case, the citizens are confident that no supreme court justice would grant such an injunction. If a motion for such an injunction should be entertained, the citizens will oppose it, and they have formed the citizens’ committee of the Fifteenth ward and that of the Seventeenth ward.

The Fifteenth Ward Citizens’ organization was organized March 11, 1891, to devise ways and means to stop or regulate the causes of the nuisances and stench emanating from the neighborhood of Newton creek, which for years have been obnoxious to the inhabitants, and to prevent the injury of our lives and property, to the general welfare of the people, to the health of the same.

Without the stench, the value of the buildings and residences is diminished, and the persons who may occupy them suffer, to the injury of our lives and property.

It is said that the citizens are instrumental in the abolition of the nuisances and stench.

The stench is caused by the stench producers, and the citizens are instrumental in the abolition of the nuisances and stench.

The citizens are instrumental in the abolition of the nuisances and stench.

Robert Creighton, Secretary.

To the mayor of the city of Brooklyn:

I beg to say that it will be impossible for me to attend your meeting, as I have a prior engagement which takes me out of town. I see no practical necessity in the presence of any nuisance in Brooklyn, and if any nuisance in Brooklyn is promptly removed, it is a matter of great importance. The people of the city are anxious to have the nuisance removed.

J. F. C.

The city authorities began to prosecute the factories owners on the Kings county side of the creek the following spring. Several factories were closed and others promised to close as soon as buildings were erected in other places. Then factory owners defied the city authorities and some who had closed reopened. They claimed that their businesses were not nuisances.

The city authorities began to prosecute the factories owners on the Kings county side of the creek the following spring. Several factories were closed and others promised to close as soon as buildings were erected in other places. Then factory owners defied the city authorities and some who had closed reopened. They claimed that their businesses were not nuisances.
NEWTOWN MEN TO FIGHT

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Members of the Fifteenth Ward Citizens organization for the abolishing of Newtown Creek nuisances were informed last night that the owners of stench emitting businesses on Newtown Creek who are included in the message sent to the Sheriff and District Attorney by the Governor, had instructed lawyers to apply to the supreme court for an injunction to restrain the Governor from interfering with their businesses.

The Fifteenth Ward Citizens’ organization was organized March 11, 1891, “to devise ways and means to abolish or regulate the causes of the nuisances and deathly stenches from the neighborhood of Newtown Creek, which for years we have been obliged to inhale and suffer, to the injury of our lives and property, petitions and personal applications to the authorities having been of no avail.” At the first meeting the organization adopted the following stances:

There exists an unbearable stench from nuisances located at Newtown Creek and such nuisances are dangerous to the business and health of this entire community. Numerous requests have been made for their removal, but they have been ignored. We call on the mayor for immediate action as we will no longer tolerate the nuisances we have been subjected to.

A creek committee, which became known as the smelling committee, chartered a tug boat and made night trips up and down the creek and made public the facts they obtained from these trips. The Mayor became interested, but said that as the factories on the shores of the creek were there many years it would take some time to remove them. In October a resolution was adopted by the citizens’ organization requesting the board of aldermen to prohibit carting offal, bones and odorous fat through the streets of Brooklyn. Through the efforts of the citizens’ committee great pressure was put on the Governor to pass the resolution. Delegations visited him, doctors appealed to him and a petition signed by 11,000 citizens was laid before him. He signed the bill in May, 1892. In August the Mayor was taken by the smelling committee on a steamboat trip up the creek and was made sick by the foul odors arising from the creek and could not complete the trip.

The city authorities began to prosecute the factory owners on the Kings County side of the creek the following spring. Several factories were closed and others promised to close as soon as new buildings were built in other places. Then factory owners defied the city authorities and some who had closed reopened. They claimed that their businesses were not breaking of the law even though they would continue their work when the authorities were not around to watch them.

The Governor issued a proclamation ordering the owners of certain businesses to stop operating, but they appeared to pay no attention to the order. The Governor notified the citizens’ organization that he would issue the precept that came to Brooklyn yesterday.
### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. According to **DOCUMENT 7**, what are “nuisances?” Who is responsible for them?

2. Why was the citizens’ organization, or smelling committee, formed?

3. What happened to the Mayor when he was taken on boat trip to Newtown Creek? What did city authorities begin doing after his trip?

4. Imagine you’re one of the businesses causing the nuisances. Describe your point of view and why changing your practices would negatively impact your business:
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What year were DOCUMENTS 8a and 8b taken?

2. Would you say Newtown Creek is better or worse than it used to be? Explain why you believe Newtown Creek is better or worse citing evidence from the photographs:

3. Who do you think is to blame for the state Newtown Creek in these photographs?

4. Who do you think should be held responsible for cleaning Newtown Creek up?

For Immediate Release, June 30, 2004
Contact:
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Eli Richlin, Councilmember Eric Gioia: 917.573.3157

Environmental Group Proceeds to Court Against ExxonMobil for Massive Brooklyn Oil Spill

Preliminary Negotiations With the Oil Company Unsuccessful
Councilmembers File Intent to Sue Pledge to Join Case Later in Year

Manhattan, NY Today at City Hall, Riverkeeper and community co-plaintiffs announced that they have filed their legal complaint in federal court against ExxonMobil for one of the world’s largest underground oil spills, right in the heart of Brooklyn. ExxonMobil is responsible for a 17 million gallon plume of oil that stretches under 55 acres of Brooklyn, contaminating the groundwater and constantly seeping into Newtown Creek, affecting both the Brooklyn and Queens shorelines. Marking their formal involvement, Councilmembers David Yassky (D-Brooklyn) and Eric Gioia (D-Queens) announced their filing of “notices of intent to sue” ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco, pledging to join the suit later this year.

