

## Past and Present: The House at 1183 Bergen Street in Crown Heights North



History

Crown Heights

by Suzanne Spellén (aka Montrose Morris) 2

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### A look at Brooklyn, then and now.

The pink house on Bergen Street was still standing when I moved to Crown Heights North in 2000. Only two blocks from my house, I saw it often. It was in rough shape then, but hadn't been boarded up yet.

According to a 1976 survey of Crown Heights North by the LPC, this house, at 1183 Bergen Street, between New York and Brooklyn avenues, was the second oldest house in the neighborhood.

It was built, they figured, somewhere between 1860 and 1865.

The oldest house in Crown Heights North is the George and Susan Elkins House, at 1375 Dean Street, a couple of blocks away. The Elkins house is only 10 years older, built around 1853.

Both houses were the last remnants of this neighborhood's suburban past, the two oldest surviving houses in Crown Heights North.

The Bedford branch of the Lefferts family owned most of the land making up Crown Heights North. They stopped farming and began selling it off in the late 1840s and '50s. The street grid had been marked out in the 1830s, and this land was advertised as a great place for a suburban villa community.



2004 photograph via Landmarks Preservation Commission

### **Crown Heights North's Suburban Past**

A look at old maps of Brooklyn shows that the streets of CHN were dotted with large wood-framed houses, many similar to this one. They were home to affluent people who wanted to get away from crowded Manhattan but still be close enough to commute to their businesses in Lower Manhattan or along Brooklyn's piers.

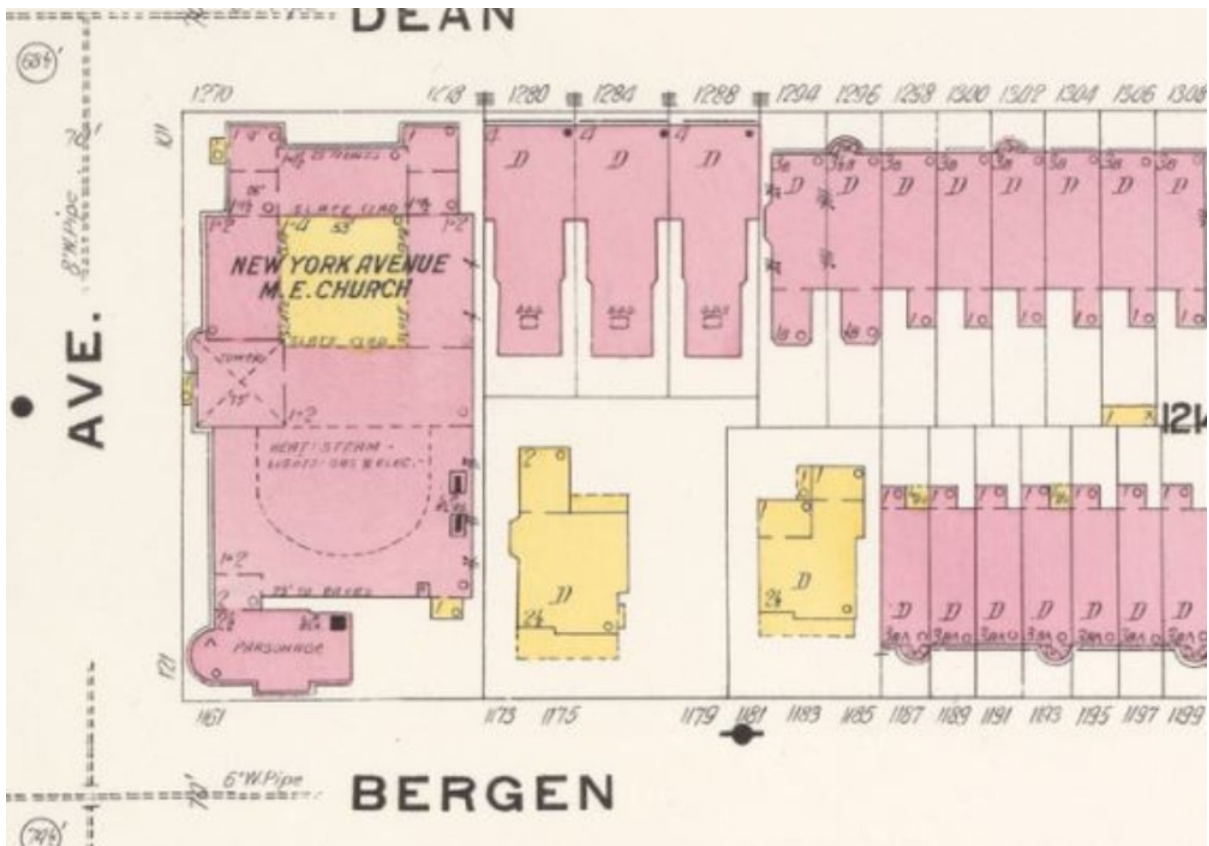
This was decades before the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, but stage lines, then horse-drawn trolley cars soon traveled down major north/south streets such as Fulton Street. By the late 1830s, the Long Island Railroad was traveling down the middle of Atlantic Avenue, with a stop at Nostrand Avenue.

