FROM BEACH RESORT TO BEDROOM COMMUNITY:

STATEN ISLAND AND THE IMPACT OF THE VERRAZANO-NARROWS BRIDGE

BY

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VITA

Alina Durkovic, daughter of Aljo and Sendiya Durkovic, wife of Mirsad Bajrami, was born on January 12, 1990, in Flushing, New York. After graduating in 2008 from Bayside High School with an Advanced Regents Diploma, she entered Pace University as the recipient of the Pace Incentive Award and Trustee Recognition Award. In 2010, she became the co-president for Pi Gamma Mu an honor society in the social sciences, as well as Alpha Chi a national college honor society for students from all academic disciplines. In 2012, she received the Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science.

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Abstract

This thesis will use historical, interpretive, and sociological methods to examine the process of suburbanization or “boroughization” of Staten Island using the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge as lens for the population growth that occurred from the 1950s through the 1970s. Specifically, this project will investigate the ways which the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge caused a increase residential communities in Staten Island. It is hypothesized that the Verrazano Bridge caused rapid growth and destruction of the idyllic lifestyle residents of Staten Island were accustomed to. The research in this thesis will investigate the extent to which the life on Staten Island changed and how the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge resulted in both positive and negative impacts from the 1950s to 1970. Although this thesis is mostly focused on population growth and change from 1950s through the 1970s, it is important to understand the historical background of Staten Island starting in the 1900s, which is where this study will begin.

This inquiry will be conducted through a historical investigation of three specific points of interest in Staten Island and the Verrazano Bridge’s histories: (1) early plans for physically connecting Staten Island to the rest of New York city, including proposed tunnel plans which began in the early 1930s until the 1950s, (2) the vision of Robert Moses and responses from the communities in Staten Island, Bay Ridge and elected officials in the later 1950s and early 1960s, and (3) the building, completion and impact of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, 1964 through 1970. Interpretive analysis of historical and archival materials include—books, historical accounts, newspapers, essays, museum archives, exhibitions, photographs, maps, census data and articles—will focus on reconstructing the social and historical context in which Staten Islanders were affected by the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Analysis will be guided by the hypothesis stated above, which is that the idyllic rural borough of Staten Island was disrupted with rapid growth by means of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, but will remain open to other social, historical or political explanations for the nature of suburbanization in Staten Island, New York. By focusing on historical archives, photographs, maps and census data, this research will contribute to urban studies specifically in the subject of suburbanization because the changes in Staten Island during this time period is very scarcely studied. I wish to bring light to the topic and illustrate the rich history the island possesses. This thesis will be a social history with historical and sociological analysis.
The Interdisciplinarity of the Study

The research in this thesis will be utilized two different traditions: sociology and history. These two disciplines are necessary because they illustrate a better understanding of the changes in beachfront development and transportation in Staten Island as well as its impacts on the residents in neighborhoods such as South and Midland Beaches. Looking at Staten Island from a sociological standpoint, I have conducted data collection and analysis using museum exhibitions, census data, planning documents, and theories of suburbanization in post-war America. From a historical standpoint, I have researched articles, newspaper stories, essays, non-fiction works, blogs and original documents/primary sources to provide context to the circumstances and conditions that influenced my study including the building and redevelopment of Staten Island’s beaches, boardwalks and residential communities.

By definition in urban studies the suburbs represent a physical form of settlement, neither urban nor rural. Staten Island falls into the category of suburb because it is no longer as rural as it once was, it is the most “green” out of the other boroughs and still lacks a “downtown” or “city-like” component. Most Staten Islanders commute to and from Manhattan as the “central business district.” Areas lying outside large cities are defined together with those cities as “metropolitan statistical areas”.¹ Historically, some suburbs start out as cities but were then absorbed by urban growth.

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In the case of Staten Island, the island started off as a rural countryside in the late 1800s that was later changed by growth after the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in 1964. Thus, by definition the study of Staten Island employs the traditions of both sociology and history. This thesis will show how the island started off as a rural region in New York City and transitioned into a suburb where people live but work commute to central business district, which is Manhattan in the case of Staten Island. During the 1950s, most of the United States was looking towards settling in the suburbs to be able to own a home and a car, which is discussed in Kenneth Jackson’s book, *The Crabgrass Frontier*. Many Brooklyn residents found this vision and the ability of the “American Dream” in Staten Island. The Verrazano Bridge made this connection with the American Dream possible. Suburban regions lack public space and rely exclusively on the automobile, which will be discussed in the context of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and increase in traffic flow on Staten Island. The study of suburban areas in connection with their urban counterparts have been important points of interest in understanding the formation of the suburbs and why people have decided to make an exodus from the city and into the “country.” Suburbanization in the United States was a central part of the campaign to create the ideal American family, and many local and federal governments played a direct role in the mass migration from the cities especially with the increase of tract homes and FHA loans. Suburbia was the American Dream for couples in postwar America as a place where they could own their own home and raise their children away from the terrors of city life. The topic of tract homes will be discussed in this paper and the protest by native Staten Islanders dealing with the
“newcomers” from the other boroughs. This study will show the transition from rural island to suburban borough and ultimately becoming a “bedroom community”.
**Introduction & Research Question**

There has been a longstanding notion that Staten Island is New York City’s “forgotten borough,” held by residents who feel neglected by city government. Local residents have also dealt with the frustrations of being excluded from expanding subway systems throughout the other boroughs. The term has been used in the media as well as by local New York City elected officials such as Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and Republican candidate for Mayor Edward Corsi in 1945. Physically, Staten Island is the most isolated borough in New York City, separated from Manhattan by five miles of water and a 30 minute ride on the ferry. One account noted, “In Staten Island there had been powerful factions that dreamed of the day when a bridge might be built to link their borough more firmly with the rest of New York City.” In the early 1950s, many Staten Island residents were overjoyed to hear of the proposed bridge, they hoped this would trigger a boom and give the island a change. Other residents were afraid their peaceful, country-like island would inherit “problems of the city”, such as crime and pollution.

The intent of the proposed study is to learn about Staten Island’s history, political, and social factors that have affected the island through time. The focus will be on the Verrazano-Bridge’s impact on suburban and urban growth. This research will address the issues Staten Islanders had encountered with the building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the many physical changes. Staten Island is New York City’s smallest yet fastest growing borough; a suburban community with half a million people.

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2 Kramer, Steven. *Staten Island Conservative Bastion in a Liberal City* (Page 13)
3 Talese, Gay. (Page 16)
living at the edge of the nation’s most global city. Some of the questions I hope to answer include:

1. What were the preliminary plans for connecting Staten Island to the rest of New York City?
2. What was master builder, Robert Moses’ vision in the development of Staten Island?
3. What communities thought the Verrazano-Bridge would promote population and economic growth?
4. What communities thought their idyllic borough would be destroyed by overdevelopment?
5. How did the influx of outsiders ultimately turn Staten Island into a “bedroom community”?

This thesis will investigate the push and pull factors of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge starting in the 1950s until the 1970s as well as the physical changes in landscape such as the beach front and overdevelopment and highway construction. These are the central questions of the study.
Research Plan & Methodology

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<tr>
<td>Historic Richmond Town</td>
<td>441 Clarke Ave, Staten Island, NY 10306</td>
<td>(718) 351-1611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staten Island Museum</td>
<td>75 Stuyvesant Pl, Staten Island, NY 10301</td>
<td>(718) 727-1135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Staten Island, CUNY</td>
<td>2800 Victory Blvd, New York, NY 10314</td>
<td>(718) 982-2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Museum of the City of New York</td>
<td>1220 Fifth Avenue New York, NY 10029</td>
<td>(212)-534-1672</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York Public Library</td>
<td>5th Ave at 42nd St, New York, NY 10018</td>
<td>(917) 275-6975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooklyn Historical Society</td>
<td>128 Pierrepont Street Brooklyn, NY 11201</td>
<td>(718) 222-4111</td>
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My research methodology required gathering relevant data from the specified documents and compiling databases in order to analyze the material and arrive at a more complete understanding of the impact of the Verrazano-Bridge on Staten Island. Using the methods of historical and sociological analysis, this inquiry will be carried out by examining three specific conflicts (1) early plans for physically connecting Staten Island to the rest of New York City, including proposed tunnel plans (2) the vision of Robert Moses and responses from the communities in Staten Island, Bay Ridge and elected officials (3) the building, completion and impact of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Each of these conflicts are important tools for understanding Staten Islanders’ feelings of isolation and the need for economic growth and thus represents a rich opportunity for detailed analysis of the research questions outlined above.

