

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Francis Guy, *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*, circa 1819–20





Francis Guy (American,
1760–1820)
Winter Scene in Brooklyn,
circa 1819–20

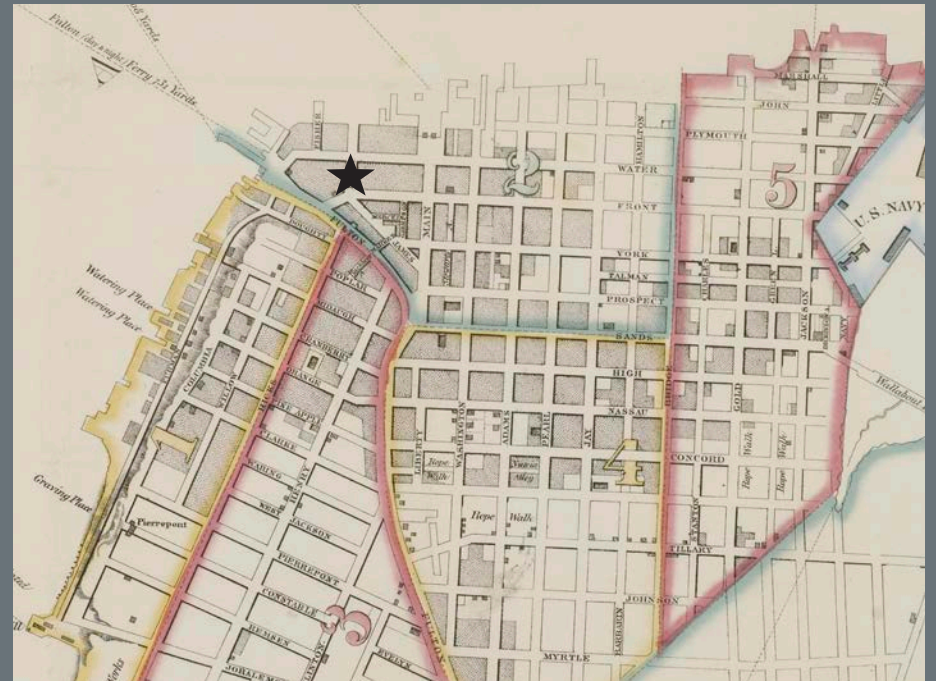
Oil on canvas, 58 ³/₈ x 74 ⁹/₁₆ in. (148.2 x 189.4 cm)
Transferred from the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and
Science to the Brooklyn Museum, 97.13

About this Teaching Resource

This packet is intended as a tool to help you look at art with your students. You can prepare for your inquiry-based discussion by reviewing the descriptions and background information provided. Then use the section “Questions for Viewing” to look closely, think critically, and respond to the art together. Extend your investigations with one of the suggested activity ideas. If you use these materials, please share your teaching stories with us at school_programs@brooklynmuseum.org.

About the Artist

Trained as a tailor and silk dyer, Francis Guy emigrated from England to America in 1795. He spent most of the next twenty years in Baltimore and in 1800, added painting to his repertoire of skills. Between settling in Brooklyn in 1817 or 1818 and his death in 1820, Guy painted at least five views of his neighborhood from the second-story window of his home at 11 Front Street. An artist with an entrepreneurial spirit, Guy probably sought to capitalize on both local pride (this area of Brooklyn had been incorporated as a village in 1816) and rising interest in American landscape imagery.



The star marks Francis Guy's vantage point from his home.

Description of the Artwork

This large painted canvas shows a busy street scene during an overcast winter's day. The foreground features people passing through a snow-covered street, some stopping to converse, others tending to daily tasks, such as fetching firewood and water. The middle ground is dominated by two- and three-story wood plank buildings with smoke drifting up from chimneys into a cloud-filled, blue-gray sky that fills the upper half of the painting.

About the Artwork

Guy selected the view from his second-story window as the subject for *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*. The painting depicts the section of Front Street between Main and Fulton Streets (now under the Brooklyn Bridge). At the time, this was Brooklyn's most developed area because of its proximity to the Fulton Ferry Landing pier, Long Island's primary port with connections to Manhattan. It was a busy marketplace with industries including slaughterhouses, breweries, and businesses such as shops, inns, and taverns. The painting captures in great detail Brooklyn's bustling streets and distinctive architecture. Many of the buildings and individuals can be identified through a key published in the 1860s (see right and p. 8).