It was possible to live here — a neighborhood still called Bedford at that time — and commute to work. The houses began going up around the neighborhood. By the late 1870s, masonry mansions, such as the Dean Sage house, on St. Marks Avenue at Brooklyn Avenue, began to be built.

The first row houses start to go up, also wood-framed, followed by masonry row houses, then masonry mansions, many of which replaced the earlier wood-framed villas.

The cycle of homes replacing homes, replacing homes, added to new construction, had begun.





1904 map via New York Public Library

By 1904, the neighborhood was all built up. The 1904 map shows a similar wood-framed house next door to 1183, but the rest of the block is now row houses. The large New York Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church complex takes up the whole block of the avenue between Dean and Bergen street.

An expanded view of the area shows row houses interrupted by a large mansion here and there. By now, St. Marks Avenue, just behind Bergen, was populated solely by enormous mansions built by some of Brooklyn's wealthiest people.

The house at 1183 Bergen Street was a two-and-a-half-story Italianate wood-framed villa. The house was built in a popular style of the day, consistent with the architectural writings of Andrew Jackson Downing and Calvert Vaux — a country home in the city.

The house had a wide raised front porch and a tall attic, and it stood on a plot of land that was a comfortable 55 feet wide. It was originally clad in clapboard, not pink asphalt shingle siding, of course. The LPC theorized that the house could have possibly been moved here from a nearby location.

Interestingly enough, the wood-framed house next door at 1175 Bergen Street was almost identical, only a bit larger, and on a wider, 90-foot lot. The houses must have been quite a handsome pair.



1980s tax photo via Municipal Archives

### **The People of 1183 Bergen Street**

By the late 1890s, the house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Charles J. Sands. They moved here from nearby 1201 Bergen Street in the mid 1890s. Charles J. Sands may have been the same man who started a very lucrative stage coach line that traveled along Bedford Avenue in the 1870s.

By the 1890s he was in real estate, wheeling and dealing in Brooklyn properties. His wife was active in local charities and often hosted events here at the house. By 1904, however, they had decamped for Los Angeles.

The house was passed on to at least one other owner before landing in the hands of Mr. Samuel Dombeck around 1917.

Mr. Dombeck's name turns up in the Brooklyn Eagle for several reasons. In 1901 he and several other men filed papers to form a new club called the Millionaire's Club. It was to be a social club for Jewish men, mostly first-generation immigrants, which would form business connections and help its members become more familiar with American customs and institutions.

In reviewing the papers Justice Dickey turned them down, saying he wanted proof that the club's name matched up with the membership. It was a pretty poor reason and a good lesson in surviving American customs and institutions.

Undeterred, Samuel Dombeck also went into real estate and did quite well, eventually buying the Hotel Montague on Montague Street in the Heights.



1175 Bergen Street, next door. 1908 photo via Brooklyn Eagle

By 1917, the Dombecks were living here on Bergen Street. The almost-identical house next door, at 1175, had a similar history to this one, passing through the hands of several socially active, well-to-do people.

It was on the market in 1908 and featured in a photograph in the Brooklyn Eagle. Ads for the house appear again in 1910. The house does not appear in the news again after 1912, at which time it was owned by a Dr. Dominic Saladino.

In January of 1917, Samuel Dombeck announced the building of a large public garage next door to his house, presumably at 1175. The neighborhood was aghast and up in arms at this news. A special hearing was held at the Board of Standards and Appeals.

Neighbors, including some of the very wealthy people on nearby St. Marks Avenue, testified that a public garage in that location would drop property values in the neighborhood.

The New York Avenue Methodist church was also horrified. The back of the church abutted the property in question. They did not want a garage in "the heart of the famous St. Marks Avenue residential section of Brooklyn."

The neighborhood lost. A large commercial garage was built on the site of the house. Dr. Saladino is listed as the owner/developer. Many, many years later, this building was renovated into a NYC Dept. of Social Services Day Care Center. It still stands, and was recently for sale.





Present-day houses and adjacent garage. Photo via Google Maps

1183 lasted a lot longer. But as the LPC and the newly formed Crown Heights North Association worked to get this neighborhood landmarked, the second-oldest house in Crown Heights was torn down before anyone knew what was happening.



Photo via Google Maps

It was replaced by three two-family modern row houses, complete with setbacks and driveways. This could have been a wakeup call to both the community and the LPC. They quickly moved to individually landmark the oldest house in CHN in 2006, literally hours before bulldozers could tear that one down too.

A year later, the first phase of the Crown Heights North Historic District was designated.

Old frame houses are not easy to save in developing neighborhoods. They are often in poor shape, and the land they sit on is more valuable to most people than the house is.

The third-oldest free-standing house in Crown Heights North, on Pacific Street, was not landmarked in 2007. This former Building of the Day was also recently torn down, even though the building was calendared for designation. Hopefully, this will not be allowed to happen again.



Photo by Greg Snodgrass for PropertyShark

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