To analyze these conflicts I have traveled to museums, historical societies, libraries and universities to view historical archives and original data for my analysis. I also used U.S. Census records to design a graph of the population changes in Staten
Island, pre-bridge and post-bridge. The most important research sources was original archives, photographs and maps from the Staten Island Museum, Staten Island Historical Society and College of Staten Island, CUNY.

I reviewed Staten Island Museum’s 1989 exhibition entitled, “Beyond the Bridge”. From this exhibition I have read through essay submissions of native Staten Islanders’ views of rural life in Staten Island. Most of the essays submitted to this exhibition discuss community life, environmental and transportation concerns. From these essays I have learned about “islandness” which a term coined by native Staten Islanders on what being from Staten Island means to an individual on a personal level as well as how they viewed the “outsiders” coming into their borough during the 1960s. Understanding what “islandness” means has been important in gaining insight on those that were opposed to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. This was the group that did not want their island destroyed by local elected officials or builders such as Robert Moses.

The College of Staten Island (CSI) library contained rare book collections on Staten Island’s history. The Brooklyn Historical Society also contained books and manuscripts from the opening day of the Verrazano Bridge. I was able to piece history together from reading the speeches that were given and the physical invitations and photographs from the opening day as well as the tickets used in the 60s for crossing the bridge. The New York Public Library and Historical Richmond Town were the essential locations for viewing before and after photographs, maps, drawings and planning
documents for the bridge and being able to see through pictures how Staten Island had changed in this time period of the 50s to the 70s.4

The Museum of the City of New York exhibition previews gave me a framework for my own research on Staten Island. From September 2012 through January 2013, an exhibition entitled, “From Farm to City: Staten Island 1661-2012” would be the first major exhibition to explore the physical evolution and urban development of New York’s “forgotten borough.” The exhibition and companion website traces “the transformation of Staten Island from its agricultural origins to its current efforts to balance development with preservation of its distinctive character.”5 The exhibition examines Staten Island’s unique role in the broader story of urban development in the city. I was able to study the photographs, drawings, paintings and maps the museum had available.6 I discovered the many retreats, estates, resorts, sporting grounds and amusement parks that turned Staten Island into a pleasure ground for many New Yorkers beginning in the 19th century—and their enduring impact. This led me to research further into the Happyland Amusement Park as a starting point of this thesis. The exhibition structure gave me a basis for my own study revolving around the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge which was the development of Staten Island over time: the island as beach resort, and suburb. The second part of the exhibition helped me explore how the island became a retreat for urbanites looking for ways to leave crowds, heat and disease of New York City. By the end of the 19th century, development

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4 I was unable to include these photographs in this thesis because of copywrite laws but I was able to take some off the online archive.
6 The museum was unable to provide me with much assistance since the private collections did not belong to the Museum of the City of New York.
included private resorts, country homes and amusement parks. The final part of the exhibition showed the growth of the island after the completion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in the early 1960s, I have extended this thesis to include the 1970s.
Review of Literature

One of the most influential books on the study of the suburbs is Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier*. Jackson describes the process of suburbanization in the American City and the “American Dream” of the 1950s. The exodus from mainly Manhattan and Brooklyn into Staten Island after the completion of the Verrazano Bridge is explained by Jackson’s concept of “drive-in” culture. When highways, connections and housing became available, people were able to live in the suburbs and work in cities thus Staten Island became a bedroom community for new residents. *Crabgrass Frontier* provides an overview and introduction to the causes of what became a unique form of American living known as the “suburb.”

Robert A. Beauregard book *When America Became Suburban*, is modern theory on suburbanization. Beauregard discusses the political and business decisions to invest in mass-production housing, which caused an uproar in Staten Island in the late 1960s. The concept of the shopping mall and automobile ownership has also been evident in the changes of Staten Island which is discussed below.

*Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth Jackson, 1985*

The suburban landscape that developed around American cities after World War II radically altered America’s identity. The suburbs represented the fulfillment of the dream of home ownership, centered on the single family home on its individual lot with a front and back yard. Historian Kenneth Jackson has described the American suburb as, “affluent and middle class Americans live in suburban areas that are far from their work places, in homes that they own, and in the center of yard that by urban standards
elsewhere are enormous.”⁷ Jackson also defines the suburb as “both a planning type and a state of mind based on imagery and symbolism.”⁸

In Kenneth Jackson’s Crabgrass Frontier, the author attempts to broadly interpret the American suburban experience, which he views as different from the suburbanization process of other major world cities. Jackson tries “to integrate intellectual, architectural, urban, and transportational history with public policy analysis, and...place the American experience within the context of international developments.”⁹ His working definition of post-war suburbs has five modules:

1. peripheral location
2. relatively low density
3. architectural similarity
4. easy availability
5. economic and racial homogeneity

Peripheral location refers to metropolitan regions determining that suburbs accounted for as least 62 percent of construction between 1945 through 1973. By 1950, the national suburban growth rate was ten times that of central cities, and in 1954 Fortune magazine estimated that 9 million people had moved to the suburbs in the previous decade.¹⁰ In New York City for example, the only area in the 1946-1947 study

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⁸ Jackson, 10.
⁹ Jackson, 90.
¹⁰ Jackson, 231.
where city construction was greater than that of the suburbs, was on the outer edges of Queens, a borough that had been largely undeveloped in 1945.

The second major characteristic of post-war suburbs was that of relatively low-density. Row houses had quickly become unpopular and between 1946 and 1956, 97 percent of all new single family homes were detached and surrounded by their own plots. This change allotted a higher proportion of their land area to streets and open spaces. The new design of neighborhoods was based on the assumption that residents would own automobiles and that those without cars would face a severe handicap in access to jobs and shopping facilities.

The third characteristic was that of architectural similarity. Most American families that searched for a new home leaned towards tract houses, which grew in increasing popularity to builders investing in Staten Island lots post-bridge completion. In order to simplify production methods and reduce design fees, larger developers offered no more than a half-dozen basic house plans, and some offered half that number. The result was a monotony and repetition that was especially stark in the early years of the subdivision, before home owners began transforming their homes and spaces according to personal taste. This was evident when Staten Islanders began resenting what was becoming of their borough by 1967 and felt that builders were destroying its natural beauty.

Architectural similarity extended beyond the tract home and to the nation as a whole. Each region of the country had developed a particular style of home such as the colonial style of New England, plantation homes in Louisiana and encircled patios of the Southwest.
The fourth characteristic of post-World War II housing was its easy availability and thus its reduced suggestion of wealth. Mass-production techniques, government financing and low interest rates made it simple and cheaper to buy homes in the suburbs than it was to reinvest in the central city or pay high rents at market prices.

The fifth and possibly the most important characteristic of the post-war suburbs was economic and racial homogeneity. The sorting out of families by income and color began even before the Civil War and was stimulated by the growth of the factory system. This pattern was highly visible in Philadelphia and New York and accentuated with the automobile. As early as the 1920s, the whites of Atlanta flocked to the fast growing wealthy suburbs. By the 1930s, zoning laws had become a device to keep poor people and industries out of affluent areas. Southern cities used zoning to enforce racial segregation and in suburbs everywhere, North and South, zoning was used by the people who already lived within the arbitrary boundaries of a community as a method of keeping everyone else out. Apartments, factories and “blight”, a euphemism for blacks and people limited means were rigidly excluded. Racial homogeneity efforts did continue in the 1950s and 1960s, many whites would move to protest a black purchase in their community.

The Crabgrass Frontier provides valuable information on the important relationships that exist between planners, landscape architects, developers, realtors, magazine editors, inventors, utility companies, politicians and the middle class' appetite for the perfect rural town, far away from the congestion, noise, expensive land, and what the Federal

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11 Jackson, 241.
Housing Administration (FHA) called "inharmonious racial groups" of the inner city.

There is a notion that the first exodus to the suburbs started with the rich who wanted to escape city life for vacation homes. Eventually when city taxes skyrocketed, the middle class and lower middle class followed the trend to suburbia. Post-World War II America marked the pinnacle of suburbanization in America. Increasing numbers of Americans could afford to buy homes because of the emergence of new cities of wartime production and government assistance for veterans. Given the massive growth of affordable dwellings accessible by the highway and train, families flocked to planned towns such as Levittown where all the details such as schools and public works were already in place so that builders could erect as many as thirty homes a day to meet demand. Jackson also describes how America’s “drive-in” culture grew to accommodate and enhance the culture of post-war suburbs. In addition to highways to transport suburban residents to the cities and garages in the new suburban homes, post-war suburbs also contributed to new forms of commercialism including the motel, drive-in theaters, fast food, and shopping malls. Between 1950 and 1980, when the American population increased by 50 percent, the number of automobiles increased by 200 percent.

