

**A LETTER INTRODUCTORY:
FROM MESSRS. OLMSTED,
HARRIS, TROWBRIDGE
AND RICHARDSON**

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A Letter Introductory: From Messrs. Olmsted, Harris, Trowbridge and Richardson by H. H. Richardson & J. M. Trowbridge

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Staten Island Improvement Commission.

A

LETTER INTRODUCTORY

FROM

MESSRS. OLMSTED, HARRIS, TROWBRIDGE AND
RICHARDSON.

1871.

EDGEWATER, Dec. 22d, 1870.

To the Staten Island Improvement Commission :

GENTLEMEN.--Before completing the work which you have given us to do, we wish to obtain the results of an analysis of waters from several sources on the Island, and certain other promised information, and our report will thus be delayed until your next regular meeting.

We have thought it might be well for us, however, to define in advance, our views of the general line of policy to be adopted in a comprehensive scheme of improvements for Staten Island, thus explaining, to a certain extent, the grounds upon which our final propositions must be recommended to your approval, and this will be the object of our present communication.

We wish to so far forecast the future market of this metropolis for real estate, that we can be satisfied what of its demands Staten Island in particular may be prepared to supply with the greatest certainty of large, general, ultimate profit.

All possible demands of the future may, in the first place, be broadly divided under the heads of Commercial and Domestic; domestic being understood in this case to refer not only to dwellings but to whatever would administer directly to household economy, convenience and comfort, including stores, shops and markets, for local supply.

The eastern margin of the Island, from a little north of Tompkins landing nearly to the Yacht Club House, has advantages of a peculiar character for certain commercial purposes, deep water and good holding ground being found close off shore, and large shipping being less liable to be troubled by ice than at any other point in the harbor at which it can lie with equal safety and convenience in other respects. An extensive use of these advantages would lead to the building of a special class of warehouses, factories and shops along the shore. As, within narrow limits, this demand is liable to become an imperative one, the erection of many permanent and costly domestic buildings on this shore is not to be expected. The sooner, therefore, its commercial advantages are developed the better.

Beyond this district, we do not think that a commercial demand for

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real estate is ever likely to be of much importance, or that it should be courted, for the Island, and as we are advised that a different opinion is held by some of your Commission, we wish to explain why.

In any region where the value of land depends chiefly on its agricultural productiveness, as, a generation since was the case here, any undertakings that are calculated to improve its means of communication with a distant market, or to establish a market within it, can hardly fail to benefit the landowners, who, consequently, are often asked to aid in the introduction of them. Nearly all of the territory of the United States being in that condition, there is naturally a pretty strong public opinion about the interest and duty of landowners in this respect. But Staten Island is now very differently situated from the country in general. It has no difficulty in finding a market for its crops, or in finding shipping enough to move them. What advantages, then, can it expect to gain by courting commerce?

In answer we may be pointed to the value which real estate has acquired in the commercial quarter of New York Island. Staten Island has a much greater extent of shore on the same harbor than New York Island, and while it is considerably nearer the sea, it is also approachable to better advantage from the main land, especially by railways. Does it then seem unreasonable to expect that by adding certain artificial to its natural advantages, so much of the commerce of New York can be drawn to Staten Island, as will greatly advance the value of its real estate?

The question is how much—how many acres—of the whole area of the island is likely ever to be actually occupied, do what you will, for commercial purposes? We think we can show that it is very little indeed.

If we look at the two parts of New York city as divided, say, at Fourteenth street, we shall see that one side is mainly occupied for commercial purposes the other for domestic. Imagine, then, that this division had been made more perfect, and that it had not been confined to the politically limited New York city, but had included all of that larger New York, now numbering a population of nearly a million outside the city, which sends a deputation of men every day to its commercial quarter. Under this division it will be evident that the buildings of the domestic class not only already cover a great deal more ground, but that *their number and area of occupation is enlarging much more rapidly* than that of the commercial class, and this notwithstanding, perhaps, that the amount of business transacted, of goods exchanged, is larger than ever before.