The white building on the corner is Benjamin Meeker's carpentry shop (no. 10). Meeker himself appears nearby holding a pole and carpenter's square (no. 27) and talking with Judge John Garrison (no. 28). In the center of the composition is the "Dutch-style" barnyard and slaughterhouse of Abiel Titus (no. 9), who feeds his chickens in the gateway (no. 31). His son James (no. 34) is on horseback near the water pump. Jeff (no. 33), a hired hand of the Titus household, carries a pail just in front of the open farmyard doors. The large yellow structure at the right is Thomas Birdsall's home, hardware store, and post office (no. 1). Sam Foster, an African American chimney sweep, peeks out of the building's chimney (no. 35). Some of the unidentified figures include the men who work with the piles of wood and coal in the foreground and a male figure who has slipped on the ice near the water pump.

The painting was first exhibited in 1820. Viewers marveled at its atmospheric effects and the accurate description of its architecture and people. A *New-York Evening Post* reporter declared it "a master

piece evincing no ordinary genius" (1821). The painting entered the collection of the Brooklyn Institute (the Museum's forerunner) in 1846 and quickly became a gallery favorite. In 1881, the canvas suffered damage from a fire and lost about two feet from its left side. The damaged section depicted Augustus Graham (no. 20), a businessman and founder of the Brooklyn Institute, conversing with his neighbor Joshua Sands (no. 21) in front of Graham's new brick town house (no. 15).



Key to Guy's Brooklyn Snow Scene

1. Dwelling and store of Thos. W. Birdsall (still living, 1869).
2. House of Abiel Titus.
3. Edward Coope's blacksmith shop.
4. Geo. Fricke's carriage shop.
5. Diana Rapelje's house.
6. Mrs. Middagh's house.
7. St. Ann's Church, corner of Sands and Washington streets.
8. Residence of Edward Coope.
9. Abiel Titus's barn and slaughter house.
10. Benjamin Meeker's house and shop.
11. Mrs. Chester's "Coffee Room."
12. Robert Cunningham's.
13. Jacob Hicks's woodyard, corner Main street.
14. Joshua Sand's residence.
15. Augustus Graham's residence, corner Dock street.
16. Burdet Stryker's house and butcher shop.
17. Selah Smith's tavern.
18. Morrison's, on the heights.
19. Dr. Ball's house, opposite Morrison's.
20. Augustus Graham, conversing with
21. Joshua Sands.
22. Mrs. Harmer and daughters.
23. Mrs. Guy (the artist's wife).
24. Jacob Patchen.
26. Mrs. Burnett.
27. Benjamin Meeker, talking with
28. Judge John Garrison.
29. Thos. W. Birdsall.
30. Jacob Hicks.
31. Abel Titus.
32. Mrs. Gilbert Titus.
33. Abiel Titus's negro servant "Jeff."
34. James (son of Abiel) Titus, on horseback
35. Samuel Foster (negro).

Brooklyn Identities

Guy's Brooklyn scene features portraits of actual individuals who range in age, occupation, social status, national background, and race. Notably, several African American laborers, some of whom were probably enslaved, occupy prominent positions in the foreground—a testament to their vital role in the region's economy. James Street, receding into the distance on the painting's left side, was an African American neighborhood until the Brooklyn Bridge was constructed in the 1880s. Guy also alludes to the Dutch heritage of some Brooklynites: Abiel Titus's barnyard, which dominates the center of the composition, was recognized by nineteenth-century viewers as being Dutch in character.

Francis Guy, Walt Whitman, and the Brooklyn Museum

In 1823, American poet Walt Whitman's family moved from Long Island to downtown Brooklyn, the same area depicted in *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*. Years later, Whitman wrote about the painting in the newspaper the *Brooklyn Standard*: "Among the few relics left to remind the present inhabitants of Brooklyn of the days and scenes of their grandfathers, few are more valuable than the large, somewhat time-stained picture known as 'Guy's Brooklyn.'"¹ In 1835, Whitman was Acting Librarian at the Brooklyn Apprentices Library, which later evolved into the Brooklyn Institute and, eventually, the Brooklyn Museum.