The analysis of suburbanization as provided by Jackson illustrates the factors that drive individuals and groups away from the core of cities and into the peripheries. Not only does Jackson provide a statistical analysis for the financial reasons to move further from jobs but he also visits the psychological and social reasons for moving far away from city congestion and into residential retreats. The relationship between

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12 Jackson, 235.
transportation technology and the ability to live in the suburbs and commute to urban centers for work is a crucial point in his work. Jackson presents a compelling argument that the American suburb has developed along a course different than other nations due to the availability of land and the idealization of the home as a middle class goal.

*When America Became Suburban, Robert A. Beauregard, 2006*

In Robert A. Beauregard’s book “When America Became Suburban”, it is discussed that postwar domestic prosperity also led to mass suburbanization. This book offers a modern theory of suburbanization in the United States. By increasing disposable incomes, expanding home ownership, automobile purchases, acres of single family homes and highway, an affluent society established the necessary conditions to draw people and investment from central cities and settle them in the surrounding suburbs.\(^{13}\)

This is easily seen in the case of Staten Island with the proximity to the central city by ferry yet being known as the country or a beach resort. Rising disposable personal incomes provided the money that made a suburban life possible. In turn, the services and goods, from homes to patio furniture, that suburban living required fueled the economy. “Lawn mower manufacturers and kitchen-appliance companies expanded, and new businesses emerged to provide food-waste disposers and backyard swing sets, all designed to serve the suburban way of life.”\(^{14}\) A single family, detached house was like a car, a crucial element in the new economy of mass consumption. Suburbanization also required massive public expenditures on highways, water-filtration plants, and

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\(^{14}\) Beauregard, Robert A., Page. 47
schools. “Suburbanization was one of the prime engines of postwar economic growth.”

In the early 20th century, small town life began to challenge rural life for the position of preferred alternative to living in the big cities. Although the countryside held fewer opportunities, “Americans retained a strong attachment to rural-agrarian ideals and a sense of themselves as free, unhampered by legal constraints, and independent. For such people the city represented closure and restraint.” Rural life allowed Americans to own land and to insulate themselves from the institutions of society. In the post-war period, Americans wanted the economic benefits of urbanization while resisting the way of life usually associated with living in big cities.

The biggest purchase people made was a house and a house was a large economic boost to the postwar economy. During the Depression fewer than 500,000 homes had been built nationwide. The rapid increase in marriages, babies and new households coupled with suburban home builders brought a surge in home construction. With single family homes making up majority of new dwellings in the 1950s, the physical landscape was transformed. These homes were typically constructed in subdivisions in individual lots. “Uniformity was the key to their low price and to the developers’ profits.” Each house was similar to the one next door and densities were much lower than that of the central city. The other major consumption item in the postwar expansion was the automobile. Automobile ownership increased dramatically

16 Beauregard, Robert A., pg. 123.  
17 Beauregard, Robert A., pg. 110.
from 1950 through the 1970s. Whereas 70,000 cars were brought in 1945, by 1973 sales had reached nearly 10 million. Owning an automobile or more than one automobile was a common trend in the suburbs where the low density dispersal of activities created a need that was not equally present in the cities. Cities also lacked parking space to support multiple automobiles per household.

The automobile industry grew to be a pivotal component of the nation economy by “ushering in a new era of profitability and capital accumulation in many related sectors.” The automobile was the dominant transportation innovation in the era. Public expenditures for highway construction and maintenance as well as for regulating automobile and truck use joined with private expenditures for purchase and operation to create a dominant economic sector.

New forms of retailing came to distinguish the suburbs from the central cities. Large regional shopping malls are the most often mentioned example. As in Staten Island when the Staten Island Mall was built instead of a proposed airport. In 1958, regional shopping malls captured less than 5% of consumers, by 19667 that had doubled and by 1979 shopping malls captured 31% of shopper’s purchases.

In summary, there two books illustrate the shift to the suburbs. These books in particular study the suburbs from two different time periods giving a rich explanation of sociologists describe the move to the suburbs. Staten Island is New York City’s suburbs, still possessing the early characteristics of what a suburb is, homes, cars, parkland and a shopping mall.

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Background of Staten Island

New York City is divided into five boroughs: Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island. Each of these boroughs is a separate county of New York State within the consolidated City of New York; Manhattan is formally known as New York County, Brooklyn is Kings County and Staten Island is Richmond County. Queens and the Bronx do not have a separate name for their counties; Queens County and Bronx County. (This paper will use, “the island,” “Staten Island,” and “Richmond County” when referring to this borough.) Each county is headed by a borough president, in Staten Island Jim Oddo was elected to this seat in November 2013. Borough presidents can allot at their discretion a small portion of the city’s cash to assist borough residents and groups.19

Staten Island is physically isolated from the rest of New York City, being closer to New Jersey and separated by only two thin inlets, the Kill Van Kull and the Arthur Kill. The Kill Van Kull is a narrow tidal straight (three miles long and a fifth of a mile wide) that separates Staten Island and the New Jersey city of Bayonne and connects New York Harbor with Port Newark. Giant container ships pass Staten Island daily through this waterway on the way to Port Newark/Elizabeth Marine Terminal. Over the decades, both waterways have been subjected to many chemical and oil spills and frequent dredging to keep the routes navigable.20

19 New York City Charter, Section 102, 201; Berg, New York Politics, 25.
Three bridges, the Outerbridge Crossing, the Goethals Bridge, and the Bayonne Bridge, connect Staten Island to New Jersey. All three of these bridges were built between 1928 and 1931 by the Port Authority of New York. Dissatisfied with ferry service, communities along the waterways in Staten Island and New Jersey spurred the construction of the bridges.\textsuperscript{21} The only bridge to connect Staten Island to New York opened in 1964; some thirty-three years after links to New Jersey were constructed. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, presented a dramatic entrance to those arriving on to New York by water, connecting Fort Wadsworth in Staten Island to the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bay Ridge.

“It is a measure of its isolation that it was not until sixty-six years after the formation of modern New York City that Staten Island was physically connected to the rest of the urban archipelago.”\textsuperscript{22} Due to the fact that Staten Island is five miles from Manhattan and three miles from Brooklyn by water, it is not easy for Islanders to get to the rest of the city. The average commute time is over 40 minutes, one of the highest in the country.\textsuperscript{23} The difficulty Staten Islanders face trying to get to other parts of the metropolitan region is a constant source of public complaint.

Staten Island is the least populated of the five boroughs however the population doubled from 1960 at 221,000 to 487,000 in 2007. “The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge catalyzed this growth, opening Staten Island to Brooklynnites who sought affordable,
single-family homes.”24 “White flight”, is one of the primary causes of population boom after the opening of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964; Irish and Italian Brooklynnites moved to Staten Island after the violent disturbances of the 1960s. The peopling of Staten Island since the 1960s is part of the American story of movement of whites from the cities to the suburbs as white incomes along with racial antipathy grew.25 There has been a long standing trend that more affluent and established Staten Islanders moving to the towns of New Jersey in order to purchase larger homes with backyards. Newer Staten Islanders have come to Richmond County to find space from tight quarters in Brooklyn. Today’s South Brooklyn is tomorrow’s Staten Island; the wave of immigration that transformed New York City in the 1990s is transforming Staten Island as well.

While most New Yorkers are apartment dwellers, residential housing patterns in Staten Island are suburban with 71% of housing units being owner-occupied and 29% being renter-occupied.26 Staten Island also has far more nuclear families than other parts of the city with 56% of households headed by married couples. As former-Republican Assemblyman Edward Amann accurately put the matter, “it’s a bedroom community.”27 Many of these homeowners desired to leave the city behind to maintain this bedroom quality of their community even if commuting to their jobs in Manhattan, Brooklyn or New Jersey remains difficult. “Staten Islanders fear overdevelopment, and tend to wax

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27 Advance, January 9, 2009, 3; NYT, June 22, 2008.
nostalgic regarding life in the borough before the construction of the Verrazano Bridge.\textsuperscript{28} Angry citizens joined groups such as NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) which was a citizen movement accompanied by political pressure on elected officials to stop development. This type of grassroots mobilization proved successful in the 1960s when legendary powerbroker Robert Moses planned to build highways and the largest planned community in the world right on Staten Island’s south shore.

