

# THE GREATEST GRID

The Master Plan  
of Manhattan  
1811-2011

**EDUCATOR RESOURCES FROM THE  
COLLECTIONS OF THE MUSEUM OF  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK AND THE  
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**Image Title:** *Five Points, 1827, Engraving after a painting by George Catlin.* Published in D.T. Valentine's Manual, 1855. Museum of the City of New York, Print Archives, 97.227.3

**Background Information for Educators:** Five Points is the picture of what the grid commissioners were trying to avoid. Their orderly future city of right angles is the antithesis of what developed at the notorious Five Points. Had the grid not happened, intersections like Five Points might have sprouted up all over the island. Five Points was the five-way junction of Orange (now Baxter), Cross (Mosco) and, from the west only, Anthony (Worth) streets.

Questions for Students	OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	
What do I see? (What are some observations about the activities depicted in the image?)	What do I think? (What are my reactions to the image?)	What do I wonder? (What do I want to know more about?)

**Further analysis for students:**

Imagine you are visiting New York City for the first time in 1827 and this is what you see. Record your impressions of the city. What are you surprised by? What impresses you? What disappoints you?

Five streets converge in the center of the image. Imagine you are a city commissioner charged with planning for the future of the city. Do you recommend building streets and avenues as depicted in the image above? Why or why not?



**Image Title:** Egbert L. Viele, *View of 2nd Ave. Looking up from 42nd St.*, 1861. Lithograph. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Mrs. Wendell T. Bush, 28.153.215

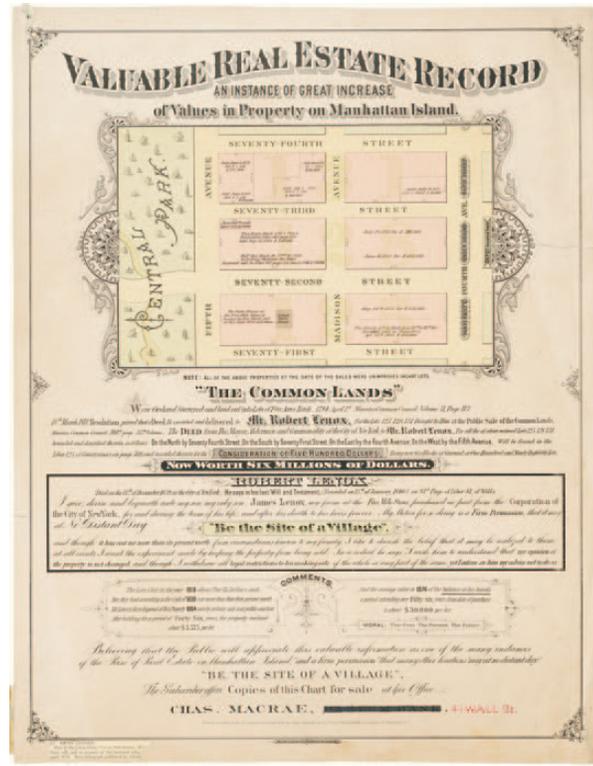
**Background Information for Educators:** Looking north at the intersection of East 42nd Street and Second Avenue today, one sees a canyon of high-rise buildings extending far into the distance. If one were to travel back to the same intersection in the early 1860s, the scene would be similar to the one shown here, where the avenue had been laid out but the surrounding hills were not yet leveled to align with the street. Houses were left high above street level as the streets and avenues were cut through the hills. The topographical changes that resulted from the Commissioners' Plan were nowhere more evident than in the view shown here of the northward path of Second Avenue on Manhattan's East Side.

Questions for Students	OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	
What do I see? (What are some observations about the image?)	What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the image?)	What do I wonder? (What do I want to know more about?)

**Further analysis for students:**

Imagine you live in the house on the hill. Write a letter to the city against the developments you witness daily. What are some reasons for keeping the city streets as they are shown in the image, without cutting streets into the landscape?

Imagine you are one of the men responsible for planning the street grid. Write a response to the letter above. Justify the changes to the landscape. How do you imagine the newly formed streets will aid in future development of the city?