It is not very difficult to see some reasons why this should be so, and why it is likely to continue.

In the progress of commerce, men of marked ability have more and more duties pressed upon them, and duties in undertakings of the most diverse character. The necessity of personal conference in regard to affairs requiring separate offices, gives increasing value to time during certain hours, and distance is for these purposes yet equivalent in the market to time. Hence vicinity to various offices becomes an increasing element of value.

The increasing specialization in business which often makes many sources of supply necessary to be called on for a purpose which could formerly be served by one, tends in the same general direction; the result being always an increasing motive to compactness.

At every center of commerce, consequently, more and more business tends to come under each roof, and, in the progress of building, walls are carried higher and higher, and deeper and deeper, so that now "vertical railways" are coming in vogue.

It may be thought that these observations apply only to commerce in a restricted sense, that is to say to exchanges and administration, and especially not to manufactures and shipping. The question is important because some think that it may be possible to establish a great manufacturing quarter of the metropolis on the island, and with this in view a different line of policy might be advised from that which we shall assume to be required. It is well known that conditions which make a difference of many years in the expectations of life with operatives are no obstacle of consequence to the success of manufactories. Let us then examine the facts.

There are between four and five thousand manufacturing establishments on New York Island, with an aggregate capital of about \$70,000,000. Why are they on New York Island rather than anywhere else?

Not because of cheap land, cheap building materials, cheap food and lodging for operatives; not because of cheap coal, or wood, or water-power, or taxes or insurances. For all manufacturing purposes in which these conditions are of primary importance, building sites must be sought far away, not only from New York but from Staten Island.

It is true that for certain of the latter class of purposes cheapness of transportation to and from the island of New York becomes also important. But the cost of transportation lies chiefly in the loading and unloading. Distance, within certain limits, extending far beyond Staten Island, counts but little. Moreover such disadvantages as distance establishes are lessened by every extension or improvement or

addition to the roads, boats, telegraphs and mail facilities which connect the outer country with the town. They will be less in the future than they are at present. Thus the difficulty of establishing new centers or new sub-centers of manufacturing, like Newark, has, of late years, greatly increased and will continue to increase.

Dividing then, all manufacturing purposes for which land and buildings are liable to be required, into two classes, one of which economy will place at a comparatively remote distance, we see that, with respect to the other class, the same motives operate as with reference to buildings simply for the exchange and administrative offices of commerce—motives, namely, which favor a tendency to increasing compactness of association; to higher and deeper buildings, and to the occupation of less and less land relatively to the whole amount of the trade of the port.

The increasing use of large, deep, fast steamers, lying but a few days at the wharf, and each carrying in a year to and from any given hundred yards of shore ten times the burden of the old fashioned coasting craft, and the increasing employment of steam and machinery in handling and stowing cargoes, tends to make dock room of less and less value relatively to the whole amount of freighting business to be done at the port. General McClellan's plans will aid this tendency.

The length of shore front on navigable water within ten miles of the City Hall is about eighty miles, of which a tenth part only, and that all more than seven miles away, is on Staten Island; of the seventy miles perhaps twenty is now in constant demand for the accommodation of shipping; of the remaining fifty an important part, as yet unavailable for shipping, will soon be improved by undertakings in which the cities of New York and Brooklyn and leading railway corporations are now engaged. The land lying immediately back from the shore, to the extent of several thousand acres, is flat and easily adapted to manufacturing and other ordinary commercial purposes. It is on the other hand generally unattractive, and cannot easily be made, even tolerably, suitable for domestic purposes. We submit that at any rate of progress which past experience gives us reason to anticipate, and especially in view of the shrinking tendency in respect to ground-space which we have shown to exist, it will be a great many years before any considerable part of the land thus available and thus likely to be pressed on the market, will be required to be occupied by buildings, docks, or other structures for commercial purposes.

If not, then it is certainly impracticable, by any use of the taxable and other political resources of the county, to place Staten Island so

successfully in competition for supplying the limited amount of land that is going to be wanted in the extension of the commerce of the port that any important favorable general effect upon the value of its real estate can be expected to be produced.

