

Landmark Designation Report
for
118-120 South 8th Street
Williamsburg, Brooklyn New York
September, 2006

Main Findings/Arguments

1. The history of 118 South Eighth Street offers a fascinating window into the lives of many thousands of Brooklyn residents. From 1875 to 1900, the building housed the Phenix Hall (also spelled Phoenix Hall), was a social hall for rent. The list of renters varies from organizations that were devoted to the largest and most important social movements of the post Civil War era, to social functions, dance lessons, religious services and political party meetings. The wide assortment of Brooklyn organizations renting the Phenix Hall included: the New York City Woman's Suffrage Society, Sons of Temperance, 13th Ward Democratic Party, 13th Ward Republican Party, Williamsburg Newsdealers Association, Bush Literary Union, Philosophical Association, Human Nature Club. The Phenix Hall was also rented for Gospel healing services by Reverend Monck, Dance lessons by W. A. French, and a widely attended lecture against the death penalty for Chicago Haymarket Anarchists.

2. The diverse range of social, cultural and political organizations that used the Phenix Hall during the latter half of the nineteenth century offers an excellent example of the spirit of America as described in Alexis DeToqueville's classic book *Democracy in America*. The Phenix Hall captures a period in the social history of Brooklyn where the borough had much in common with other large American cities undergoing industrialization, urbanization and emergence of a reform minded middle class.

3. Williamsburg is one of NYC's oldest and most interesting yet not adequately landmarked neighborhoods. Historic 19th century Williamsburg has not received the public attention it firmly deserves. In 1850, while most of Brooklyn was still farmland, Williamsburg was a thriving commercial and industrial city with a population of 30,780. The population of Kings County was divided between 92% in Brooklyn and Williamsburg and the remaining 8% in the six towns of Bushwick, Gravesend, Flatlands, New Utrecht and Flatbush. The same two primary factors that shaped Williamsburg in the twentieth century and today, close proximity to lower Manhattan and the waterfront, were in evidence with the first wave of urbanization. The movement of continuity and change from 19th Century Williamsburg to present day Williamsburg is one of New York City most interesting chapters. It is the only historic NYC neighborhood without a section of streets having neighborhood landmark designation.

4. 120 South 8th Street is one of six remaining Federal architecture style buildings in the Williamsburg area. The building has almost all of the prominent design features of Federal

architecture. These include the Flemish style laying of bricks, two stories with dormer windows, six glass panes per window sash and transom window over the doorway.

5. Federal style architecture has been sufficient criteria for landmark designation for many Lower Manhattan buildings. New York City Landmarks Commission just approved three Federal architecture buildings in Greenwich Village. Nine more applications are pending. The NYC Landmarks Conservancy is pushing for landmark designation for all 12 Federal architecture buildings. If approved, this would be first Federal building to receive NYC Landmark designation in Williamsburg.
6. 120 South 8th Street is one of the oldest structures still standing in Williamsburg. While building construction dates are not available, it was most likely built in the late 1830's or early 1840's. 118 South 8th Street was most likely built in the 1840's. New York City property records show the earliest recording for a sale for both 118 and 120 South 8th Street to be 1854. The first owner was Abraham Meserole. Meserole was a large landowner in the 1830's and 1840's and a Village of Williamsburg trustee.
7. Most of the individual building landmark designations made by the NYC Landmarks Commission have been for buildings in Manhattan. The New York City Municipal Arts Society (MAS) has produced a report documenting this geographic disparity. The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn is rich with buildings historic and architectural significance.
8. South 8th Street, running from the East River waterfront to Roebling street, was a bustling commercial street during the mid and late 1800's. South 8th street was one of two opened (cobblestone streets) in 1835. The blocks closest to the ferry terminals were filled with hotels, saloons and restaurants. A well know hotel, the Carlton was at the corner of South Eighth and Kent Avenue. The Long Island Business College was located at South Eighth Street. Prior to the building of the Williamsburg Bridge, seven privately owned ferry terminals transported people back and fourth. After the Williamsburg Bridge was built, the ferry slips were slowly closed down. None were operating by 1930. Most of Williamsburg's historic structures have been demolished (Urban Renewal Areas, building of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway).
9. Alley way: an alley that was laid out before the Civil War (or earlier), running 11" by 223", can still be found running through the middle of block 2137. The alley begins at 116 South 8th Street and runs all the way to Berry Street. The alley was used for horses which records show were kept in a stable on the ground floor of 118 South 8th Street. There is also documented evidence that the ground floor of 118 South 8th Street building was used for shoe services for horses and later as a stable for horse drawn beer trucks. Iron rings for tying the horses can still be found on the wall of 118 South Eighth Street. Today, there may be one or two alleys left in Williamsburg.