“This lawsuit aims to remedy one of the worst environmental crimes in the country,” said Riverkeeper Executive Director Alex Matthiessen. “Exxon has profited for five decades by neglecting this massive spill, at great cost to our waterways and the people of this city. A comprehensive cleanup of this neglected waterway is long overdue and the time of reckoning has come.”

In January, Riverkeeper had filed its intent to sue, proceeding into negotiations with ExxonMobil. Negotiations proved unsuccessful as the oil company refused to admit responsibility.

Newtown Creek is one of the dirtiest waterbodies in North America, and ExxonMobil is its most notorious polluter. Courtesy of ExxonMobil, oil slicks consistently seep from the shoreline and often extend hundreds of yards with the tide. Due to a series of major spills in the 1940s and 1950s and nearly half a century of wanton neglect, a massive 17 million gallon plume of oil migrated into the creek and under the Greenpoint community. A weak consent order with the State of New York in 1950 demanded no penalties, set no benchmarks for cleanup, and allowed ExxonMobil to conduct the most rudimentary remediation. As a result of the main consent order, only 3 million gallons have been removed since operations started, and progress is slowing considerably.

Said Councilman Yassky, “ExxonMobil must take responsibility for this terrible ecological disaster. Every day they do nothing, Brooklyn waterways become more polluted. This spill is a crime against the environment, and it must be remedied.”

Said Councilman Gioia, “For too long, irresponsible polluters and insufficient state enforcement have allowed an oil spill that dwarfs the Exxon Valdez to seep unchecked into our waterways.” said Councilmember Gioia. “From this lawsuit, the oil companies should take one message loud and clear: New York will no longer tolerate pollution that degrades our environment and threatens our health.”

Also in attendance were the East River Apprenticeshop and the Urban Divers, two organizations that use Newtown Creek, and several concerned citizens.

###
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the press release in DOCUMENT 9 about? Summarize the press release:

2. According to the press release, who is responsible for Brooklyn’s oil spill?

3. How much oil was spilled? How much had been cleaned up at the time this press release was published?

What was the purpose of DOCUMENT 9? What outcome are the people writing the press release hoping for by suing ExxonMobil?

By EMILY S. RUEB

Some people questioned the wisdom of establishing a boat club at a Superfund site.

But such is the lure of water, even when sludge seems like a more fitting descriptor, that the North Brooklyn Boat Club emerged out of one of New York’s most-polluted estuaries, Newtown Creek.

Its docks sit just downstream from a sewage treatment plant and a recycling center. Its clubhouse is flanked by salvage yards and warehouses, not far from an area so contaminated by decades of oil spills that the soil resembles black mica. And, flashing a winking self-awareness, its logo features a rowboat in a stream gushing out of a sewer spout while a tin can and a dead rat drift alongside.

“There’s only so many times you can see a beautiful sunset or a nice little beach,” said Fang Lim, 52, a charter member who takes experienced and novice rowers out each week in a 20-foot skiff he helped build. “It’s more fun to poke around in a commercial waterway.”

Now in its second year, the boat club has more than 150 members paying the annual $40 membership fee. A testament that the best stretch of shoreline is your own. The resilient community of paddlers has embraced not just the opportunity for recreation but also a continuing crusade to clean up Newtown Creek, a commercial waterway that snakes between parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

“Once you realize you’re not going to die or get covered in toxic sludge,” Leif Pearsfield, 30, of Williamsburg, said after a row from Brooklyn to the Bronx, “it’s pretty relaxing.”

It was not long ago when New Yorkers kept a safe distance from the water once so fouled by sewage and industrial waste that it was infamous for harboring cholera, typhoid, and hepatitis. But in recent years, thanks to concerted rehabilitation efforts by environ-
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. According to DOCUMENT 10, where is the North Brooklyn Boat Clubhouse located?

2. Why is the North Brooklyn Boat Club interested in using Newtown Creek?

3. List 2 reasons why “New Yorkers kept a safe distance from the water” in the past:

4. According to Mr. Lipscomb, why is Newtown Creek harder to clean up than other polluted New York City waterways?
GLOSSARY:

Abolish: to do away with or end completely

Adaptation: a text that is rewritten usually with the intention of making it easier to understand

Adopt: to formally accept

Consent Decree: settlement of a lawsuit case in which a person or company agrees to take specific actions without admitting fault or guilt for the situation that led to the lawsuit.

Corrode: to eat away at

Defy: to refuse boldly to obey

Dredge: to deepen by digging

Injunction: a court order forbidding the doing of some act

Noxious: harmful to health

Nuisance: something annoying or troublesome, in this case offensive odors

Offal: inside organs of or parts trimmed from an animal killed and prepared for food

Plaintiff: complaining party in a lawsuit or the side bringing forth the lawsuit

Precipitate: to bring about

Proclamation: something proclaimed or announced

Precept: a command meant to be actioned

Refinery: a building or equipment used to make metals, oil or sugar pure for usage

Remedy: cure

Resolution: formal statement of the decision of a group

Sludge: solid matter produced by water and sewage treatment processes

Superfund: federal government program to clean up the nation’s uncontrolled hazardous waste sites

Tributary: a stream flowing into a larger stream or lake

Wanton: unrestrained