**Image Title:** Valuable Real Estate Record. An Instance of Great Increase of Values in Property on Manhattan Island, 1874. Museum of the City of New York, J. Clarence Davies Collection, 29.100.1360B

**Background Information for Educators:** This broadside celebrates the rising value of Manhattan real estate, as exemplified by the Upper East Side estate of Robert Lenox (1759–1839). In 1818, according to the print, Lenox paid \$500 for the three blocks between Fourth and Fifth Avenues from 71st to 74th Street. The highlighted area was only half of his purchase: in total Lenox bought six blocks, or 30 acres, from 68th to 74th Street, and according to the New York Times, he paid \$6,920, about seven times more than this print claims. The block numbers on the print, 125, 128, and 131, derive from the Common Lands subdivision of 1796, with which the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811 was largely aligned. The opening of Madison Avenue then split the blocks nearly in half.

Questions for Students	OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	
What do I see? (What are some observations about the document?)	What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)	What do I wonder? (What do I want to know more about?)

**Further analysis for students:**  
 What is the intention of this document? What words, sentences, or images in the document support your claim?

According to the background information, this real estate record doesn’t document the actual purchase made by Mr. Lenox. Why does the broadside use the lower sum?



**Image Title:** *Madison Avenue and 55th Street, showing street construction, ca. 1875.* Gelatin silver print. Museum of the City of New York, Photo Archives, X2010.11.2489

**Background Information for Educators:** Madison Avenue cuts a strong diagonal across this photograph taken from just south of 55th Street. Although the state legislature approved to 42nd Street in 1833, the avenue was only opened in 1844, and this stretch was only extended to 66th Street in 1857, then to the north end of the island in 1869. The photograph reveals a hodgepodge of buildings: a squatter settlement in the foreground contrasts with luxurious houses in the background, including Mary Mason Jones’s Marble Row on Fifth Avenue, the white, Renaissance-style residence peeping from behind a collection of similarly elegant structures.

Questions for Students	OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	
What do I see? (What observations can I make about the scene in the image?)	What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the image?)	What do I wonder? (What do I want to know more about?)

**Further analysis for students:**

Log on to the Museum’s Collections Portal ([collections.mcny.org](http://collections.mcny.org)) and type “Madison Avenue and 55<sup>th</sup> Street” into the search tool. Scroll through the images to find the one titled “First Reformed Episcopal Church, 55th Street and Madison Avenue”. Although it shows a different perspective, you can find many similarities between the two images. What has stayed the same? What differences do you see between the photographs?



**Image Title:** Charles S. Reinhart, *The March of Modern Improvement—Destruction of Old Buildings in Upper New York*. Wood engraving, printed in *Harper's Weekly*, October 28, 1871. Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Harry Shaw Newman, 55.53.2

**Background Information for Educators:** In this 1871 *Harper's Weekly* illustration, Charles S. Reinhart illustrates New York's "march of improvement," a term New Yorkers used to describe their city's northward push up the island. The expression conveyed optimism about the benefits of a new, modern cityscape. Reinhart's allegorical scene takes place somewhere in "upper New York," where men are taking down an old tree and a farmhouse erected in the celebrated year of 1776. The future of the area can be seen on the left, where a pair of three-story row houses are under construction. As the old Revolutionary-era New York disappears, the modern era arrives, represented by an omnibus full of people. The horsecars and other modes of public transportation have brought about the changes we witness in this picture, as they have carried the city, its crowd, and its needs northward. The mass of people in the foreground represent the complex bustle of the modern city including well-dressed women, street urchins, and laborers in the congested space, ready to spill into the sparse, green pastures behind. No one seems concerned by the destruction of the 1776 house, except for an older man with a top hat and cane who gestures to the scene while facing stern, smartly dressed men, representing speculators, investors, and developers.

Questions for Students	OBSERVATIONS/INFERENCES	
What do I see? (What are some observations about the people and places included in the image?)	What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the image?)	What do I wonder? (What do I want to know more about?)

**Further analysis for students:**

How does the image depict change over time?

Imagine you are in the crowd eavesdropping on what the people are saying. On a separate sheet of paper create speech bubbles to attach to a copy of the image. What are they saying? Are they for or against "the march of improvement"?

**Final Activity:**

Use the images included in this packet, and additional images from the Collections Portal, to create a timeline. Using the Museum's online collection portal, find images that depict the same locations as the images in this resource, but represent different time periods. Attach all the images to a timeline. Add dates and descriptions of the images to the timeline to explain change over time in New York City.