1. Introduction

The two buildings, 118-120 South 8th Street (Tax map block 2137, lot 14) are located between Bedford Avenue and Berry Street in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. They are one block directly south of Broadway and the Williamsburg Bridge. According to the current City of New York Tax block and lot map, the two buildings are included as one lot with four other buildings. 120 South 8th Street is the only federal style architecture building left standing in Williamsburg Brooklyn. The building was constructed at some point in the late 1830's or early 1840's. Even though Williamsburg was already a thriving city in the early 1850's, with a population of , there are only a handful of Williamsburg buildings still standing from this period. 120 South Eighth Street may be one of the oldest standing structures in Williamsburg. 118th South Eighth was rented as the Phenix Social Hall. The Phenix Hall was used by a wide range of organizations reflected the daily lives of the working and middle class.

Williamsburg is one of Brooklyn's oldest neighborhoods. Due to its waterfront location and proximity to Lower Manhattan, it developed very quickly into a thriving urban area. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 gave Williamsburg a water route all the way to the Midwest. It was a strategic location for industry. By 1854, when the City of Williamsburg was incorporated in the City of Brooklyn, it was one of New York's most densely populated, industrial and commercial areas. Outside of Brooklyn Heights and the downtown area, the rest of Brooklyn was still farmland. However, unlike the surrounding neighborhoods of Brooklyn Heights, Greenpoint, Fort Greene, Vinegar Hill, Fulton Ferry, Clinton Hill, a section of its streets, never received landmark designation. Today, only individual buildings in Williamsburg have Landmark status. The same four blocks of South Eighth Street, running from East River to Roebling Street, that exist today were also clearly evident in a map of the Village of Williamsburg in 1827 when it was officially incorporated by the New York State Legislature.

The two buildings offer a direct and strong connection to the Williamsburg's historic and architectural past. An individual landmark designation for these two historic buildings means that the social and physical past will now have the safeguards and recognition that come with New York City Landmark status. We believe that Landmark status will be catalyst for further research into the rich social history of 19th century Williamsburg.

2. The Phenix Social Hall: 118 South 8th Street Building Historic Significance

Phenix Hall: Between 1873 and 1897, 118 South Eighth housed the Phenix Hall (also spelled the Phonix Hall and Phoenix Hall). Phenix Hall was a private social hall for rent. Phenix was the spelling used at that time for the bird in the story of phoenix. In some advertisements, it was also listed as the

Phoenix Hall. A wide assortment of Brooklyn organizations rented space in the Phenix Social Hall including: the 13th District Republican and Democratic Party organizations, Suffragettes, Temperance League, literary and debating clubs, religious lectures, dance lessons and other social organizations. Based on the wide range of groups that held functions at the Phenix Hall, it is clear that it was a very popular venue. The range of organizations and issues that brought people to the Phenix Hall for an evening activity is very interesting. It includes the three of most important social movements of the late 19th Century: prohibition, woman having the right to vote and the labor movement. There were also religious sermons, dance classes, debating societies and self help groups. The organizations were formed mostly by members of the new middle class (shopkeepers, commercial services and other small businesses). Much of late 19th century Brooklyn and American history can be witnessed by the list of organizations that rented space at the Phenix Hall. The Phenix Hall is about social history. Social history tells the story of the ideas and interests that were closest to people's hearts.

Social Halls: During the 19th century, social halls were a very important part of the social and organization life of millions of urban Americans. Each neighborhood had at least one social hall. The late Nineteenth Century was a period before movies, radio and TV. There were very few meeting places at this time. Community centers, public schools and libraries either didn't exist or were not available for use. Only the very wealthy or immigrant societies had their own social halls; few groups could afford the cost of owning their own space. The social hall gatherings and regular meetings offer a window into interests of a diverse range of groups and social classes. In the late 19th Century, social halls were located throughout the Williamsburg area including the Fifth Knickerbocker Hall at Clymer near Bedford, International Hall at 470 Grand Street as well as private clubs such as the Hanover Club on Bedford. The social halls and clubs were also clear indicators of status, ethnic background and wealth. The organizations that rented space at the Phenix Hall are indicative of a mostly middle class following.