Beachfront Development in Staten Island

Staten Island’s South and Midland Beaches started rapid development in the post-Civil War period. In the 1860’s South and Midland Beaches became popular beach resorts, with people coming from all over the nation to vacation along the New York Bay.29 Staten Island’s growing beach popularity led to more people considered moving to the island. Living in New York City was expensive and not many people were able to afford it. Staten Island’s real estate prices were relatively cheap due to the lack of subway connection to the rest of the boroughs. By 1880, a rush of people flooded the market and made the move to Staten Island.

By the late 19th century, investors began to understand Midland and South Beach’s potential by building hotels, theaters, gardens, carousels, Ferris Wheels, and concession stands. Staten Island once a simple beach that relieved New Yorkers of summer heat became a popular vacation destination. Thus, on June 30, 1906, Happyland Amusement Park opened on what is now the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Boardwalk in South Beach. (Fig. 1) Happyland Amusement Park marked a turning point in the history of South Beach’s waterfront. On the first day of opening, 30,000 people assembled on the beach and this continued summer after summer until the Great Depression. (Fig. 2)

On September 26, 1924, Midland Beach was wiped of Happyland Amusement Park from a massive fire.30 The flames burned 15 summer bungalows, four hotels and

several small stores. Hundreds of firemen and three fire boats from Manhattan were not able to control the flames. The bungalow colony of 5,000 summer homes were threatened, dwellers moved their belongings and furniture to points of safety, and 300 families were asked to vacate. The Midland Beach Hotel built in 1915, the most imposing structure on the beach, a five-story frame building with 450 rooms, was in the path of the fire. The roof was caught and within 15 minutes the building was a furnace. Residents had spent the night in bucket brigades, rushing to houses with buckets of water as the swirling sparks settled of the roofs. Well after midnight, residents began pulling their furniture back into their homes. James C. Hinchcliffe, President of the Midland Beach Amusement Company, which operated the resort, visited the ruins of Happyland the day after the fire and announced that there was no insurance and was uncertain the place would ever be rebuilt.

Midland Beach became one of the most popular tourist attractions in the New York City area in the 1920s. (Fig. 3) Its wide array of activities that varied from amusement park to the beach attracted thousands of pleasure-seekers, which was an economic gain for the local businesses in the area. Though little remains of Midland Beach’s former glory, there are still remnants of the past such as photographs and artifacts of the amusement park.

In 1935, under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration, a two and half mile boardwalk was built in hopes of restoring the beach to its original state. (Fig. 4) More than 10,000 officials, civic workers, and citizens participated in three groundbreaking ceremonies for Staten Island’s boardwalks on
August 10, 1035.31 Staten Island Borough President Joseph A. Palma turned up the earth at the foot of Sand Lane, South Beach; Ocean Avenue, Ocean Beach; and Lincoln Avenue, Midland Beach. Thus began a WPA project that cost $2,210,000 and gave work to 4,000 men. The development was to comprise of 600 acres of uplands, beach and lands under and above water. Borough President Palma hoped this project would attract thousands of new visitors to Staten Island annually and the prospects of new buildings and restore property values in the entire zone. Among those who attended the ceremonies were James F. Graham, former owner of Midland Beach and S. Robert Molinari, a civic leader of Midland Beach. In July of 1937, Borough President Palma announced the opening of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Boardwalk a mile and a half of the island’s south shore, from Fort Wadsworth to New Creek, and fronted by a new beach 200 feet wide.

By the 1940s, Staten Island was being recognized once again as a summer, beach resort. In 1942, the island retained its grassy uplands and wooded stretches. Its highest hill still offered panoramic vistas that attracted early settlers seeking a rural retreat within easy reach of Manhattan. Twenty minutes from the Battery, holiday-makers found a new field for exploration.32 For the nature lover there was contrast in the seascapes and the shoreline rising steeply to the wooded hills. For the energetic excursionist there were plenty of amusements—boardwalk, picnic grounds, sports fields, 35 miles of waterfront, bathing beaches and harbors for boating.

Great Kills Park on the southeastern shore of Staten Island was opened to the public in 1949, being made available to millions of New Yorkers and New Jersey communities. Great Kills Park was planned to consist of 1,275 acres with 10,000 a foot beach and would compare to Jones Beach on the south shore of Long Island after which is was patterned. The park includes a boardwalk, playground, bicycle paths, baseball diamonds, court games and picnic areas. In 1949, it was also important that Great Kills Park would be close to the “spot where the projected Narrows Bridge will connect Staten Island with the Fort Hamilton section of Brooklyn. When completed this will serve as vital link between Greater New York’s heavily populated areas and Richmond’s playgrounds.”

By 1953 yet another plan was presented to redevelop the waterfront on South Beach. A general plan was submitted by Robert Moses to mirror the success of Rockaway Beach in south Queens. Construction of this modern beach would cost approximately $3,800,000 with an additional $1,800,000 for street paving and improvements to “correct the very bad substandard conditions within the area of the proposed improvement and to reverse the trend of deterioration in the section adjacent,” Moses declared. In a report to the Mayor of New York, Vincent R. Impellitteri, Robert Moses said the redevelopment would mean the elimination of “cheap, dilapidated seasonal bungalows and other seasonal shanties.” The report also added that the 415 dwellings and sixty-three commercial structures in the 215-acre area to be improved violate city ordinances. The program called for an attractive boulevard behind the

34 “South Beach Plan Presented to the City”, New York Times, May 18, 1953.
boardwalk with parking facilities for over 6,000 cars and areas for play, simple bathhouses and concession stands would also be built. Moses also proposed a fee of 25 cents for parking and 10 cents a person for use of the boardwalk, game areas and beach that was once a free public entity. Robert Moses’ improved beach was expected to attract 1,500,000 people its first year and rise up to 2,400,000 in thirty years. In 1952, South Beach’s attendance was 1,200,000. Moses also recommended rezoning to prevent the “mushrooming growth of beach shanties” and prohibiting all parking on streets within walking distance of the new beach. These were the early stages of the rapid growth and change that Staten Island would soon face by ways of Robert Moses.

Final approval of South Beach’s $6,460,000 redevelopment plan was announced in 1954. The development was supposed to transform a run-down bungalow area into a 2.5 mile waterfront playground. To get the project started, New York State provided $800,000 for its Development of Public Works to develop plans for its construction of jetties and placing of hydraulic fill on the beach to correct erosion and prevent future damage.

In the late 1950s, tentative plans for The Clove Lakes Expressway were being considered along with other proposed through-Staten Island highways, as a provision for the influx of traffic expected to follow the construction of the Narrows Bridge. (Fig. 5) By March 25, 1955, Moses announced a three-point program to aid home owners forced to pull up stakes to make way for the Clove Lakes Expressway. Moses promised,

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“Every possible effort” to ease the lot of residents forced out of their homes.\textsuperscript{36}

Chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, Moses’ three measures included: (1) Homeowners forced to move will receive help from the Triborough and Port Authorities in finding new quarters, (2) Residents able to be relocated without aid will receive cash bonuses, (3) Whenever possible, the authorities will move houses off their present sites to new locations.

The plans and physical changes discussed above are crucial for understanding why the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge came to Staten Island. The beaches and recreational facilities brought the people of the gritty city and outer boroughs to a retreat they could call home. Living on Staten Island meant being on a permanent vacation, achieving the American Dream by owning a home and being away from the problems and filth of the city.

\textsuperscript{36} “Borough Plans Expressway to Handle New Bridge Traffic” Staten Island Advance, March 25, 1955.
“Islandness”

In 1989, the Staten Island Museum held an exhibition about the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge entitled “Beyond the Bridge”. Essays, photographs, models and other memorabilia was put on display in honor of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. One of the themes in the exhibition was that of “islandness” and what it means to be a real Staten Islander. Unnamed authors submitted essays on being an islander, community life and how the Verrazano impacted their lives.

One of the strongest feelings in regards to islandness was community life on Staten Island. Neighborhood civic associations characterized the uniqueness of Staten Island having anti-New York City feelings. “The status of Staten Island as a “neglected and mistreated” stepchild of New York City becomes the rallying cry and battle lines are drawn along Staten Island vs. New York City division. Issues that stir up passions include proposed homeless shelters and jails, the Fresh Kills Landfill, one-way toll on the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, and public transportation.”

This brings the focus to two important points pertaining to Staten Islanders. The first is the idyllic view of Staten Island that residents have. The homeless, criminals, and garbage are not Staten Island problems but from the “outside” suggesting an insular community. The second point is the Staten Island vs. New York City fronts in which Staten Island must protect their borough.