**Document 1:**



Image Title: *Sackersdorff Farm Set, Page/Plate 23:*  
*[Bounded by W. 177th Street, Harlem River, w. 157th Street and Hudson River.]*  
Date of Work: 1868  
Digital ID: 1531830



<b>Observations/Inferences</b>		
<b>What do I observe in this document?</b>	<b>What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)</b>	<b>What do I want to know more about?</b>



Document 2:

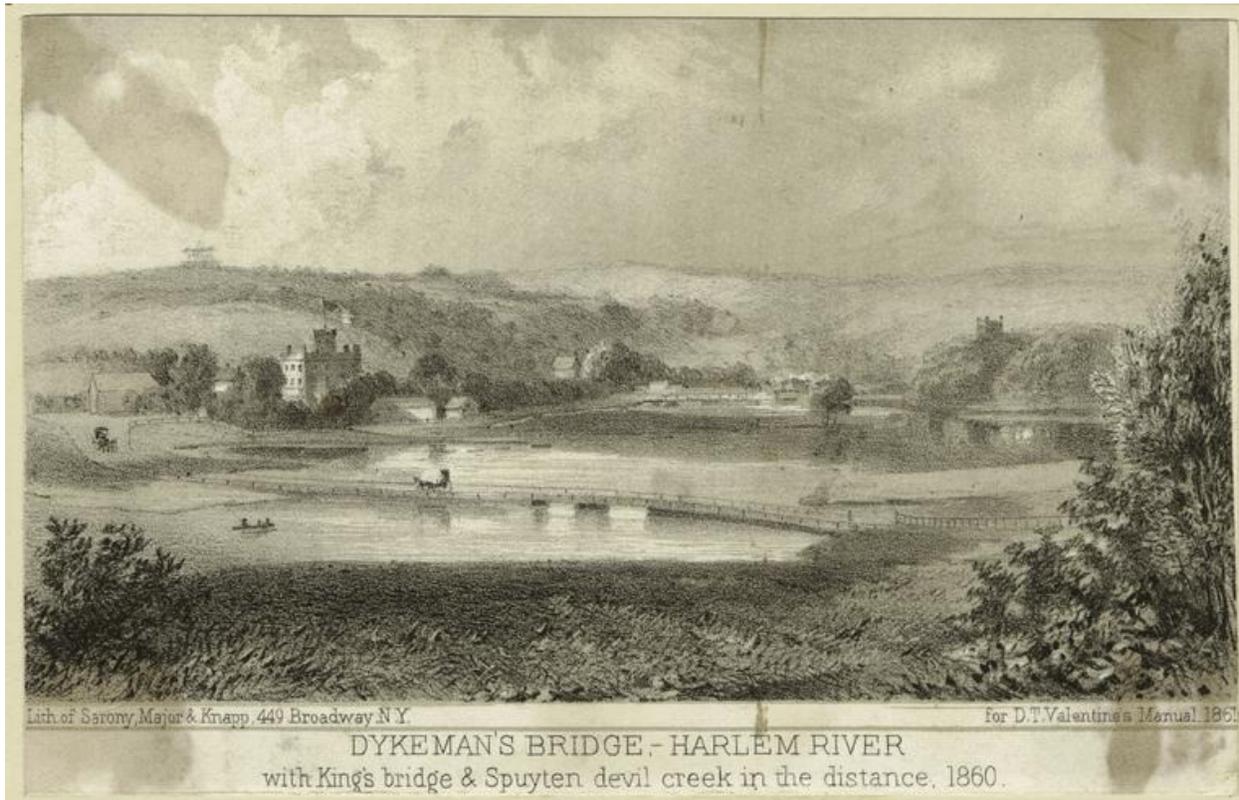


Image Title: *Dykeman's Bridge, Harlem River: with King's bridge & Spuyten devil creek in the distance, 1860.*

Date of Work: 1861

Digital ID: 804951



Observations/Inferences		
What do I observe in this document?	What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)	What do I want to know more about?

**Questions for Documents 1 & 2:**

What part of New York City is Document 1 representing? What are the map's specific boundaries?

Find on Document 1 approximately what area Document 2 is depicting. What do you think this land was used for, citing specific examples from both documents?

What are the pros and cons of creating a grid-style plan in this area?