Questions for Viewing

Look closely at this work. What's happening in this scene?

Pretend that you are inside the painting. List the sounds you imagine you can hear around you. List the odors (good or bad) that you imagine you can smell. What are some of the different textures you can touch? Use visual evidence to support your ideas.

In 1822, lawyer and amateur historian Gabriel Furman listed the following structures in Brooklyn (among others): 493 dwelling houses, 92 stables, 48 taverns, 48 groceries, 26 store houses, 12 tar sheds, 10 boot and shoe manufactories, 8 schoolhouses, 6 house-carpenter's shops, 5 blacksmith shops, 5 rope walks, and 1 windmill. Can you find any of these structures in this scene?

What do you notice people doing? What kind of daily activities are taking place? Are the activities associated with industry (slaughterhouses, breweries), business (shops, inns, taverns), or home life?

What different modes of transportation do you notice? Are they similar to or different from how people travel today?

A primary source provides firsthand testimony or direct evidence about a topic. This painting is a primary source for Brooklyn in the year 1820. What do you see that is similar to your own neighborhood today? What is different? What types of primary sources could we use for Brooklyn today?

Classroom Activities

Language Arts

Francis Guy's painting includes portraits of his neighbors going about their daily activities. The artist reportedly called out to these individuals from his second-story window, asking them to freeze in position while he captured their likenesses. Identify one character in the painting to examine. Look carefully at the character's clothing, pose, and any special items with him/her. What do these details tell us about this person? Find a partner and share your findings. Write a dialogue considering the point of view of each character. How would you greet one another? What would you discuss? Practice your dialogue together and then invite people to watch your performance.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and Francis Guy both chose Brooklyn and its residents as subjects for their work. Read “Crossing the Brooklyn Ferry” from *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems that Whitman first published with his own money in 1855. How does Whitman describe his observations? How does he treat this subject? Compare and contrast the poem and the painting. What similarities can you find between Whitman's poem and Guy's portrayal of Brooklyn's cityscape and its inhabitants?

Art-Making

Compare *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*, by Francis Guy, and *The Block* (<http://bit.ly/BeardenTheBlock>), by Romare Bearden (American, 1911–1988), an artist who lived and worked in New York City almost a hundred years after Guy. What is special about how each artist chose to depict his neighborhood? Draw, paint, or create a collage showing your own neighborhood today. Write a caption to explain the artistic choices you made.

Social Studies

Research the relationship of the location depicted in Guy's painting, and Brooklyn in general, to the Underground Railroad and slavery in 1820. For a helpful article, visit <http://bit.ly/undergroundrailroadarticle>.

Technology includes the use of materials, tools, techniques, and energy sources to make life easier or more pleasant and work more productive. Look for evidence of technology in the painting. Research what types of technology would have been used to run a Brooklyn household in 1820. Specific professions shown in the painting, such as joiner or chimney sweep, can be researched as well.

Resources

<http://bklyn.newspapers.com>

An online, searchable database for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (1841–1902). Use the search term “Francis Guy” to locate several articles about *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*. The text of a lengthy lecture to the Society of Old Brooklynites by William H. Waring, who offered extensive and often amusing anecdotal details about many of the individuals Guy portrayed (published in March 1884), is available to download.

<http://bit.ly/BHSpodcasts>

Brooklyn Historical Society podcasts with walking tours, interviews, oral histories, and live recordings about various aspects of Brooklyn’s history.

<http://bit.ly/WinterScene>

A THIRTEEN SundayArts segment with Curator of American Art Teresa Carbone discussing *Winter Scene in Brooklyn* in the Brooklyn Museum’s galleries.

<http://maap.columbia.edu>

The website for Mapping the African American Past (MAAP) with maps, images, lesson plans, podcasts, and other resources to help students learn about the history of the United States and New York. Lessons are targeted for eighth to twelfth grade, with fourth–grade adaptations.

Carbone, Teresa A. *American Paintings in the Brooklyn Museum: Artists Born by 1876*, vol. 1, pp. 571–74. New York: Brooklyn Museum; published in association with D. Giles, London, 2006.

