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**fig. 1.** BHS DUMBO is located in Empire Stores, a 19th-century waterfront warehouse that is today a tourist retail destination. Lively signage and the glass front of the gallery invite visitors to walk inside.

# Waterfront

BHS DUMBO / Brooklyn Historical Society

Brooklyn, New York //

Opened January 2018; long-term

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**Nancy Haffner**

*Waterfront* is a wonder: it is extremely informative without being didactic – and it is really fun to visit. In creating the exhibition, the Brooklyn Historical Society calls on the power of place (“These things happened here”) and fascinating forensics (“This is how we know what we know”). Visitors are invited into the process of unlocking history and in so doing learn that history is dynamic, not static, something that is made every day.

The gallery that houses *Waterfront* is located in Empires Stores, a renovated 19th-century waterfront warehouse complex converted into a tourist destination with restaurants, retail shops, and offices in Brooklyn’s DUMBO neighborhood (the acronym stands for “Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass”). A satellite of the Brooklyn Historical Society (whose headquarters is in nearby Brooklyn Heights), it is currently the only cultural institution in the complex.

The gallery is relatively small and compact (3,200 square feet), the size of a mall retail shop. Fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass windows, a prominent “Brooklyn Histories” sign and a neon arrow (fig. 1) are in tune with the informal destination environment. Colorful and varied exhibits and intriguing artifacts, including a giant industrial winch, are visible from outside, creating a draw for the curious. This is important: while some visitors will certainly know about the DUMBO

gallery from the Brooklyn Historical Society and its website, for others, it will be an unexpected and serendipitous discovery.

## **BHS’s Small Plates Approach Is Well-Suited to the Location**

The BHS DUMBO exhibition design demonstrates an understanding that visitors may not be typical museum enthusiasts, perhaps not even people who generally go to exhibitions. The individual exhibits are designed as “small plates” – informative, thought-provoking, and often entertaining, but not requiring a long time commitment by the visitor. Filled with intriguing stories and surprising facts about the past and the contemporary waterfront, they are tailored to different types of visitors with different interests. The visitor-centered approach is apparent even in the exhibition brochure, which includes an “If you are...Don’t Miss” guide for: “...families with children; ...someone with only 20 minutes; ...interested in the environment; ...passionate about social justice; ...a social media enthusiast; ...interested in learning about Empire Stores; or ...a foodie,” and directs visitors to the pertinent areas of the exhibition. Text panels provide necessary information but in a succinct, lively, and nondidactic style; a variety of tactile, mechanical, and electronic interactives invite visitors to explore and discover.

A critique is a writer’s professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features a critique of a current or recent exhibition.



The exhibition explores the human and natural history of the Brooklyn waterfront. The history of commerce and waterfront development starts with the 19th-century heyday of shipping and manufacturing, and takes visitors through late 20th-century industrial decline and current gentrification.

**There is no designated path through the exhibition. Instead, the design fosters random access based on interest.**

Along the way, it features personal stories of workers, enslaved people, immigrants, and today's residents. The history of the ecosystem covers the environmental effects of waterfront development: landfilling the shore; the growth and demise of oyster farming; the impact of 2012's destructive Hurricane Sandy; climate change and sea rise; and current and future plans for remediation. Objects and artifacts anchor the themes and stories in time and place.

#### **Waterfront's Design Encourages Visitors to Choose their Own Paths Through Interconnected Stories**

There is no designated path through the exhibition. Instead, the design fosters random access based on interest. Although interconnected in content, the 10 areas of the exhibition also work well independently. However, I found it satisfying to start with "The Walled City," which is about the 19th-century waterfront, and to end with the contemporary "After Industry" and "Rising Waters" sections, diverting midway to investigate other topics and themes.

"The Walled City" is a name once used to describe the Brooklyn waterfront, when stretches of brick warehouses crowded the

shoreline and buzzed with activity. The focal point of this area is a segment of an 1879 Currier & Ives lithograph, *The City of Brooklyn*, a bird's-eye view of the 19th-century waterfront. Covering nearly the entire wall and mounted behind plexiglass, the rear lighting makes the translucent map subtly glow. Drawers installed just below its lower edge present a range of stories of people, places, and events tied to specific locations along the waterfront. When you pull out a drawer, it highlights the relevant area on the map. I discovered nuggets of information that were new to me: that bones unearthed during excavation came from men who died of disease on British prison ships during the Revolutionary War; that building the Brooklyn Bridge was dangerous but also deadly; that theft on the waterfront was endemic, exemplified by Lanky Dan the Sugar Man who syphoned sugar off boats in the dead of night; that there had been race riots in the tobacco warehouses; and that Walt Whitman engaged in waterfront trysts.