In order to travel to Staten Island, one must travel five miles by boat or by the world’s longest span bridge. Even though other New Yorkers must cross some body of water to travel to other boroughs, going into the “city” means going underground. Thus, travelers or commuters are never fully conscious of crossing water. Crossing bridges into Manhattan is looked upon as an expansion of the roadway rather than crossing a body of water. “Attendant to this is the fact that Staten Island is geographically a part of New Jersey, and looking at an area map points out geographically how physically removed Staten Island is from the rest of New York City.”

In the case of New Jersey, there has never been a particularly close relationship with Staten Island. When New Jersey lost the battle over who “owned” Staten Island to New York, the relationship became even more strained especially with the charges that New Jersey pollution seeped in Staten Island’s water and air. Before the consolidation of New York City in 1896, Staten Island was always independent. This independence, which could be viewed as positive or negative, was a result of poor transportation which halted Island “progress”. Consolidation with Staten Island meant that New York City would provide the “resources and motivation needed to upgrade Island transportation, and bring Staten Island from a perceived rural outback to a modern suburbia.” This eventually led to further Staten Island vs. New York City tension later in the 19th century. One side wanted to preserve island beauty and nature while the other side

wanted to develop the land and its resources without planning for the Island’s green spaces.

The other factor in the lack of identification with New York City is a psychological one. Both Staten Islanders and City residents are to blame for this because of the notion that Staten Island is characterized as the “Forgotten Borough.” History is also at fault for this with the placing of the quarantine on Staten Island “when there were plenty of other, smaller, uninhabited island in New York Harbor.”41 The State of New York carried out the pattern of attempting to put undesirable things on the island such as the garbage dumb, prisons and homeless shelters. All other boroughs were excluded from consideration for these undesirables. The psychological lack of identification also stems from the lack of “mass transit allocations, even though the Island’s express bus lines are the only ones that generate a profit.”42 Isolation and being on the outside of the sphere of the mainland plus the physical and psychological separateness may have changed the perception of “Islandness however the “basic character and the nature of Staten ‘Islandness’ remains.”43

41 "Staten Island: The Place." Beyond the Bridge Exhibition (1989)
42 "Staten Island: The Place." Beyond the Bridge Exhibition (1989)
43 "Staten Island: The Place." Beyond the Bridge Exhibition (1989)
Plans to Connect Staten Island to New York City

The earliest plans for a Narrows Crossing between Brooklyn and Staten Island, where the Upper New York Harbor joins the Lower New York Harbor, took place as early as 1888. That same year the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad proposed plans for a tunnel that would have expanded the route of B&O’s Staten Island North Shore line. Unfortunately, financial constraints and delays in the approval process prevented this proposal from moving forward.

The unification of New York City’s five boroughs in 1898\(^{44}\) provided a new drive for a Narrows crossing. In 1910 bridge engineer Charles Worthington announced his idea for a 2,500-foot-long, 260-foot-high Bridge. The proposed bridge was to provide a clearance for tall ships and monumental gateway to New York City.\(^{45}\) The War Department rejected Worthington’s plan because demolition of the bridge could severely hamper access to New York’s harbor and Navy Yard.

Due to these many obstacles, federal agencies tried to find a solution to the rail tunnel idea. In 1921, under Mayor John F. Hylan, the New York State Legislature authorized construction of a twin-tube railway tunnel under the Narrows on a line almost directly under the current bridge.\(^{46}\) Preliminary work began on what would have been the Brooklyn-Staten Island tunnel, due to unexpected costs the work was stopped and eventually became known as “Hylan’s Holes”.

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There were two more Narrows Tunnel proposals in 1929 and 1937 by the New York City Board of Transportation. In 1941, the New York City Planning Department proposed a link between Brooklyn and Staten Island in the master plan of express highways. (Fig. 6) “The eventual linking of Staten Island with Brooklyn by a vehicular crossing is desirable for several reasons. It would provide a Staten Island connection that is not hampered by weather conditions, as is the present ferry system. It would form part of a through express route linking southern New Jersey with New England via New York City. It would be part of a through route for express buses connecting Staten Island with Brooklyn and Manhattan. While no cost estimate for this crossing is available, it would appear from an examination of the costs of similar projects in the New York metropolitan area that a single-tube tunnel could be constructed for about $35,000,000, and a two-tube tunnel for about $60,000,000. A suspension bridge, designed to carry six lanes of traffic and future railroad or rapid transit tracks, is another possible solution.”47 All plans were stopped because of the Great Depression and later again because of World War II.

In 1946 the New York City Tunnel Authority was annexed by the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority which was chaired by Robert Moses. The Narrows Crossing proposal was brought up again in which Moses recommended building a Narrows Bridge instead of a tunnel. Robert Moses argued that a bridge would cost less, take less time to build and have more automobile traffic ability.48 Thus, in 1946 the New York State Legislature authorized construction of the Narrows Bridge connecting

47 “Master Plan: Express Highways, Parkways and Major Streets,” New York City Planning Department (1941).
Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn and Fort Wadsworth in Staten Island. The reason for choosing the two Army forts as bridge points was because this is the narrowest part of the New York Harbor making the most sense for a bridge.\textsuperscript{49}

Although both Fort Hamilton and Fort Wadsworth were not active defense stations, the Army was reluctant to give them up without a fight. Finally in 1949, after long debate, the Army Corps of Engineers granted the first approval. The Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority paid the Army Corps $26 million for the land and building construction costs at both forts.\textsuperscript{50} A joint study done by The Port of New York Authority and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority in 1955 concluded the following; the Narrows Bridge would connect Fort Wadsworth, Staten Island, and Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn comprised of two decks with six lanes of traffic costing approximately $220,000,000 to build. (Fig. 7) “The bridge would be financed and constructed by the Port Authority, and operated and maintained by the Triborough Authority under a lease agreement. Rental would cover all Port Authority debt service charges based upon actual cost of the bridge. This amount would be determined when final cost figures are available. Agreements would be made, prior to construction, for sale of the bridge by the Port Authority to the Triborough Authority by 1969, or prior to that time if the Triborough's financial commitments would make such a transfer possible.”\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Joint Study of Arterial Facilities, The Port of New York Authority and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (1955).
Public Response to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge Plans

Bay Ridge is a neighborhood in the southwest corner of Brooklyn, bounded by the Narrows Strait on the west and the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge on the south. To make way for the proposed bridge approximately 800 buildings were demolished resulting in the relocation of about 7,000 residents.\(^\text{52}\) The Verrazano Bridge and the big highway leading up to it would cut into Bay Ridge causing panic in Brooklyn.

Although twice as many people would be affected, the Staten Island response to the bridge was different than from Bay Ridge. “In Staten Island there had been powerful factions that dreamed of the day when a bridge might be built to link their borough more firmly with the rest of New York City.”\(^\text{53}\) Staten Island had always been the most isolated borough in New York City, separated from Manhattan by five miles of water and a 30 minute ride on the ferry. New Yorkers and tourists alike enjoyed riding the Staten Island Ferry however it stopped there. There was not much to see once you get on the other side. Sixty percent of Staten Island was undeveloped as of 1958 with most of its citizens living in one family homes.\(^\text{54}\) Many Staten Island residents were overjoyed to hear of the proposed bridge, they hoped this would trigger a boom and give the island a change.

The bridge announcement led to a land rush in which real estate values shot up. “A small lot that cost $1,200 in 1958 was worth $6,000 in 1959, and larger pieces of

\(^{53}\) Talese, Gay. (Page 16)
\(^{54}\) Talese, Gay. (Pages 16-17)
property worth $100,000 in the morning often sold for $200,000 that afternoon.” In early 1959, before any work had started, the bridge was a symbol of hope and profit, that the isolation of Staten Island would soon be a thing of the past.

In Bay Ridge however, the residents did not want any change, they had a flourishing middle class, all-white community. Bay Ridge saw the bridge as destruction rather than progress; a monster that would force out 7000 people out of 800 buildings. Many people joined the “Save Bay Ridge” committee which tried to fight Moses by signing petitions, made speeches and screamed until bulldozers were bashing down their homes.