A comprehensive overview of *Winter Scene in Brooklyn*, including its reception and history.

Dodson, Howard, Christopher Moore, and Roberta Yancy. *The Black New Yorkers: The Schomburg Illustrated Chronology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

A book focusing on the black experience in New York from the colonial period to the present.

Hodges, Graham Russell. *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

A comprehensive history of African Americans in New York City and its rural environs from the arrival of the first African to the Draft Riots of 1863.

Huey, Lois Miner. *American Archaeology Uncovers the Dutch Colonies*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2010.

An account of archaeological findings in the former Dutch colonies for third through sixth graders.

Snyder–Grenier, Ellen M. *Brooklyn! An Illustrated History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.

An engaging book about Brooklyn history. The chapter “Brooklynites, Real and Imagined” features Brooklyn residents.

Notes

1. Quoted in Henry M. Christman, ed., *Walt Whitman’s New York: From Manhattan to Montauk* (Lanham, Md.: New Amsterdam Books, 1963), 19–20.

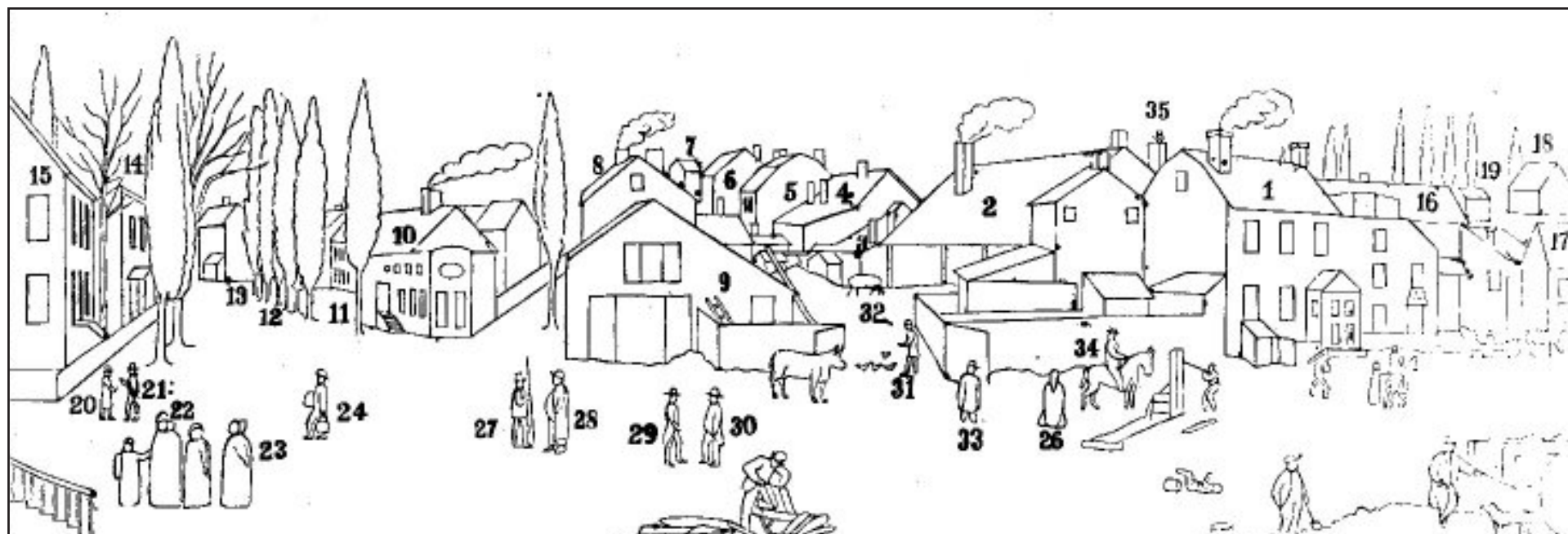
Pages 2 and 10: *Hooker’s Map of the Village of Brooklyn*, 1827. Engraving with watercolor on paper, sheet: 16 3/8 x 20 3/16 in. (41.6 x 51.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Barbara Head Millstein, 76.160.2

Pages 3 and 8: “Key to Guy’s Brooklyn Snow Scene,” published in Henry R. Stiles, *History of the City of Brooklyn . . .* (Brooklyn, 1867–70). Both the image and the corresponding text are reproduced from Stiles’s publication. This key is based on the Museum’s painting in its original form.