*Sampling of Documented Community Activities that Took Place at 118 South Eighth Street
Phenix Social Hall between 1873 and 1897*

| Date | Event | Description |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Jan.31, 1873 | Temperance Lecture | "Manacles on Manhood" lecture by J. H. Carrol, pastor of East Reformed Church |
| July 8 th , 1874 | Temperance League | General citywide meeting |
| July 11, 1874 | Temperance league | New Temperance Crusade announced at meeting, for the Eastern District, hopes to raise \$100,000 over 5 years to carry on battle |
| April 23, 1875 | Phenix Division of the Sons of Temperance | |
| May 10, 1875 | Phenix Division of the Sons | Entertainment, see paragraph |

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| | of Temperance | |
| May 14, 1875 | Phenix Division, Sons of Temperance | Meeting to discuss annual picnic outing at Rockaway |
| Dec. 2, 1875 | Rev. Almon Gunnison, pastor of All Souls Church | Gave a lecture about his recent trip to Europe |
| Feb. 21, 1876 | School Boys Association | Second annual reception. "The attendance was quite select, partaking of the nature of a private social affair, which in reality it was" (Feb. 22, 1876) |
| May 2, 1876 | Thirteenth Ward Republicans | Monthly meeting |
| Oct. 21, 1879 | New York City Woman's Suffrage Society | Meeting held to protest against the election of Governor Robinson. 100 people attended. |
| Sept. 16, 1883 | W. A. French's School for Dancing | Classes are held every Tuesday and Friday evening beginning on Oct. 2, 1883 |
| Oct. 7 th , 1883 | Williamsburg Newsdealers Protective Association | Meeting |
| May 18, 1884 | Gospel Healing service by Reverend Monck | Every Sunday during summer (on Fridays it was held at Cooper Union) |
| June 21 1884 | Gospel Healing service by Reverend Monck | Every Sunday during summer (on Fridays it was held at Cooper Union) |
| Oct. 2, 1885 | W. A. French's School for Dancing | Every Tuesday |
| Nov. 19, 1886 | Chesnut Social and Literary Society | |
| Feb. 18, 1887 | New George Ricard Post | Veterans Organization, Grand Army Post |
| Oct. 10, 1887 | Philosophical Association | Mr. W. C. Bowen made a speech to a large crowd against the execution of the Chicago Haymarket Anarchists. Seven men (none of them the actual bomb thrower) had been convicted and were condemned to die. "There was, the speaker added, a growing feeling in the public mind of the injustice of capital punishment. |
| Oct. 5, 1889 | Thirteenth Ward Democrats | Minutes of the meeting. |
| Oct. 12, 1889 | Thirteenth Ward Democratic Party | Part of round up of all Brooklyn Democratic ward meetings |
| Jan. 27, 1890 | Order of Foresters will hold a dance | The Independent Order of Foresters is one of the world's oldest and largest fraternal benefit societies with over one million members. History The concept of Forestry originated hundreds of years ago when people voluntarily formed groups called Friendly Societies to provide help for one another in times of distress. Based on the spirit of brotherhood, each family contributed to a fund from which they could draw when an emergency arose. www.bklyn-geneology-info.com |
| Oct. 14 th , 1890 | Ninth Assembly District Republican Convention | |
| Nov. 8 th , 1890 | Thirteenth Ward Democrats | Minutes recorded |
| May 7, 1892 | Thirteenth Ward Democrats | |
| Jan. 20, 1893 | Debate between the Bush Literary Union and Junto Debating Society | The debate topic for the evening: "Was Washington Necessary to the Success of the Revolution". |
| July 21, 1893 | Bush Literary Union | Fifth Anniversary of the Bush Literary Union, Senator Patrick McCarren was guest speaker. |
| April 8, 1894 | American Legion of Honor | Held a masquerade (and it was considered very successful) |
| Dec. 30, 1894 | Human Nature Club | Professor Albert Bausch's lecture was on "How To Tell a Liar" by explaining mind reading techniques and how people move their head when telling the truth or |

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------|---|
| | | lying. |
| August 3, 1895 | Old Glory Council | An entertainment and social was given with a list of attendees printed the next day in the Brooklyn Eagle |
| Jan. 22, 1897 | Human Nature Club | Meeting |
| Sept. 17, 1897 | Thirteenth Ward Republican Party | Meeting |
| Sept. 17, 1897 | Davenport Dramatic Club | |
| Feb. 14, 1898 | Davenport Dramatic Club | Meetings are held in the second week of each month at the Phenix Hall |

Source: The Brooklyn Eagle Newspaper. Brooklyn Public Library website online database.