55 Talese, Gay. (Page 17)
The “Save Bay Ridge” Committee’s Fight for Their Community

The “Save Bay Ridge” committee was a Bay Ridge group that hoped to persuade New York City officials to delay building of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The committee hoped their campaign would be successful for at least a year but was vetoed on March 18, 1955. J. Gerald Shea of Fort Hamilton Parkway, Brooklyn was president of the committee. He and his associates hoped to persuade city officials not to call on the state to approve constructions between Brooklyn and Staten Island. In 1955, Republican majority leaders in Albany had announced their support of the bridge project but Mr. Shea explained that action must await a request from the city. The bridge was part of a vast traffic plan of the Port of New York and the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authorities.\(^{56}\)

Bay Ridge, a residential community of one and two family homes feared destruction of their neighborhood. Mr. Shea and Vincent P. Kassenbrock, vice president of the Save Bay Ridge Committee, argued that the bridge was not wanted in their neighborhood. Mr. Shea’s biggest fears were that 1,000 dwelling units would be razed, local streets would be clogged and already overtaxed subway service would be made worse from traffic from the bridge. Bridge plans were opposed also by residents of adjoining communities, which feared the disruption that was caused by wide approach road. Organization of the Save Bay Ridge Committee was spurred by the Bay Ridge Community Council, consisting of twenty-four veterans, civic, fraternal and professional groups in the community. The committee to fight the bridge was

augmented by Republican and Democratic leaders, clergyman and private citizens from Bay Ridge and from Fort Hamilton and other areas.

In Albany on April 29, 1957, a bill that would have altered the route of the Brooklyn approach to the then proposed Narrows Bridge was vetoed by New York State Governor Harriman. Governor Harriman pointed out that state budget studies indicating that the route would cost $265,000,000, as compared with $62,500,000 for the route agreed upon by the two agencies concerned with the projects, Public Works and Federal Highway Administration. The plans at the time called for building an approach highway along Seventh Avenue and the Fort Hamilton Parkway. The vetoed bill would have mandated a route “following generally the route of the Belt Parkway.” Supporters of the bill insisted that the Belt Parkway approach would prevent the destruction of 2,500 homes in Bay Ridge, eliminating the relocation of 10,000 residents and save the city from a $1,000,000-a-year tax loss. In calling for a veto, Mayor Wagner did not endorse the Seventh Avenue route. Instead he emphasized that existing law made land acquisitions for such projects subject to the approval of the Board of Estimate, which was, “not in any way committed to any specific project or route.” Mayor Wagner also emphasized that the bill would “deprive the city of its proper voice in determining” the approach route. Robert Moses who spoke on behalf of the Triborough and Port of New York Authorities said that “the route outlined in the bill is entirely impractical and if this is the only choice, the bridge cannot be built.” When the bill was passed by Legislature the month before, a number of Brooklyn Democrats supported it and expressed hope that the Governor could be persuaded to sign it.

By May of 1957, Governor Harriman was criticized for his veto of the bill mandating the Belt Parkway as the main approach link. Robert Moses was castigated for alleged trickery in trying to get approval of the curved section leading toward Seventh Avenue, that would displace 2,000 families, and the Mayor was scolded for allowing Moses to “control” him. Mr. Shea and Michael F. Whalen, vice chairman of the “Save Bay Ridge Committee”, suggested that Moses resign from the planning board so the agency would be able to make an impartial decision on the bridge approaches. Mr. Shea declared that Mayor Wagner’s administration seemed to be more concerned with the construction of Brooklyn ball parks than the interests of the people of Bay Ridge. Mr. Shea went on to say, “This matter affects our lives and our property. I may be emotional about it but I am sincere.”

In a letter to the New York Times on June 18, 1958, John A. Ward wrote, “the construction of a bridge at this point will destroy one of the city’s scenic treasures. It will also precipitate the disintegration of the charming Bay Ridge residential area, one of the finest in New York.” Many residents of Bay Ridge urged for a tunnel instead of a bridge because the entrances and exits may be arranged far enough beyond the crest of the ridge on either side of the Narrows so they would not interfere with the natural expansion of the residential districts on the Brooklyn or the Richmond flank. “Thus by routing motor traffic underground New York will be able to preserve one of its most

58 “Bay Ridge Residents Call for Putting Off Approval Till All Links Are Proposed” New York Times, May 18, 1957.
bewitching scenic panoramas, where the ships of the seven seas glide silently by, as they pass in and out of the greatest port in the world."^59

By the end of 1958, the plans for a Narrows bridge had been backed by both the Mayor and the Governor. The Board of Estimate approved the bridge, meaning the destruction of 800 homes and displacement of 7,500 residents. The problem for Bay Ridge residents was not exactly the bridge but the approach to the bridge, as expressway along Seventh Avenue that necessitated the destruction of all buildings in its path. Almost all of those who owned homes were undecided on where they would live next. Nearly everyone in Bay Ridge during the time of construction would be affected in one way or another by the bridge.

Robert Moses’ Vision

Robert Moses (1888-1981) was the "master builder" of mid-20th century New York City. (Fig. 8) As the designer of the modern city, Moses was one of the most polarizing figures in the history of urban planning in the United States. On March 20, 1961, Moses wrote an article for the anniversary edition of the Staten Island Advance in which he discussed his vision for Richmond County. “We feel a responsibility for growth in this borough because we have participated it by building the big new bridge. We foresee a 500,000-population increase in Staten Island in the next 20 years, which means that the county will have nearly 750,000 residents in 1980.” It was foreshadowed that the bridge would bring a real estate boom in Staten Island, “the strategic link in the chain of vehicular arteries and crossings planned to ring the entire metropolis.” The bridge would give Staten Island access to the rest of the city, carry products of industries quickly to the warehouses and piers of Staten Island and, encourage foreign commerce to Staten Island. Moses believed that the removal of the “isolation” and increase in labor force will encourage industrialists and business leaders to establish enterprises in Staten Island and will provide employment for residents leading to population and industry growth. (Fig. 9)

This forecast presupposed by Moses also included the problems of mass transportation. With growing population and industry, “adequate local facilities will be

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62 Moses, Robert. Staten Island Tomorrow.
provided to meet the challenge.”\textsuperscript{63} It was also expected that automobiles will be in greater numbers as the standard of living improves, “we have laid out and are constructing a network of parkways and expressways designed to prevent traffic strangulation and to expedite through and local vehicular movement.”\textsuperscript{64} (Fig. 10)

Unsympathetic to old residents’ feelings of invasion by outlanders, Moses hoped for Staten Island’s public beaches and parks to be made available to the entire City of New York after 1965 and “thereafter pleasure seekers in increasing numbers will pour across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.”\textsuperscript{65} Moses believed that Staten Islanders would prevent progress and change by opposing the bridge. People in every borough should have the same rights to the public beaches as residents of the immediate neighborhood. More than 10,000,000 people enjoyed Jones Beach and other Long Island beaches that Robert Moses designed, so too Staten Island would be the place for recreation seekers.\textsuperscript{66}

\textit{Vision, wisdom and courage in the present generation are indispensible. The mistakes of the past warn you about the future. You have the benefit of experience, technological advance, modern planning and a reservoir of good will to draw on. There will be no valid excuse for you if you allow Staten Island to be swamped and deteriorate. It can be a model of orderly urban industrial, business and home planning growth; it takes no great prophets to preach this lesson to you. – Robert Moses, 1961}

\textsuperscript{63} Moses, Robert. \textit{Staten Island Tomorrow}.
\textsuperscript{64} Moses, Robert. \textit{Staten Island Tomorrow}.
\textsuperscript{65} Moses, Robert. \textit{Staten Island Tomorrow}.
\textsuperscript{66} Moses, Robert.
Staten Island is known for having more natural beauty than any other borough; big hills, deep valleys, meadows, woodland and waterfront. Moses wanted Staten Islanders to seize the opportunity to avoid errors of the past and build with a good plan and intelligence that he would provide. He argued that less responsible and money hungry real estate developers would destroy the empty space and scenic beauty. Staten Islanders were urged to plan ahead, save the natural state of their neighborhoods and encourage population growth by making their borough more attractive to the “outside.”
How Staten Island Became a Suburb

Migration to Staten Island escalated following the completion of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. Between 1960 and 1980, the size of population expanded from 221,991 to 352,121, marking a 58.6 percent increase. (Fig. 11) Whereas the 1950-1960 decade witnessed modest gains of 15 percent, growth rates exploded to 33.1 percent between 1960 and 1970, falling to around 20 percent from 1970 to 1980. By the early 1980s, the Island was considered the fastest growing county in New York State and the leader in the construction of new housing. The accessibility gained through the bridge to the other boroughs of New York City was expected not only to increase the Island’s population base, but also to revitalize its commercial and industrial life, particularly since Staten Island had large tracts of undeveloped land. But the accessibility factor and expectations regarding the invigoration of Staten Island’s economy were not the only catalysts for the heavy inflow of people into the Island in the 1960s and 1970s.

The coming of the Verrazano Bridge changed “islandness” once again. (Fig. 12) Many islanders felt that a population boom would ruin the small-town suburban nature of Staten Island. The population after the building of the bridge did go up significantly but did not reach the estimated numbers. People who relocated to Staten Island did so because in the early 1960s, suburban living was no longer available elsewhere in New York City.67 This move was facilitated by the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, but not the single factor encouraging people to move. Another motivating factor was probably “the

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change in ethnic and economic makeup of the other boroughs which promoted the exodus out, and into Staten Island.”