On the other hand, it is only necessary to go out on Long Island a little north and east from Brooklyn to see how harmful an effect is liable to result from a very moderate effort in that direction, many people of wealth who formerly lived there, having been driven away, and tracts of land formerly clothed with beauty laid waste almost as by an invading army, this being the result of a number of scattered manufactories. It is true that there are manufactures which would not be likely to have any such effect, but it is also true that manufacturing establishments started for one object are liable, after a time, to be adapted to another, and that those which have the greatest permanency in the outskirts of large towns are such as are most offensive, and destructive of value to the better class of domestic property near them. Illustrations of this are not wanting on Staten Island. It is also to be considered that it is very difficult to draw the line between a manufactory which is legally permissible, and one which is legally a nuisance, and that when capital has been once largely invested in any works, it is always a difficult and expensive undertaking for the public to remove or control them. The owners of property in the district we have referred to on Long Island, having first invited the introduction of manufactories, have of late years made great but vain exertions to cause the removal or suppression of many of them.

Turning now to the domestic division, is there, in the first place, any question that a tendency prevails precisely opposite to that which we have seen to be governing the commercial—a dispersing and colonizing tendency? If it is recollected that the people who inhabit the tenement-house districts of New York are very little to be taken into account, simply because they are just those who are least able to get what they want, and consequently manifest least what is generally wanted, for domestic purposes, we think there can be none.

A man who has probably made more money by suburban real estate improvements than any one else in the country, said to us lately, "I find that everywhere there has been the largest advance where the streets have been widest and the lots deepest, and if, where the determination of the width of streets and the depth and breadth of lots has been under my control during the last thirty years, I had, in every case, insisted on having them doubled, I should have been at least a million dollars the better for it. I will never again, if I can help it,

have a street laid through or beside property of mine in the outer part of a town, less than a hundred feet wide, nor lay off lots less than fifty feet wide and a hundred and fifty feet deep, unless it is where I wish to draw commercial business or a poor class of people for a special purpose, as where hands are needed for a factory."

Is this experience and opinion exceptional? If so, why, over so large an extent of ground on New York Island, in Westchester and in Kings and Queens has the plan upon which land was laid out twenty thirty and forty years ago been discarded?

This plan was generally that of rectangular blocks of 25x100 feet lots, with streets of from fifty to seventy feet in width, a plan tolerably well adapted to purely commercial requirements. The new plans are less regular and will give larger blocks, wider streets, deeper lots and more open spaces. This, according to our reading of it, is simply an adjustment of the market to a rising demand of a special character for domestic purposes, which can be met on New York Island only by a compromise with the commercial demand, and consequently, at the best, but imperfectly, but which, with the small exception we have referred to, the whole of Staten Island may be adapted to supply in the most complete way and with great and speedy profit to its land-owners.

From an examination of the recent census returns, which we have been permitted to make at the Marshall's office, it is ascertained that in one district, over twenty square miles in extent, about as far north from Wall street as the middle of Staten Island, there has been an increase of population during five years of over ninety-five per cent.; in another sixteen miles distant, a little larger, forty-four per cent.; in another twenty-five miles distant, or further than the most distant point of Staten Island, fifty-five per cent. These are all in Westchester County; and, from personal examination, we know that the larger part of the immigration has consisted of thrifty families, each carrying with it considerable capital, and almost invariably going into villas and cottages, with more or less extensive grounds.

There are a number of districts on Long Island and New Jersey where an increase of a similar character has occurred quite as large.*

* The increase in population on Staten Island in five years has been less than sixteen per cent. The average capital per head brought in and made available for taxation has been less than it has in some of the districts above referred to, which have increased much more rapidly. There are several districts in Westchester and Long Island, as near and as accessible as the most favored of these, which, as we perceive by the census returns, have either lost or failed to increase at all in population, and the real estate of which is believed to have fallen in value. We have either visited or had communication with physicians and intelligent citizens in each of these, and, in every case, the first reason given for the depression of their real estate is a reputation for unhealthfulness.