The Phenix Social Hall appears to have functioned during a nearly thirty year period of 1873 to 1898. There are no references to it in the Brooklyn Eagle prior to 1871 or after 1898. The first advertisement for the hall was posted in 1873.

3. Building Occupants

For the actual date of the first occupancy, the architect or the original building owner cannot be confirmed. There is enough recorded evidence to establish that the building was constructed prior to 1850. City tax block 2137 is bounded by South Eighth Street, Bedford Avenue, Berry Street and South Ninth Street. On block 2137, the City of New York tax records show that 13 real estate transactions took place between 1800 and 1840. Another 33 real estate transactions were recorded between 1840 and 1850. It is not possible to confirm whether or not building was also taking place along with the sale of property.

A block and lot map of 1887 shows that block 2137 was completely built up by 1887. Between 1835 and 1887, the block became completely built up. According to a tax map from 1887, all lots had buildings on them. A private alley ran through the middle of the block between the rear yards of South 8th Street and South 9th Street. On the 1887 map, 118 South 8th Street lot has the word “hall” marked on it. However, there are numerous advertisements in the Brooklyn Eagle for events at the Phenix Hall by this date.

The lots were first owned by Abraham Meserole. Meserole was one of five trustees that governed the Village of Williamsburg after 1827. A map made by the surveyor and mapmaker William Perris in 1855 shows that Abraham Meserole was the original owner of the south side of South 8th Street. He was also a major landowner and businessman. Both buildings were originally owned by Richard and Mary Shepard. The Kings County property records refer to the terms “grantor” or seller and “grantee” or buyer.

118 South Eighth Street had the following transactions:

In April 11, 1854 Abraham Meserole sold the building to Richard and Mary Shephard.

In April 11, 1854 Richard and Mary Shepard sold it to George Colt.

In Oct. 30, 1866, George Colt sold to Andrew Harmon.

In May 15, 1873, Andrew and Margaret Harmon sold to Catharine A. Kraly (William A.)

120 South Eighth Street had the following transaction:

- Mary and Richard Shepard sold it to Louisa Antoinette Shepard in April 17, 1854
- Mary and Richard Shepard sold it to Louisa Antoinette Fitch on April 25, 1860.
- Porter and Louisa Antoinette Fitch sold building to Mary Shepard in May 31, 1860
- Porter and Louisa Antoinette Fitch sold the building to Cyrus Mead on Sept. 24, 1867.
- Cyrus and Jemima Mead sold to Mary L. Shepard on April 30, 1868.
- Mary and Richard Shepard sold to Ellen Ferris on Dec. 15, 1869
- William Ferris sold the building to Patrick Halloran on April 15, 1892.

All property records were obtained from the City Registers Office (Brooklyn), 210 Joralemon Street, Brooklyn New York.

4. 120 South 8th Street Building Architectural Significance

120 South 8th Street was built in the Federal architecture style. The building has retained all the main distinguishing features of Federal design. These include the Flemish bond pattern for laying the bricks, red bricks, pitched roof with dormer windows, two stories, six glass panes per sash and a transom over doorway. While the doorway does not have the Federal style columns it does have a semi-circle above the transom. The date of construction also took place in the last years that Federal style architecture was in use. While it is most likely that the other buildings built in a Federal row style between 1835 and 1850, this is not possible to verify (see below Section 4). One of the most important reasons for landmark designation is that this is one of six Federal style buildings still standing in Williamsburg. The New York City Landmarks Commission has already approved many buildings in Manhattan solely because the buildings were built in the Federal architecture style (some of these buildings do not have

the doorway columns). These Landmark designation reports all provide a detailed discussion of Federal architecture and its importance in early New York City history.