In January of 1965, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge already carried 1,860,000 vehicles that paid nearly a million dollars in tolls since the bridge was opened on November 21, 1964. (Fig. 13) It was estimated that if traffic flow was maintained, the volume in the bridge’s first year would be 10% higher than predicted by Tri-borough Bridge Tunnel Authority consultants. In addition to predictable traffic patterns, the St. George-Battery ferry service had lost nearly 30% of its 5,000-a-day vehicle traffic.

New Yorkers who rarely went to beaches before because they were “too far away” or “too packed” began whisking across the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to Staten Island’s uncrowded shores. The bridge put the island’s main beachfront just ten minutes away from people in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. Before the bridge, people have suggested that getting to the beach was too much trouble with the ferry. The new beach comers dug in on the pink sands of South Beach, which was amongst the most popular of the Staten Island strands. Despite the beach’s popularity, its crowds were never more than a fraction of capacity, which was 200,000. The largest crowd was recorded on July 4, 1965 at 28,500 which was more than double the year before the bridge. Parks Department supervisor, Camillo Di Clerico had suggested that the bridge was responsible for at least 20% of the persons.

The newcomers to the beach—the Staten Islanders called them “foreigners”—had only one complaint about the edge of the shore which was “rocky and

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68 “Staten Island: The Place.” *Beyond the Bridge Exhibition* (1989)
uncomfortable”.

In 1965, all of Staten Island’s beaches were listed as polluted by the City Health Department. Even though the beaches were not condemned, Health Department officials said that there was a high enough bacteria count to make the beaches “below standard” but not enough to cause illness “unless the swimmer swallowed a bucketful.” Much of the pollution was caused by the dumping of raw city sewage in the waters of New York Harbor and ships’ illegal dumping of garbage and bilge water into the Upper and Lower Bays as they would enter and leave. (Fig. 14)

Another big fear Staten Islanders were facing in the summer of 1965 was the loss of beauty to builders—rows of small houses were beginning to characterize the island. The dreams of beauty and better living in an improved suburbia were in the mud. The mud was created by bulldozers ruthlessly leveling wooded hills, rolling sites and unspoiled farmland for critics called some of the most inadequately designed and planned housing in the country. Houses were being built on land that had quintupled in value since the laying of the cornerstone of the bridge in 1959 in a real estate boom. Staten Islanders called these newly built homes, ugly and expensive--$22,000 to $30,000 for ordinary, minimum builders models on scant 40 by 100 foot lots—and that were being scattered throughout Staten Island’s 13,000 acres of open, undeveloped land which people felt was being calculated to destroy the countryside. Borough President Albert V. Maniscalco told Islanders that any planning of the rural parts of the island was being done “through the back door.” Back-door planning meant the indirect acquisition

70 “Over the Bridge They Go to Staten Island’s Beaches” New York Times, July 29, 1965.
of parks by the inclusion of fringe areas as part of the purchase of interstate highway rights of way, rather than designing parks as integral parts of growing communities.

Before the bridge was built, Staten Island had only 3% of the city’s total population; by 1965 the population had jumped from by 75,000 to 250,000. During the thirties and the forties, roughly one-third of Staten Island was owned by the city, mostly have been taken over for non-payment of taxes. Similarly in some European cities, municipal governments bought and held large tracts of neighboring land for future expansion and successful new community development. The 1959 start of the bridge brought no holds of the city’s extraordinary resources future planned development. The gleam of in speculator’s eyes was turned into profits in the city’s pocket.

Just south of the bridge approaches, hills comparable to the outlying San Francisco country had been stripped bare, and treeless houses marched unfeelingly across them in straight bulldozed rows. Many signs had advertised the sale of 120 to 150 acres of land for building, new developments saying “Coming Soon!” President Maniscalco along with other city departments attempted to curb the destruction of the island’s natural assets which only led to the building of a green belt on a north-south axis down the center of the island across its most handsome hills and woods.

In a letter to the editor in the Staten Island Advance, an anonymous writer said that “If Giovanni da Verrazano were alive to see what the bridge that bears his name is doing to once pastoral Staten Island, he might wish it had never been built.” Critics and Staten Islanders felt strongly about the bulldozers mashing their rural borough to pieces setting the scene “for future slums”. Islanders also believed that the city has only
aggravated the situation. In depression years, vast qualities of private land fell to the city by tax default, and by the 1960s that land was being sold off to developers. “With almost every other part of New York a horrible example of the blight caused by plan-less development, it is criminal that this last chance for any approach to civic grace is being sacrificed on the altar of municipal and private greed.”

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73 Staten Island Advance – Letter to the Editor, August 10, 1965.
Moses’ Staten Island Plans Even After the Bridge

By August of 1965, Robert Moses again wanted to put his hands on Staten Island. He called for drastic zoning changes to conserve open spaces and to provide for the orderly growth of the island. A report released by the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority—for which Moses was chairman of—detailed the accomplishments on Staten Island. Moses asserted, “Having made Staten Island accessible and its rapid growth inevitable with the opening of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, it is the duty and obligation of Triborough to help to conserve it.”74 Moses’ proposals were offered in the wake of sharp criticism that a lack of planning was destroying the dreams of beauty and better living on Staten Island. The report by the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority presented a chronological history of plans of the authority and various city agencies for impending growth of Staten Island. The plan were predicated on the construction of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge which called for an integrated program of new parks, beaches, parkways and expressways as well as the preservation of historic landmarks.75 Without specifying the zoning changes required for this “imaginative, realizable Staten Island program of beautification,” Moses said that “the adequacy of present zoning restrictions is not proven by statistics showing how much some recent raising of absurdly low standards reduces the potential under former ones.”

Moses also asserted that his reasonable, logical and defensible zoning changes would be so controversial and explosive to those who are most noble about conserving space in an ideal community. He also added that “when builders’ selfishness and

75 Moses Urges New Zoning to Preserve Staten Island, NYT, August 16, 1965.
democratic dogmas collide, the “good old dogmas usually retire to what it left of the tall timbers.” Moses called for a halt to the huddled and identical houses on small lots, which was the principal target of critics who contended that inadequately designed and planning housing is what is destroying the countryside. Thus, Moses emphasized that new parks would be proposed for which funds were available through the 1964 $75 million park bond issuance. Robert Moses believe that the importance of advancing construction in late 1965 stemmed from the influx of visitors coming into Staten Island over the new bridge. He also said Staten Island must prepare to provide and operate beach and recreation facilities for New Jersey residents, “even if it means peak loads on some summer days, and on occasion, elbowing out borough residents.” This was in part because the bridge provided a direct link with the Staten Island Expressway, which also led to the major highway system of New Jersey, by way of three Staten Island-New Jersey Bridges. Moses also felt strongly about green belts being essential projects to preserve the intrusion of mass housing.

76 Moses Urges Plan For Staten Island, Staten Island Advance August 17, 1965.
77 Moses Urges Plan For Staten Island, Staten Island Advance August 17, 1965.
Suburbia and the Population Boom

In 1966, residents of Staten Island were still getting used to the sight of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge. The march of urbanization caused much of the borough’s upper crust to leave the island while others have taken to the hills—Dongan, Emerson, and Todt at 409 feet the highest point on the East Coast between Maine and Florida. In these parts of Staten Island lived the bridge haters, the upper class, business owners of the island. Overlooking the sprawl of shoddy tract houses that the bridge had bequeathed are old homes on quiet, tree-lined streets. Many Islanders had departed for Manhattan, Long Island or Connecticut and those who remained liked the country life within the city to raise their children.

In the 1960s, Staten Island’s growth rate exceeded that of the city’s other boroughs, although the total was only a fraction of the others. In May of 1966 a big announcement came to Staten Island with the prospects for a new shopping center that would be the largest in the metropolitan New York area. Macy’s New York announced its plan to build a major, full-line department store, 230,000 square feet in area, situated southeast of the intersection of Richmond Avenue and Richmond Hill Road.78 David L. Yunich, presidents of Macy’s New York, said that new Staten Island center would serve a trading area of 250,000 people, with a population expansion expectancy of over 300,000 by 1970 which became accurate.