**Document 3:**

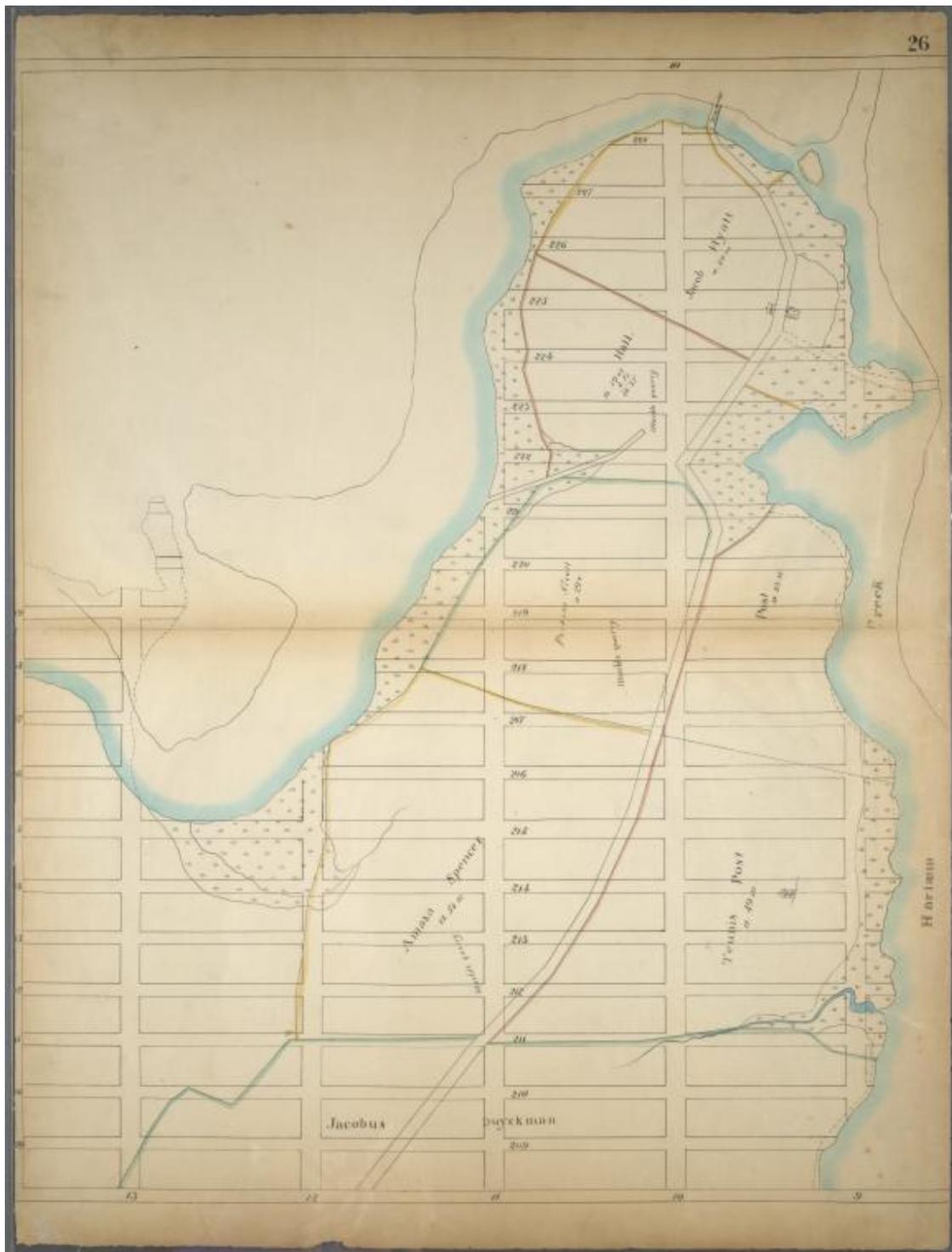


Image Title: Sackersdorff Farm Map, p. 3, Bounded by E. Twenty First Street, Union Square, E. Eleventh Street and Fifth Avenue

Date of Work: 1868

Digital ID: 1531807

To access this and other images, visit the Digital Gallery at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>



## Observations/Inferences

What do I observe in this document?

What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)

What do I want to know more about?



