

## Brooklyn Navy Yard Rediscovered Its Past

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

Besides planning to restore documents if grants can be obtained, Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corp is considering restoring one of the historic buildings as a place to explain the yard's history and exhibit some of the documents. The company hired Daniella Romano to oversee the documents. Other details are presented.

### Full Text (860 words)

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Daniella Romano had no clue what she was getting into when she was hired out of college as the archivist at the Brooklyn Navy Yard a year ago. Then she got her first glimpse of the "archives" at the historic site where the USS Monitor was commissioned and the battleships Arizona and Missouri were built.

"They had two rooms here that contained roughly 2,200 cubic feet of rolled up plans that had been left behind by the Navy," she said. Blueprints and other documents were crammed into a heating-ventilation space and storage closet in a building erected in 1942 as a mess hall.

"Some of them were ruined by being exposed to water," she said. "They've become very brittle," some so much so that Romano has been afraid to unroll them before they can be treated by a professional conservator.

While executives of the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corp., the quasi-public entity that manages what is now an industrial park owned by New York City, have an interest in history, Elliot Matz, the chief operating officer, hired Romano more for practical reasons.

"Elliot recognized that with all the development that's going on in the yard there would be a lot of information here that would be valuable," Romano said in her office with tables full of folders containing blueprints. "There are no records, so we can dig in an area and not know what's underground. Now we're finding out."

While corporate executives hired Romano for development reasons, the history bug has bitten them, and they are even buying yard items such as paychecks from the 1840s, on eBay for future display.

Besides planning to restore documents if grants can be obtained, the corporation is considering restoring one of the historic buildings as a place to explain the yard's history and exhibit some of the documents.

Romano's office is in the same three-story brick building where the documents had been stored. But the larger space has better climate control, as well as providing her a view of the Manhattan skyline and the Williamsburgh Bridge.

"We have just under 33,000 drawings," Romano said. "I don't think it's even 10% of the drawings that were created here." The rest are kept by the National Archives at a site in Lower Manhattan.

"Every time they replaced a light bulb, they had a drawing to show them how to do it," quipped David Lowin, the corporation's vice president for planning and development. "Now that we have them somewhat organized, whenever we have a capital project, one of the first things we do is to come to Daniella and say 'Do you have drawings of this building that we want to work on?'"

What the Navy and National Archives left behind are mostly architectural drawings for yard buildings. But there are some plans for ship construction work. "We do have a drawing of the U.S.S. Maine in 1890 just prior to its launching," Romano said, referring to the battleship that blew up in Havana Harbor. The drawing, on waxed linen, is about eight feet long and three feet wide. It was used for construction of the ship's armor belt.

"We've got a good number of plans from World War I," she said. One dated 1914 shows how to construct platforms for funeral services. "It wasn't very busy here during the '20s so we don't have much from that era. In the late '30s through World War II, the number of plans explodes."

The oldest document unearthed so far dates back to 1858 and is a design for a monument erected at the yard to honor sailors and Marines who died during the Battle for the Barrier Forts in Canton, China, in 1856 during the Opium Wars.

So far, she explained, "I've gone through and unrolled all the rolls that I can; some are too fragile, and I'll have to wait for conservators."

Romano has separated the documents by material and subject, so now all blueprints or drawings on waxed linen paper are together in archival-quality storage sleeves. When she unrolls a set of plans, Romano said, "I feel a pretty direct connection to the people that were here."

Lowin said that as yard executives work on a development plan to build more industrial buildings, they are talking to community groups. "One of the things that always comes up is the fascination with the place," he said.

The corporation is trying to satisfy that curiosity. It is thinking of restoring an old building, possibly a gatehouse that dates back to the 1890s, as a small visitor center with a few displays and some documents.

In the meantime, the corporation is talking to local museums and historical organizations about finding a more appropriate permanent home for the documents. Another possibility is housing them in another old Navy Yard building that would be restored or in a proposed new centralized services building.

While these decisions are pondered, Romano keeps looking for pieces of the yard's past. "There's so much out there in people's attics," she said. "I'd love to get my hands on it."

Bill Bleyer

#### **[Sidebar]**

Daniella Romano oversees nearly 33,000 vintage drawings, from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.