By 1969, “the new people” or so they were called by native Staten Islanders, came mainly from Brooklyn and have settled on the island because of the Verrazano-

Narrows Bridge. This was said to be the biggest boom since the Dutch moved in on the Lenape Indians in 1661. The bridge pushed the last rural outpost in the city into suburbia and many islanders feared “another Queens” would be made of their island with high rise apartment buildings and bulldozed woodlands. On June 28, 1969, a six-lane second level of the bridge was opened 11 years ahead of schedule, adding fuel to the arguments over progress and serenity. Lorin McMillen, former director of the Staten Island Historical Society said that the bridge began to develop steadily after World War II but the bridge made the island boom more in those few years than during the 30 years before. One industry created by the bridge was the assembly of statistics, which included Staten Island’s population since the bridge opened November 21, 1964, had increased by more than 60,000 in 1969’s estimated total of 310,000, approximately double the increase between the census figures of 1950 and 1960.79

Less than four years after the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was dedicated, scores of steel and concrete workers returned to build access roads and ramps for the bridge’s unused tier. Their job was to accommodate traffic that had not been anticipated for another decade. Traffic Commissioner Henry A. Barnes said in 1968, that this always seemed to be the history of all freeways and bridges, “Traffic grows much more rapidly than anyone ever expects. It’s hard to keep up with.”80 Although both levels were ready in 1964, the lower level was used for bridge authorities to patrol for night prowlers. Originally, the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority planned to open the lower level in 1981, but the growth of traffic had been “phenomenal”. The first year alone, 34%

more trucks and cars than were expected motored across the Narrows.\textsuperscript{81} Congestion was not common in the late 1960s, the authority figured however that within two years, a backup of cars extending all the way across the span would be common.

One quarter of the steel workers and machinists working on the lower level were Verrazano veterans. Many of these workers were happy to come back and were proud to be working on a project of worldwide significance. The Triborough Authority also received many letters requesting a pedestrian walkway for the bridge. The Authority was strongly against it for the fact that people had a tendency to throw trash from railings onto ships below.

The opening of the lower level received mixed reactions from the public. Before the Verrazano Bridge, Staten Island’s population went up about 2,000 a year according to census records. By 1968, the increases were approximately 1,700 a month. The problems of crowded public facilities and land sale booms, which have scarred the landscape and the rural quietness long cherished by older Staten Islanders, were foreseen and feared by early opponents of the bridge. By the late 60s, many abandoned their overt antagonism in favor of accepting “progress”.

The 1970s showed even more attempt at “progress” in Staten Island. New York City began investigating new way news to move people between rapidly growing Staten Island and Manhattan. Among the new ideas was a plan for a direct rail tunnel from St. George to the Battery, a rail link via the Bayonne Peninsula, and rail-bus service across

\textsuperscript{81} Joint Study, TBTA 1969.
the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge to the Brooklyn subways.\textsuperscript{82} The study also included a possible new waterborne system such as hovercraft vessels. In 1970, roughly 28,000 workers from Richmond County were traveling to Manhattan daily which made the need for inter-borough public transportation critical for the island. \textbf{(Fig. 15)}

The Staten Island plan was the first of five borough volumes scheduled to follow the over-all “Critical Issues” report made public by the City of New York. The plan went on to say that South Richmond had the largest amount of vacant land in the city—5,600 acres—which could be new communities for 250,000 to 500,000 people developed together with jobs and industry. The City of New York even hired Rouse Company, which developed the new town of Columbia, Md. To “conduct a comprehensive study of economics of a large scale development” for South Richmond.\textsuperscript{83} The City Planning Commission put together a 68-page, 25,000 word, 60 chart volume of Staten Island’s projected growth. The planners also determined that the lack of rapid transit to other parts of the city and the resultant dependency on automobiles limited the attraction of the island for less affluent groups. City planners believed there was an opportunity to create on the island model communities of natural charm and high quality open to all the city’s residents. Amongst the preparation for the growing population in Staten Island the plan included improving the public school

\textsuperscript{82} “Hovercraft and Rail Links to Mainland Are Among Methods Studied by City” New York Times, March 2, 1970.

system, improving the physical and mental health care facilities and a new system of regional parks.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{84} Joint Study, City of New York Planning Commission 1970.
Conclusion

Many Staten Islanders of long standing who recalled their borough as the last outpost of rural serenity in the city agreed with resident Richard S. Neville who wrote that, “The Verrazano Bridge is a two-face woman, at this distance she’s beautiful but up close she’s ugly, I mean, when you look at it closely the bridge has not meant progress—only change and I mean change for the worse.”\textsuperscript{85} In the first six years since the Bridge opened, the island had been invaded by newcomers, bulldozed by land developers, implanted with subdivisions, colonized by business and industry and pulled abruptly into a maelstrom of problems. The population jumped from 250,000 to 325,000; the welfare caseload tripled from 1,547 to 4,286; land values soared from $1,500 for an undeveloped acre in 1960 to $20,000 in 1964 and to $80,000 in 1971.\textsuperscript{86} (Fig. 16 - 17) Consumer prices also soared, along with demands for housing, services, shopping facilities, public transportation and planning. Whatever its effect on Staten Island, the bridge itself has been a commuter’s dream and a stunning financial success. In just its first year of operation, it carried 17,000,000 cars and took in $9.5 million in tolls. But what is the cost of losing the rural serenity Staten Islanders were once used to? In the early 1900s until the 1950s, Staten Island was a beach resort, fully equipped with bathing beaches, an amusement park, vacation bungalows and most importantly isolated from the rest of the gritty city. In two decades, Staten Island’s reputation went through a dramatic change from a serene beach resort to a bedroom community where people have the highest commuting times in the country. Staten Island remains to be the

borough to move to if you want to own a house and car and have some sense of rural space in suburbia.

Throughout history sociology and urban studies, we have learned about the exodus of people in and out of cities. This thesis contributes to the study of suburbanization illustrating Staten Island as once a rural area that with the help of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge became a bedroom community—a community where commuters live or a residential district located on the outskirts of a city lacking a major employment center. This paper is the study of a people living through a period of “progression” and change in their borough. Politicians and planners once dreamed of a bridge that would connect Staten Island to the rest of the city so that all New Yorkers could utilize Staten Island beaches and recreation. Unfortunately, native Staten Islanders lost most of their countryside and serenity by massive building projects. The Verrazano-Narrows Bridge stands with its monumental 693 foot high towers with each tower weighs 27,000 tons, held together with three million rivets and one million bolts and a rich history of change, progression and destruction of an idyllic country and beach resort to the forgotten borough of New York City.
Appendix

Fig. 1 Map of areas in Staten Island (East Shore represents South and Midland Beaches
Midland Beach Real Estate)

Fig. 2 Happy Land Park, Staten Island Historical Society
Fig. 3 Bathers at South Beach Staten Island. (New York Public Library)

Fig. 4 Post card from Staten Island (College of Staten Island CUNY)
Fig. 5 Map of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge area—Brooklyn and Staten Island. (Geology of National Parks Website.)

Fig. 6 Staten Island 1941 Map, with proposed tunnel construction. (Staten Island Historical Society)
**Fig. 7** Plans from 1939 show a Staten Island subway connection via a Fort Hamilton Parkway subway.

**Fig. 8** Robert Moses, chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority, was on hand Nov. 29, 1974 for the Verrazano-Narrows' 10th anniversary celebration. From left: Carlton Ettinger, then-president of the Staten Island Chamber of Commerce, Moses; Ralph Lamberti, then deputy borough president and John LaCorte, who chaired the event. Moses died in 1981 at the age of 92. (SILive.com)
Fig. 9 1963 Proposed future arterial (Staten Island Historical Society)

Fig. 10 Ocean liner, putting out to sea, steams through the Narrows beneath the then-under-construction Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in this December 1963 photo. (Staten Island Advance)
Fig. 11 New York Times
Fig. 12 Grand opening weekend of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, November 1964. (Hemmings Daily)

Fig. 13 Enjoying the opening day of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge (NY Daily News)
Fig. 14 The last car to pay a 50-cent cash toll on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge did so in 1972. This photo was taken in 1964, shortly before the bridge opened. The round-trip toll remained $1 (50 cents each way) until it jumped to 75 cents each way in 1972. (SILive.com)

Fig. 15 Present Staten Island, Bay Ridge Map (Google Maps)
Fig. 16

Percentage Population Growth by Decade

![Bar chart showing percentage population growth by decade: 33% in the 1960s, 19% in the 1970s, 8% in the 1980s, 17% in the 1990s, and 6% in the 2000s.](source: US Census Bureau)

Fig. 17

1A. Population Growth on Staten Island

Population Growth, 1960 - 2010

![Line graph showing population growth from 1960 to 2010.](source: US Census Bureau)
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