**Document 4:**

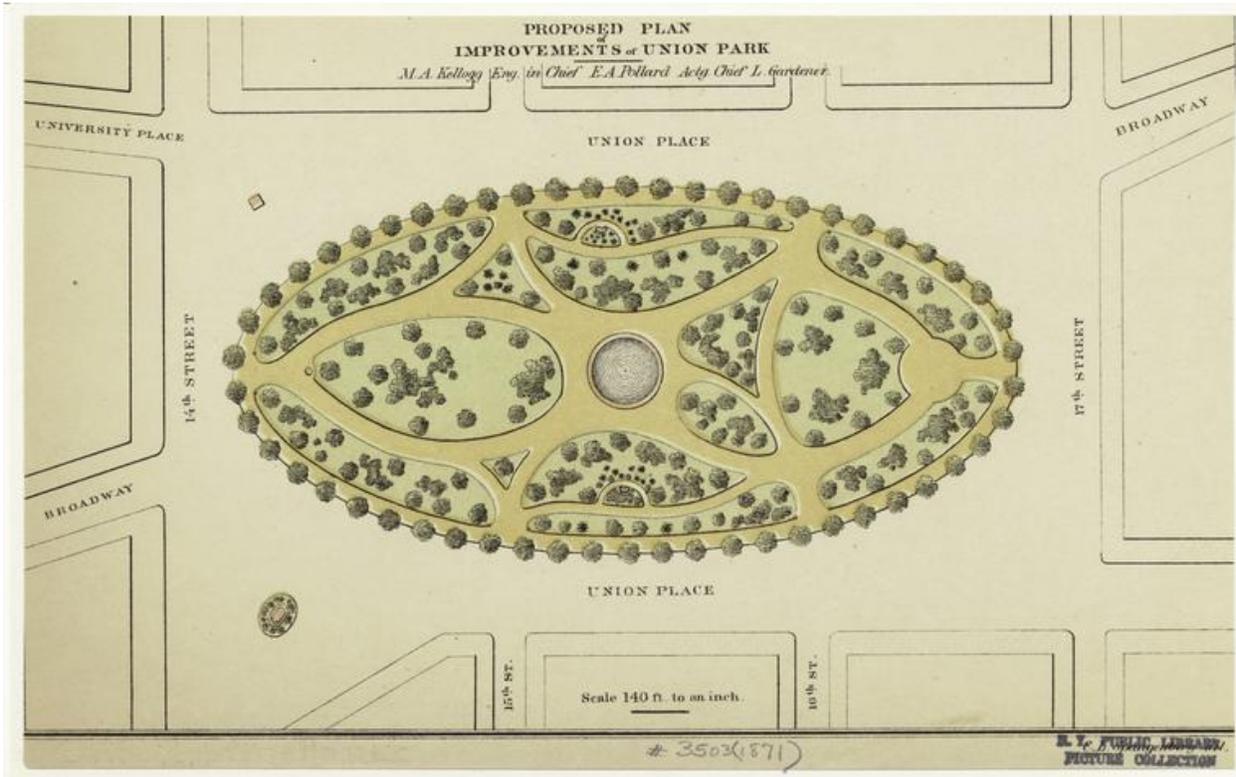


Image Title: Proposed Plan Improvements of Union Park  
Date of Work: 1871  
Digital ID: 810070



<b>Observations/Inferences</b>		
<b>What do I observe in this document?</b>	<b>What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)</b>	<b>What do I want to know more about?</b>



**Document 5:**



Image Title: *Map detail of Union Square. Atlas of the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York*

Date of Work: 1916

Digital ID: 1511761



<b>Observations/Inferences</b>		
<b>What do I observe in this document?</b>	<b>What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)</b>	<b>What do I want to know more about?</b>

**Questions for Documents 3, 4 & 5**

What part of New York City is Document 3 representing? What are the map's specific boundaries?

Compare and contrast Documents 3 & 4, what changes to Union Square Park are being proposed?

How much time has elapsed between documents 3 & 5? How has the grid changed and how has it remained the same?

To access this and other images, visit the Digital Gallery at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>



**Document 6:**



Image Title: Sackersdorff Farm Set, Page/Plate 7: [Bounded by Fifth Avenue, 52nd Street, First Avenue and 31st Street (Turtle Bay, Murray Hill and Kips Bay).]  
Date of Work: 1868  
Digital ID: 1531811

To access this and other images, visit the Digital Gallery at <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org>



<b>Observations/Inferences</b>		
<b>What do I observe in this document?</b>	<b>What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)</b>	<b>What do I want to know more about?</b>