Page 9: *Key to “Winter Scene in Brooklyn” by Francis Guy*. Photograph, 8 5/8 x 13 1/4 in. (21.9 x 33.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. John Moffatt, 00.63

Text by Rachel Ropeik, Senior Museum Educator, and Alexa Fairchild, School Programs Manager, with assistance from Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development, and Teresa Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art.





KEY TO GUY'S BROOKLYN SNOW SCENE.

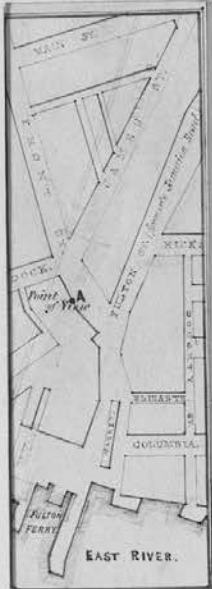
1. Dwelling and store of Thos. W. Birdsall (still living, 1869).
2. House of Abiel Titus — see page 59.
3. Edward Coope's blacksmith shop.
4. Geo. Fricke's carriage shop.
5. Diana Rapelle's house.
6. Mrs. Middagh's house.
7. St. Ann's Church, corner of Sands and Washington streets.
8. Residence of Edward Coope.
9. Abiel Titus's barn and slaughter house.
10. Benjamin Meeker's house and shop.

11. Mrs. Chester's "Coffee Room."
12. Robert Cunningham's.
13. Jacob Hicks's woodyard, corner Main street.
14. Joshua Sand's residence.
15. Augustus Graham's residence, corner Dock street.
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27. Judge John Garrison.
28. Thos. W. Bird-all.
29. Jacob Hicke.
30. Abiel Titus.
31. Mrs. Gilbert Titus.
32. Abiel Titus's negro servant "Jeff."
33. James (son of Abiel) Titus, on horseback.
34. Samuel Foster (negro).

Descriptive.
 The point from which the View is taken, is at "A" (see map) where the New York and Brooklyn Bridge now crosses Front St. To the left is the range of Front St. In front, is the rear of the houses on the

north side of Fulton St.; and have the site of the Brooklyn Daily Union; and on the extreme right are the outskirts of the village, the high grounds of Poplar and Middagh Streets! The spectator is looking east, and south, and west.