The entire area is interesting: through text, photographs, and artifacts I learned about navigating the harbor, methods and tools for loading and unloading on the docks, and more (fig. 2). An interactive timeline demonstrates how the Civil War-era Empire Stores changed and evolved in usage over time. Pullout drawers provided an olfactory tour of commercially traded and manufactured goods such as hemp, sugar, and tobacco, once stored in the warehouses. An audio program of character-voice readings of 19th-century newspaper accounts of riding the Staten Island Ferry across New York Harbor added another sensory dimension.

Nearby, "Landfilling the Shore" consists of an elegant floor-to-ceiling sculptural display of more than 80 archeological artifacts excavated from landfill under Empire Stores.

fig. 2. “The Walled City” exhibit provides a comprehensive overview of the 19th-century heyday of commerce on the waterfront.



## NAVIGATING THE HARBOR

The main thoroughfares of 19th-century Brooklyn were not roads or high-ways, but waterways. Night and day, the East River teemed with hundreds of vessels in a scene of maritime bustle and chaos. Steamships, clippers, sloops, and barks brought goods to be stored in Brooklyn's warehouses. Specialized equipment like derricks and floating grain elevators supported the loading and unloading of cargoes. Ferries carried people to and from home and work. Tugboats pushed and hauled massive cargo ships. And local fishermen plied the waters in small sailboats and rowboats.



Model of Lehigh Valley No. 78, 1850s. The ship was built in the Lehigh Valley region of Pennsylvania. It was one of the many ships that plied the waters of the East River and the Hudson River. The ship was used for transporting goods and passengers. It was one of the many ships that plied the waters of the East River and the Hudson River. The ship was used for transporting goods and passengers.



Wooden oar and rope. The oar was used by rowboats to navigate the waters of the East River and the Hudson River. The rope was used for various maritime purposes, including securing cargo and maneuvering ships.



fig. 3. A massive wall of oyster shells forms the backdrop for the “Brooklyn Bivalves” exhibit.





Pullout drawers provide clues to life on the waterfront, with interesting facts about the bottles, fragments of pottery and clothing, shells, tools, and other objects shown. Who knew that cows and horses were kept on the waterfront, workers smoked clay pipes on the job, and “takeout” food was delivered to workers on ceramic plates?

“Brooklyn Bivalves” (fig. 3) is another gem of little-known facts. A panel mounted in front of a massive wall of oyster shells traces the story of how the native Lenape and early settlers subsisted on natural oysters. It also describes how cultivating oysters in the late 1800s was a booming business until the bivalves, polluted by the overwhelming amount of sewage released into New York Harbor, were found to be the source of a typhoid epidemic. I was startled to learn this is still an issue today: during storm surges, sewers can overflow and release raw sewage into the bay.

### **Inclusive Narratives: How the Exhibition Explores Under-Told Stories**

In the center of the gallery, two touchscreen interactive kiosks – “A Laboring Family” and “An Unfree Waterfront” – respectively tell the stories of 1) 19th-century dockworker Michael Harkins and his family and 2) three enslaved Brooklynites. Low-tech flip panels add additional information. I found these two components to be impressively well thought out. Visitor-friendly, intuitive screen navigation and a clear indication of levels of investigation made it easy to access extensive information. Through legal documents,

receipts, census rolls, period paintings and other primary resources, it was possible to extrapolate information about the lives of real people whose stories, and others like them, otherwise go largely unrecognized.

I found the “Factory Women” exhibit (fig. 4) to be exceptionally relevant in honoring the women who worked in waterfront factories in the 19th and 20th centuries and contributed to Brooklyn’s booming economy. Text panels, graphs, artifacts, photographs, and oral histories tell how women workers prevailed despite inequality in pay, limits in the type of work they were allowed to do, and the prejudice they faced for working outside the home. Little had changed by World War II, as revealed in the oral histories of women who joined the wartime workforce in the Navy Yard as welders and riveters.

fig. 4. “Factory Women” honors the history of women workers on the waterfront through artifacts, photographs, graphs, and oral-history recordings.





fig. 5. A young visitor enthusiastically builds a waterfront to his liking on the “Waterfront Neighborhood” wall.