**Document 7:**

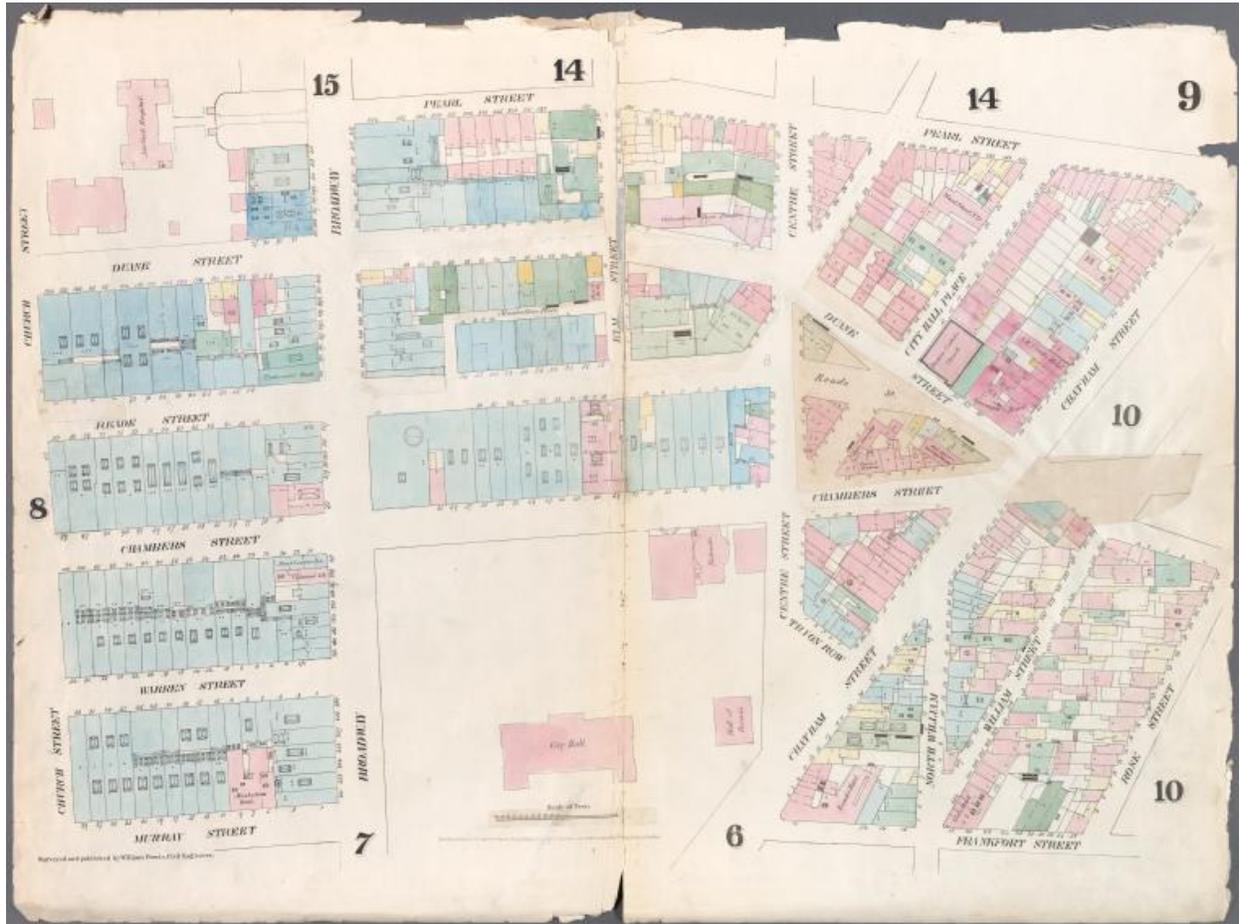


Image Title: *[Plate 9: Map bounded by Pearl Street, Chatham Street, Duane Street, Rose Street, Frankfort Street, City Hall Square, Murray Street, Church Street.]*  
Date of Work: 1857-1862  
Digital ID: 1268293



## Observations/Inferences

What do I observe in this document?

What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)

What do I want to know more about?



