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Brooklyn Historical Society Explores the Eclectic History and Global Impact of Brooklyn's Waterfront with Major New Exhibition

Museum Creates Immersive Experience About the Past, Present, and Future at BHS DUMBO in Empires Stores

November 16, 2017 (Brooklyn, NY) — On January 20, 2018, Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) will open *Waterfront*, an exhibition and multimedia experience for all ages that brings to life the vibrant history of Brooklyn's coastline through interwoven stories of workers, industries, activists, innovators, families, neighborhoods, and ecosystems.

The culmination of four years of development and research, *Waterfront* is the first major exhibition on the history of Brooklyn's coastline, housed in Brooklyn Historical Society DUMBO, the only history museum in the DUMBO neighborhood. *Waterfront* blends BHS's acclaimed approach to historical interpretation with forward-thinking design. The exhibit immerses visitors in the natural and human histories of the waterfront and teaches them to identify vestiges of that past throughout the present-day landscape.

Developed by design studio Pure+Applied, with digital installations from acclaimed firms Potion and batwin + robin, *Waterfront* combines cutting-edge digital interactives with engaging storytelling to welcome visitors of a variety of ages and interests – it includes activities for children as young as two years old, along with thought-provoking history for adults. *Waterfront* features 12 concept areas explored through eclectic micro-histories:

- *Landfilling the Shore*: At the entrance, visitors encounter a floor-to-ceiling sculptural installation of more than 80 archaeological artifacts and fragments excavated from the ground beneath Empire Stores in the 1970s.
- *At Water's Edge*: A seven-minute multimedia experience introduces visitors to the waterfront's dynamic history through ten historical moments, leaving them exhilarated by their time travels.
- *History in Motion*: This installation makes the visitor the star. Using Kinect technology, "History in Motion" drops visitors into ten historic paintings and photographs, records them interacting with historical figures and objects, and weaves their actions into a 60-second movie starring themselves that can be shared on social media.

- *Brooklyn Bivalves* tells the unlikely story of oysters and sewage. The 600 pounds of oyster shells featured in this installation were donated by the Billion Oyster Project.
- *An Unfree Waterfront* highlights the moving and untold stories of three enslaved Brooklynites and their struggle for freedom along the shoreline.
- *The Walled City*: Centered on a large-scale 1879 image of Brooklyn’s coastline, this section immerses visitors in the sights, sounds, and smells of Brooklyn’s 19th-century warehousing district. Visitors explore hidden stories vital to understanding the culture and history of the Walled City – from Walt Whitman’s waterfront trysts to hidden graves near the present-day Brooklyn Navy Yard.
- *A Laboring Family*: Visitors become historians themselves and hunt down details in documents and genealogical records to trace the story of one 19th-century Empire Stores dockworker, Michael Harkins, and his family.
- *Made in Brooklyn*: This object display in the museum’s restrooms highlights some of the iconic products made along Brooklyn’s coastline, including Chiclets Gum, Domino Sugar, and Benjamin Moore Paint.
- *Factory Women* honors centuries of women workers along the waterfront. Visitors explore artifacts and listen to oral histories of female Navy Yard workers during World War II; a dress-up experience lets kids don work clothing and try their hand at shipfitting.
- *After Industry*: Visitors explore salvaged materials and graffiti from the once-abandoned Empire Stores building. Oral history and video installations tell of the waterfront’s midcentury economic decline and its 21st century rebirth.
- *Waterfront Neighborhoods Magnet Wall*: Using magnets of buildings, bridges, animals, landmarks, and more on a ten-foot illustrated landscape, kids and adults can create their own whimsical waterfront while learning about Brooklyn’s many coastal neighborhoods.
- *Rising Waters*: A touchscreen video installation features historians, business owners, politicians, scientists, and activists who explore key questions about climate change and sea level rise.

“We want visitors to leave *Waterfront* looking at their surroundings with a richer sense of the history of the site, of Brooklyn, and of Brooklyn’s place in a broader global economy and culture,” said Brooklyn Historical Society President Deborah Schwartz. “In conceiving and designing *Waterfront*, we embraced the challenge of designing a museum for many types of visitors. Our DUMBO location gives us a remarkable opportunity to create that experience and to extend the institution’s reach. We expect it to serve as a model for a new kind of museum that welcomes its role as civic educator and center for social and environmental dialogue.”

“For the last four years, we have produced a staggering amount of research about Brooklyn’s waterfront,” said Brooklyn Historical Society Director of Public History Julie Golia, curator of the exhibition. “What became clear through this deep dive is that the key themes shaping this history – commerce and industry, labor politics, environmental change, art and creativity, and more – are incredibly relevant to the most pressing issues shaping Brooklyn’s coastline today, including climate change, social justice, and gentrification.”

Waterfront also addresses pressing contemporary topics with its public programs. These timely and thoughtful discussions include “Current / Bodies: Art and Action on the Waterfront” (January 23), “Invisible Water, Invisible Watersheds: The Gowanus Canal as a Case Study” (April 18), and “Roasted: The History of Coffee in NYC” (April 30). Visit: brooklynhistory.org.

BHS DUMBO is the historical society’s new second location; a 3,200SF satellite space inside Empire Stores, a renovated 19th-century warehouse in Brooklyn Bridge Park. The warehouse, constructed in the late 1860s, once housed coffee, sugar, animal hides, and other commodities when Brooklyn was one of the largest commercial waterfronts in the world. Empire Stores stood shuttered for decades and reopened in 2017 as a revitalized public space featuring restaurants, retail stores, and offices.

Waterfront at BHS DUMBO (55 Water Street, Brooklyn) will be open to the public Tuesday to Thursday from 11 am to 6 pm, Friday and Saturday from 11 am to 8 pm, and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm. Suggested admission will be \$10 for adults, \$6 for seniors and teachers, and free for members and students of all ages.

Support for BHS DUMBO and *Waterfront* generously provided by: NYC Department of Cultural Affairs; Office of the Mayor of the City of NY; NYC Council, Brooklyn Delegation; National Endowment for the Humanities; Empire State Development; Institute of Museum and Library Services; Bloomberg; Dormitory Authority of the State of NY; Bank of America; American Express; Midtown Equities; M&T Bank; Office of the Brooklyn Borough President
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About Brooklyn Historical Society: Founded in 1863, Brooklyn Historical Society is a nationally recognized urban history center dedicated to preserving and encouraging the study of Brooklyn's extraordinary 400-year history. The main site is in Brooklyn Heights, housed in a magnificent landmark building designed by George Post and opened in 1881. In 2017 a second site, Brooklyn Historical Society DUMBO, opened in Brooklyn Bridge Park. Today's BHS is a cultural hub for civic dialogue, thoughtful engagement, and community outreach.