5. 19th Century South 8th Street between Roebling and Kent Avenue:

South 8th Street and surrounding streets in the 19th Century: As of 1835, South 8th street was only one of two open streets below Grand Streets. A major ferry line opened at South 7th Street in 1836. By 1851, there were nearly 35,000 people living in Williamsburg (source). By 1850, three ferries were running along the waterfront below Broadway. These ferries ran all day through out the late 19th Century. After the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, the ferries slowly began to decline in use with the last one closing in 1930. The Kent Avenue and the waterfront area, running from the Brooklyn Navy Yard all the way to Greenpoint, was a major manufacturing center for New York City. By the 1880's large factories for Pfizer, Havemeyer and Elder Sugar Refinery (later to become Domino Sugar), Hecla Iron Works, were all situated along Kent Avenue and nearby streets. Kent Avenue was lined with large industrial buildings, banks, stores and low rise office buildings. There were six sugar refineries between Division Avenue and the Bushwick Inlet. Its proximity to Manhattan caused it to develop both as an industrial powerhouse along with significant socio-economic diversity. Elegant mansions lined Bedford Avenue. Williamsburg was also home to a growing middle class and thousands of the working poor. The last 19th Century, Williamsburg was populated mostly by recent immigrants from Germany, Austria and Ireland as well as American born and people of English descent.

The location of South Eighth was very significant. It was the next block directly south of Broadway. By the 1880's, Broadway had surpassed Grand Street as the major commercial corridor with its big bank and insurance buildings. Given its proximity to the Seventh Street and Broadway Ferries, it is fairly likely to assume that South Eighth Street was a well traveled street by workers and businessmen on their way or leaving the ferry terminals. The Business Directory shows that it was full of commerce. The Carlton was a large four story hotel and restaurant located two blocks down at the corner of Kent and South 8th. By the 1880's Broadway was only second to Grand Street as main commercial thoroughfare. The Long Island Business College was located at 143-149 South Eighth Street, on the next block over, across the street. South Eighth Street was also only a short walk from Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Almost all of the large factories that covered the waterfront area up to Kent Avenue have been demolished or soon will be due to the 2005 passage of the Greenpoint Williamsburg waterfront rezoning. There will very little physical evidence left of the great industrial workplace that was 19th Century Williamsburg.

6. 118-120 South Eighth Street and 19th Century Williamsburg History

To appreciate its rich urban history, the 118-120 South 8th Street buildings must also be seen in the context of the development of Williamsburg, the City of Brooklyn and Kings County. The origins of South Eighth Street are also part of the story of the growth of Williamsburg from farmland and real estate speculators in 1800 into a thriving village of industry and commerce forty years later.

First settled in an area that was part of the Town of Bushwick, Williamsburg is the only historic Brooklyn neighborhood that never received a New York City landmark designation. Williamsburg was incorporated as a village in the township of Bushwick in 1827. In 1850, while most of Brooklyn was still sparsely populated farmland, Williamsburg was a thriving commercial and industrial city with a population of 30,780. (the population of Kings County was divided up between 92% in Brooklyn and Williamsburg, and the remaining 8% in the six Kings County towns of Bushwick, Gravesend, Flatlands, New Utrecht and Flatbush). On January 1, 1852, Williamsburg received a city charter. However, by 1854, due to municipal corruption it had gone bankrupt and had to be consolidated into the City of Brooklyn (which at that time only covered Brooklyn Heights, downtown, Red Hook with the rest was made up of towns of Kings County). In 1860, at the start of the Civil War, Brooklyn (which now included Williamsburg) was the third largest city in the country with a population of 266,661 people. Williamsburg was a major center of commerce, banking and industry.

The 19th Century history of Williamsburg has not received the professional historical attention it warrants: The research of Brian Danforth showed that Williamsburg and Brooklyn Heights were being developed at the same time but took very different paths. The bluffs on which Brooklyn Heights was built were never destroyed; the opposite occurred in the 1830's in Williamsburg. The bluffs that ran along what is now Bedford Avenue were destroyed to provide direct access to the waterfront. Brooklyn Heights was spared industrial development and remained an exclusive suburb for the wealthy. Williamsburg and much of Kings County had very little in common during most of the 1800's. Even as late as 1880, Kings County was the second biggest producer of vegetables in the country; it was the agricultural producer for Manhattan. (footnote). 19th Century Williamsburg had much more in common with the neighborhoods of Lower Manhattan. However, most history books about 19th century New York City focus almost exclusively on Manhattan with only a few paragraphs devoted to Williamsburg. Williamsburg is not only one of New York City's oldest neighborhoods, it also has one of the most

interesting histories. Over the past 200 years, Williamsburg has seen more major social and physical changes than almost any other NYC neighborhood. 118-120 South 8th Street buildings offer a window into 19th Century Williamsburg and could be a catalyst for renewed interest and research.