**Document 8:**

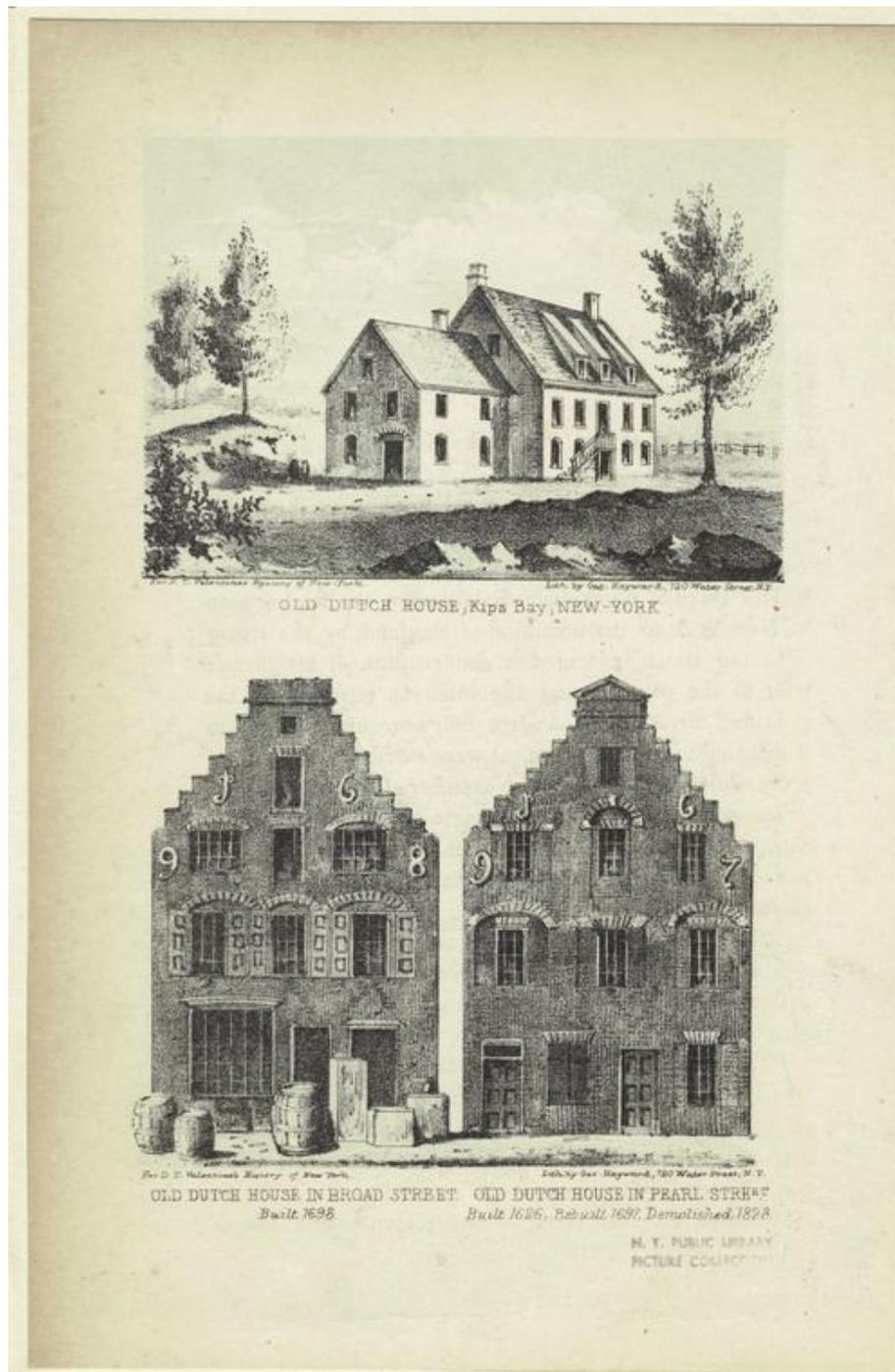


Image Title: *Old Dutch house, Kips Bay, New-York; Old Dutch house in Broad Street, built 1698; Old Dutch house in Pearl Street, built 1626, rebuilt 1697, demolished 1828.*

Date of Work: c 1800s

Digital ID: 805318



<b>Observations/Inferences</b>		
<b>What do I observe in this document?</b>	<b>What do I think? (What are my responses and reactions to the document?)</b>	<b>What do I want to know more about?</b>

**Questions for Documents 6, 7 & 8**

What part of New York City is Document 6 & 7 representing respectively? What are each map's specific boundaries?

Compare and contrast Documents 6 & 7, what are the similarities and differences to the grid styles?

Examine Document 8. What do the different building styles depicted tell you about the respective areas illustrated in Documents 6 & 7? How do you think the planned grid plan would impact these differences?