### Examining a Recent Past, A Changing Present – and Pointing to the Future

Two components, “After Industry” and “Rising Waters,” bring the exhibition up to the present day. “After Industry” covers the mid-20th-century decline in manufacturing and shipping and the effect of the current reinvention and gentrification. Installed in a contemplative space, visitors can sit and look at salvaged artifacts from the abandoned Empire Stores warehouse while listening to oral histories of residents recalling those decades. This was one of the only misses in the exhibition for me – the oral histories were very long (four to five minutes each) and didn’t hold my attention. “Rising Waters” features short video interviews with stakeholders including historians, business owners, politicians, scientists, and activists who discuss key questions about climate change and related sea level rise.

The eight-minute film, *At Water’s Edge*, covers 20,000 years of history, from the forming of the landmasses in New York harbor up to today’s waterfront, told through 10 significant historical moments. I found it to be a bit of a misnomer to call it a “multimedia experience,” as described on the BHS website, but it is a very good film – informative and moving, with elegant and inventive use of period visuals, clear scientific animation, beautiful new footage, effective use of character voices reading poetry and literary excerpts, and an evocative soundtrack. It plays every 15 minutes starting on the hour in a dedicated theater space.

### Putting Yourself into History

For visitors of all ages, the “History in Motion” experience is great. You stand in front of a large screen and select by gesture one of 10 historic painting and photographs from the Brooklyn Historical Society’s collections. The selected image fills the large screen. Then, you are “dropped” into the image and prompted to interact with historical figures and objects. Your actions are recorded into a 60-second movie, which you can share on social media. The experience works best with several people; the first time I tried it, I was by myself and as a solo experience it fell flat, but the second time I joined other visitors and it was really fun.

Although there were no children when I visited, the overall tone, content, and style of the exhibits is family-friendly. Tactile and mechanical interactivity is a welcome change from all-digital interactivity. Several components are designed for children: the smelling stations in “The Walled City” are kid-height, dress-up opportunities with hard hats, welders’ masks, and aprons and

tools are available in the “Factory Women” area, and the 10-foot illustrated “Waterfront Neighborhood” wall encourages kids to try their hand at building their own waterfront with magnetic bridges, vehicles, buildings, animals, and landmarks (fig. 5).

## Conclusion

One of the clear strengths of BHS DUMBO’s *Waterfront* is that it capitalizes on the power of place. The history and stories explored in the exhibition happened right here, much of them in this very building. Throughout the exhibition, the power of place is recalled and reinforced through locating the stories and events on sections of the iconic, illuminated Currier and Ives view. Large and small artifacts make the information real, concrete. One of my walk-away lessons from the exhibition was to look at the present-day Brooklyn landscape anew, searching out vestiges of the past, turning history into a living, walking experience.

I love also that the exhibition gave me the opportunity to become, for a short while, a history detective. The exhibits demonstrate how information is unearthed, traced, coordinated, and interpreted to tell a story of how we know what we know about the past. “Landfilling the Shore,” “A Laboring Family” and “An Unfree Waterfront” pointed me where to look, but let me draw my own conclusions. With new eyes, I looked carefully at artifacts and fragments of excavated items to see what they could tell me; I poured over legal documents, receipts, and genealogical records and discovered clues about the lives of real people.

My only complaints, and they are really quibbles, are that the BHS DUMBO Gallery is not easy to find, being located on the second floor of Empire Stores. I had to ask

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directions and had some missteps in locating it. Better signage would be a big help. Likewise, I entirely missed the “Made in Brooklyn” object display that highlights some of the iconic products made on the Brooklyn waterfront, including Chiclets Gum, Domino Sugar, and Benjamin Moore paint since apparently it is installed in the museum bathrooms! And, a countdown clock for *At Water’s Edge* would be appreciated.

History museums often have an uphill battle fighting the perception that history is dry and dull. For a history museum located in a tourist retail destination, the competition for visitor interest makes that battle more intense. *Waterfront* nimbly meets the challenge by focusing on the human aspect of Brooklyn waterfront history – quirky (but important) facts and compelling personal stories presented in ways that invite the visitor to think, explore, and participate.

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