



MUSEUM ASSOCIATION  
OF NEW YORK

## Breaking Down the Walled City: A Look into the Brooklyn Historical Society's New Exhibition in DUMBO

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“Brooklyn is incredible, Brooklyn is an adjective,” says Marcia Ely, Vice President of Programs and External Affairs of the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS).

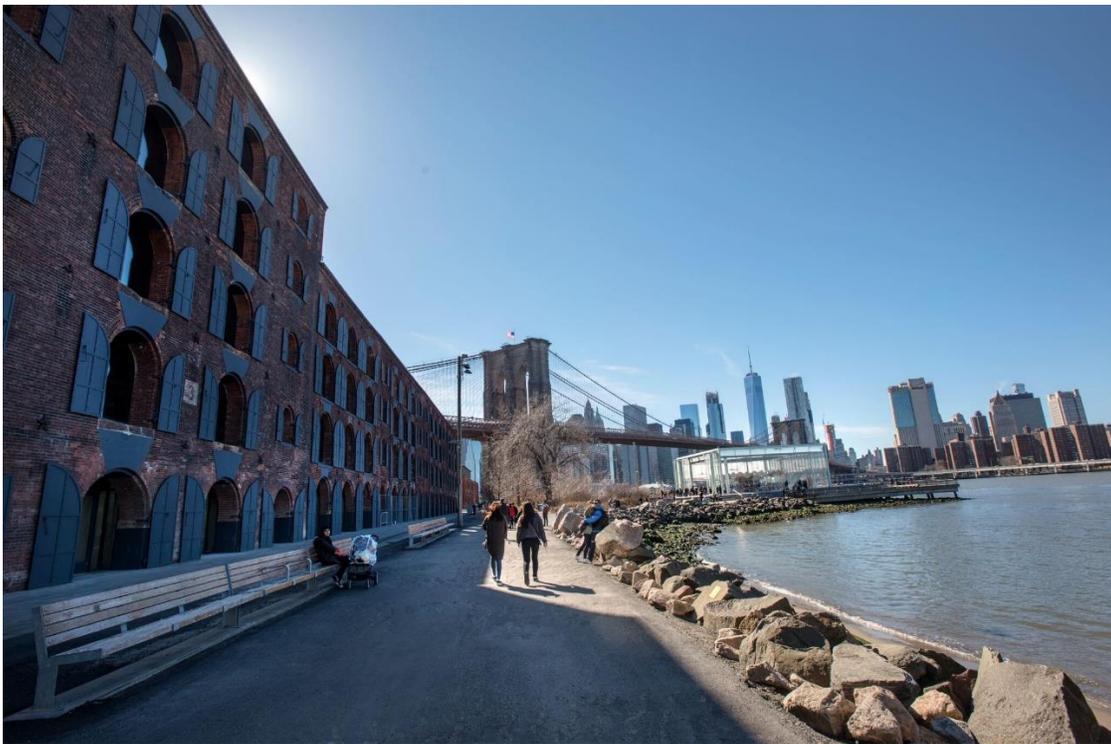
And she's right. With a new location in the famous DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) neighborhood, an exciting permanent exhibition celebrating all things Brooklyn and water, and big plans for the future, the Brooklyn Historical Society is ready to amplify the already elevated stature of one of New York City's five boroughs.



“We’re at a really exciting phase in our history,” Ely says. The Brooklyn Historical Society has been an institution of Brooklyn for 155 years. Founded in 1863 in the middle of the Civil War by prominent Brooklyn residents as a collecting institution, BHS (then called the Long Island Historical Society) has grown and evolved into a thriving urban history center that brings Brooklynites and visitors alike together to learn and celebrate the rich and unique history of New York City’s largest borough.

Throughout its history, BHS has borne witness to the ever-changing landscape of Brooklyn, from its tremendous growth as a rural center to one of the most well-known cities in the United States. In 1881, the Society opened their landmark location at 128 Pierrepont Street, a Queen-Anne style building designed by renowned architect George Browne Post, where they’ve resided ever since.

But in 2017, BHS decided it was time to continue their growth in new ways, opening a second location in the Brooklyn Bridge Park in DUMBO.



“One of the really interesting things about the DUMBO location is where it’s housed,” Ely says. BHS DUMBO is nested in the newly renovated Empire Stores, an historic warehouse that brings back memories of Brooklyn’s historical nickname as the “Walled City,” because of the brick warehouses that lined the city’s coastline. Empire Stores is one of the last remaining 19<sup>th</sup>-

century warehouses in Brooklyn that retains its original features. At a time when Brooklyn was one of the largest commercial waterfronts in the world, the warehouse was home to “countless tons of coffee, sugar, jute, animal hides, and many other commodities,” according the BHS website.

The BHS is the only cultural institution in the Empire Stores, which is otherwise home to office space, restaurants, and stores. “For us, having this second space has been really transformative, because it’s very different foot traffic, it’s a very different audience that you capture down there in DUMBO,” Ely says. “There’s a really beautiful balance and comparison between our main site, which is in Brooklyn Heights but on a fairly quiet, residential street, and the hubbub and vibrancy of DUMBO,” she says. “It’s been a huge, wonderful journey for us.”

And now, after the DUMBO location’s inaugural exhibition of Brooklyn Waterfront photography closed in January, BHS is continuing their mission of celebrating and exploring Brooklyn’s history with their new long-term exhibition, “Waterfront.”



“Waterfront,” which Ely says is a very ambitious long-term exhibition, is the first major exhibition specifically dedicated to telling the history of Brooklyn’s coastline. The exhibition and multimedia experience opened in January of this year, and so far, she says, people love it. The exhibit space isn’t large – in

fact, BHS DUMBO itself only takes up 3,200 square feet of space in the Empire Stores – but its multiple levels expand its potential far beyond that of physical space. “It has lots of nooks and crannies,” Ely says.

Take, for example, the exhibition’s two digital installations: “At Waters Edge,” an eight-minute multimedia experience and video that tells the history of Brooklyn’s waterfront, starting over 20,000 years ago with the glacier that formed the Brooklyn coastline; and “History in Motion,” an interactive video that lets visitors insert themselves into Brooklyn’s past using Kinect technology.

“I think one of the nice things about this exhibit is that you can literally spend 20 minutes or you can spend three hours here,” Ely says. Whether visitors want to explore an installation of archaeological artifacts that were excavated from the landfill underneath Empire Stores in the 1970’s, or listen to the BHS’s impressive collection of oral histories from “Brooklynites of all kinds,” that won a 2018 MANY Award of Merit for Innovation in Collection Access, or even play with the Waterfront Neighborhoods Magnet Wall, a kid- and adult-friendly ten-foot magnetized landscape that invites visitors to reimagine the coastline, there is truly something for everyone in DUMBO.



“We want to be the place that people come first to understand a little bit of background on Brooklyn before they go off and explore the rest of the borough,” Ely says. “We want to tell the history of Brooklyn that’s being made right now, as well as tell the stories that have been forgotten.”

*The Brooklyn Historical Society: DUMBO will also be hosting the Museum Association of New York’s seventh Meet-Up of the fall on October 16, 2018. Registration is open [here](#).*

*Words by Sarah Heikkinen. Photos courtesy of the Brooklyn Historical Society.*