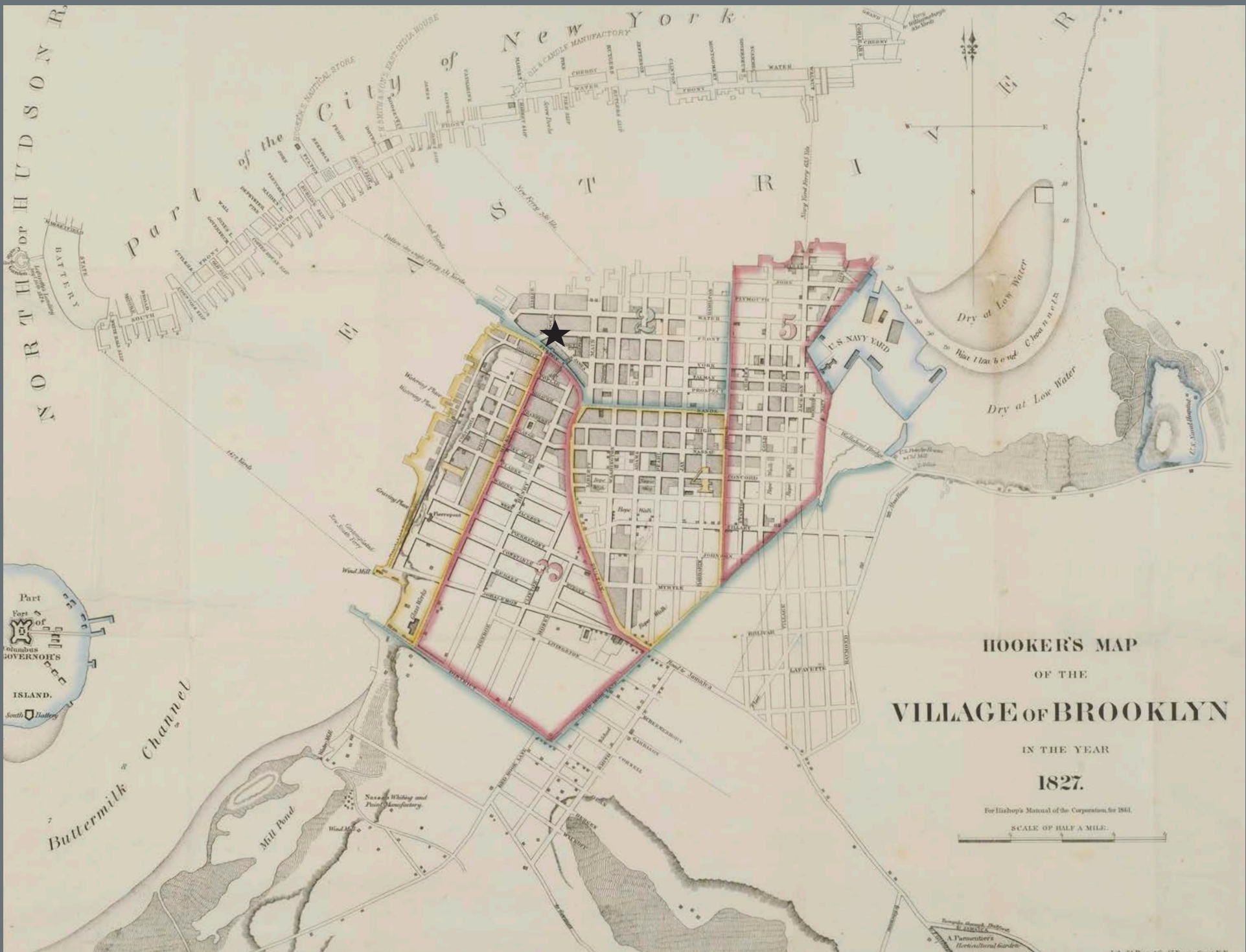
1. Residence of Mr. Augustus Gorham.
2. Judge Sands' House. (Where Mrs. M. Bartan began housekeeping.)
3. Residence of Mr. Benjamin Meeker.
4. Carpenter Shop of do. do.
5. Barn of do. do.
6. House in which Mrs. M. Bartan was married. (1822)
7. Residence of Mr. Coop.
8. Mr. A. Titus' Barn.
9. do do Residence.
10. Mr. Coop's Blacksmith Shop.
11. Residence of Mr. Barrows, Harnessmaker.

BROOKLYN, 1816.

12. Residence of Miss Rappelyea.
13. do Mr. Thomas W. Birdsall.
14. Post Office, and Store of do.
15. Residence of Mrs. Stycker.
16. Barn of do.
17. School House. (Where Mrs. Bartan attended.)
18. Judge Sands' and Augustus Gorham.

19. Jacob Patchen, Butcher.
20. Benjamin Meeker, Carpenter.
21. Judge Garrison.
22. Jacob Hicks.
23. Thomas W. Birdsall, Post Master.
24. A. Titus Esq. (Raising chickens.)
25. The Old Pump. 27. Main Street.

26. Industries of the Age and Generation.
27. Front Street.
28. James Street. (Destroyed by the Brooklyn Bridge.)
29. ~~James~~ Street. (See Map in margin.)
30. Life in slippery places.
31. ~~James~~ Street. High grounds of Poplar St.
32. The way to Fulton Ferry.
33. Residence of Jacob Hicks.
34. Robert Bach.
35. Robert Nichols.
36. Charles Hewlett.



NORTH OF HUDSON R.

Part of the City of New York

Part of Fort of GOVERNOR'S ISLAND.

Buttermilk Channel

HOOKER'S MAP OF THE VILLAGE OF BROOKLYN IN THE YEAR 1827.

For Hishop's Manual of the Corporation, for 1861.
SCALE OF HALF A MILE.