7. 20th Century South 8th Street and Williamsburg, Brooklyn

There is little recorded evidence of the two buildings between 1900 and 1921. From 1921 to 2005, it was owned by and housed the Gabila Knish Factory. The four blocks of South Eighth Street, running from Kent to Roebling, were greatly transformed by the major demographic changes of the twentieth century Williamsburg. These periods can basically be broken up in three periods: 1) 1903 to 1945: the resettlement of thousands of immigrants (Eastern European Jews and Italians) after the Williamsburg Bridge was opened in 1903; and 2) the post World War II Williamsburg. 3) the influx of artists, the new bohemia and conversion of old industrial buildings into luxury housing.

Beginning with the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, the neighborhood underwent dramatic changes. By the 1920's Williamsburg had become a vast and ethnically diverse working class enclave. In addition to being one of the largest Eastern European Jewish immigrant communities, there were also sizeable Italian, Irish and Polish communities. After World War II, with the influx of Hasidic and Puerto Rican communities, the building of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, Urban Renewal, Public Housing, Williamsburg again underwent great changes. Throughout the post war period, Hasidic and Puerto Rican families both lived on South Eighth Street.

Beginning in the 1980's, another wave of change began to sweep through Williamsburg. Artists and craftspeople started moving into the former industrial loft buildings. The same social and economic forces, proximity to Manhattan and a long waterfront border, that helped to shape Williamsburg in the pre Civil War era, are still at work in Williamsburg in the 21st century. Up until the 1970's and later, Kent Avenue was still filled with large factories from the 19th century including the Brooklyn Navy Yard area, Schaefer Brewery and Domino Sugar. The current chapter of Williamsburg is witnessing the destruction of these great industrial buildings for luxury housing.

The Gotham Center considers Williamsburg to be New York City's most diverse neighborhood (footnote). What makes South Eighth Street still one of New York City's most fascinating streets is the highly diverse movement of occupants. From the merchants and workers of the 19th Century to the Eastern European Jewish and Italian immigrants to a street shared by Hasidic and Puerto Rican families in the 1950's to the present.

6. Notes

Business Directory

2Brooklyn Eagle Newspaper. Brooklyn Public Library Online Digital Collection for the Brooklyn Eagle for years 1842 to 1902.

Danforth Brian, Williamsburgh in the Early Nineteenth Century, Journal of Long Island History. Fall 1978.

NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, June 8, 2004, Designation List 354 LP-2151 **131 MACDOUGAL STREET HOUSE**, Manhattan. Building Landmark Report

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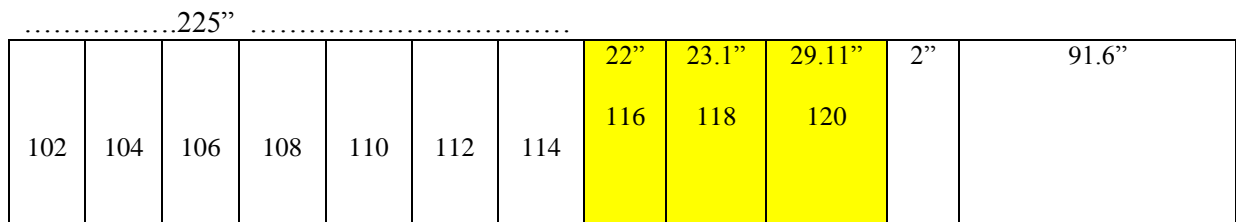
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Reiss, Marcia. History of Williamsburg. Brooklyn Historical Society, 2005

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7. diagram of block 2137 showing the lot dimensions of 116, 118 and 120 South Eighth Street.



South 8th Street, between Berry and Bedford, during the late 19th Century.



Rear photo 120 South 8th Street



120 South 8th Street Front photo