



Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives
Guide to the Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project
1989-2015
SC/3

Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives
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Descriptive Summary

Title: Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project

Creator: Brooklyn Navy Yard

Date(s): 1989-2015

Quantity: 455 files (84.7 GB)

Language of Materials: English

Call Number: SC/3

Administrative/Biographical History

The Brooklyn Navy Yard was established in 1801 and served as one of the nation's premier naval shipbuilding and repair facilities for the next 165 years. During this time, more than 230 naval warships and auxiliary vessels were launched and over 5,000 were serviced here. The first ship produced at the Yard was the USS Ohio in 1820, and the first dry dock was completed in 1851. During the Civil War, the Yard employed 6,000 people, and by 1938 that number had risen to 10,000. At the height of World War II, the Yard was New York state's largest industrial enterprise, with 70,000 reporting for work daily. By the time the US Navy vacated the premises, the property had grown to encompass 291 acres, with 270 buildings, 24 miles of railroad tracks, 23,278 linear feet of crane tracks, 18 miles of paved roads, 16,495 feet of berthing space, 9 piers, 6 dry docks, and 22 shops housing 98 different trades. In 1966, the Navy decommissioned the Yard and the property began a second life as an industrial park. The City of New York purchased the site from the federal government for private commercial use, establishing a non-profit organization to transform the site into a job-generating industrial campus. The Yard has been managed by the mission-driven Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation (BNYDC), which made a commitment to

reinvest in the Yard's infrastructure and diversify its tenant base beyond heavy industry to also include design, manufacturing, and art, while reestablishing the Yard as a leading national and international model of urban manufacturing growth. Today, it is a diverse ecosystem of over 400 businesses and more than 8,000 employees, the product of years of careful planning, fundraising, and political partnership. The Yard continues to evolve, building on its history as the economic heart of Brooklyn.

The Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project is an effort to capture the personal memories of those who worked here in their own voices.

In September 2005 author Jennifer Egan approached the BNYDC Archives to research the subject of women at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II. Egan and BNYDC partnered on a project whose mission was to document an evolving labor demographic. Prior to the World War II, women worked here as yeomen performing chiefly clerical duties, but in 1944, with most eligible men serving their country, positions opened up for welders, riveters, pipe fitters, and draughtswomen and women found work in trades positions for the first time. For many women, fresh out of school and eager to aid the war effort, this was the only time they worked outside of the home.

In 2008, after 10 women were interviewed by Egan, BNYDC hired the Brooklyn Historical Society to aid in significantly expanding its efforts. This led to a grant funded partnership between BNYDC and BHS to conduct twenty additional interviews with women, coordinated by Sady Sullivan, Egan, and BNYDC. BHS provided transcription as well as professional recording and editing of the interviews. BHS also digitized twenty interviews of the same topic conducted in the 1980s and integrated them into BNYDC's evolving collection to provide a complete body of 50 interviews with women who worked here between 1942 and 1946. The intention was to make these stories accessible through both institutions and highlighted in the Brooklyn Navy Yard's permanent exhibition Brooklyn Navy Yard: Past, Present, Future.

After the opening of its visitor's center the Brooklyn Navy Yard Center @ BLDG 92 in November 2011, more individuals who worked at the Yard approached the Archivist to participate in the Oral History Project. Since then, BNYDC has continued to conduct interviews and add them to the collection. To date, labor and leadership at the Yard is documented, from the Shipyard era through the Industrial Park era.

Scope and Content

This collection contains a total of 99 oral histories that were created between 1989 and 2015, but the bulk are stories of working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard during World War II. The early interviews focus on women workers in the Yard. These oral histories contain personal details, including family life and growing up in New York City, as well as detailed descriptions of life in the Yard. Many histories detail the launching of the U.S.S. Missouri in 1944, which later became the site of the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay in 1945. Other oral histories describe a post-World War II Yard, with workers providing a detailed description on what it was like to work here during the decommissioning, as well as redeveloping the site to serve new business and economic development in the borough of Brooklyn. A series of video interviews with Brooklyn Navy Yard tenants describe their businesses and how they are supported at the Yard. These video interviews are a component of the permanent exhibition Brooklyn Navy Yard: Past, Present, Future, on display in the Today's Yard gallery.

Some of the oral histories have transcripts provided, but many do not. There is a mix of audio and video interviews in this collection.

Related Materials

Location of Copies: All items in this collection have been digitized and are featured in [BNY Collections](#), the BNYDC Archives' digital library. Use the Object ID or title of the item when searching BNY Collections.

Access Points

Brooklyn Navy Yard
Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.)
Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation
Commerce, Labor, Industry Corporation of Kings
Industrial buildings
Laborers
Navy-yards and naval stations--United States
New York Naval Shipyard
Sailors--United States
Ships
Ships--Launching
Shipbuilding--United States
Shipbuilding industry--Employees
United States. Navy
Waterfronts

Administrative Information

Acquisition Notes: The ten oral histories created in 1989 are owned by the Brooklyn Historical Society, copies of which were transferred to BNYDC in 2011. All oral histories created between 2008-2011 are co-owned by the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation and the Brooklyn Historical Society. All oral histories created after 2011 are solely owned by BNYDC.

Accruals: The BNYDC Archives continues to add materials to this collection.

Processing Notes: This collection was processed by Chelsea Reil from July – October 2018. Superfluous clips made from the original interviews were weeded, as well as extra copies of transcripts. An accession was processed by Elizabeth Mc Gorty in March 2020.

Access and Use

Access Restrictions: This collection is open with restrictions for research. Restrictions are noted at the item level on BNY Collections.

Use Restrictions: Material in this collection is made available for use in research, teaching, and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright law. The use must assume full responsibility for any use of the material, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced material. Please see the BNYDC Archives' Policy on Access and Use for more information about reproductions and permissions to publish. Any material used for academic research or otherwise should be credited using the citation below.

Preferred Citation: Published citations for all oral histories should take the following form: Identification of item, date (if known); Brooklyn Navy Yard Oral History Project; SC/3; Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation Archives, Brooklyn, NY, with the exception of the ten interviews dated 1989. Please contact Archives staff for assistance for those interviews.

Container List

Arrangement Note: This collection is arranged alphabetically by interviewee's last name.

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