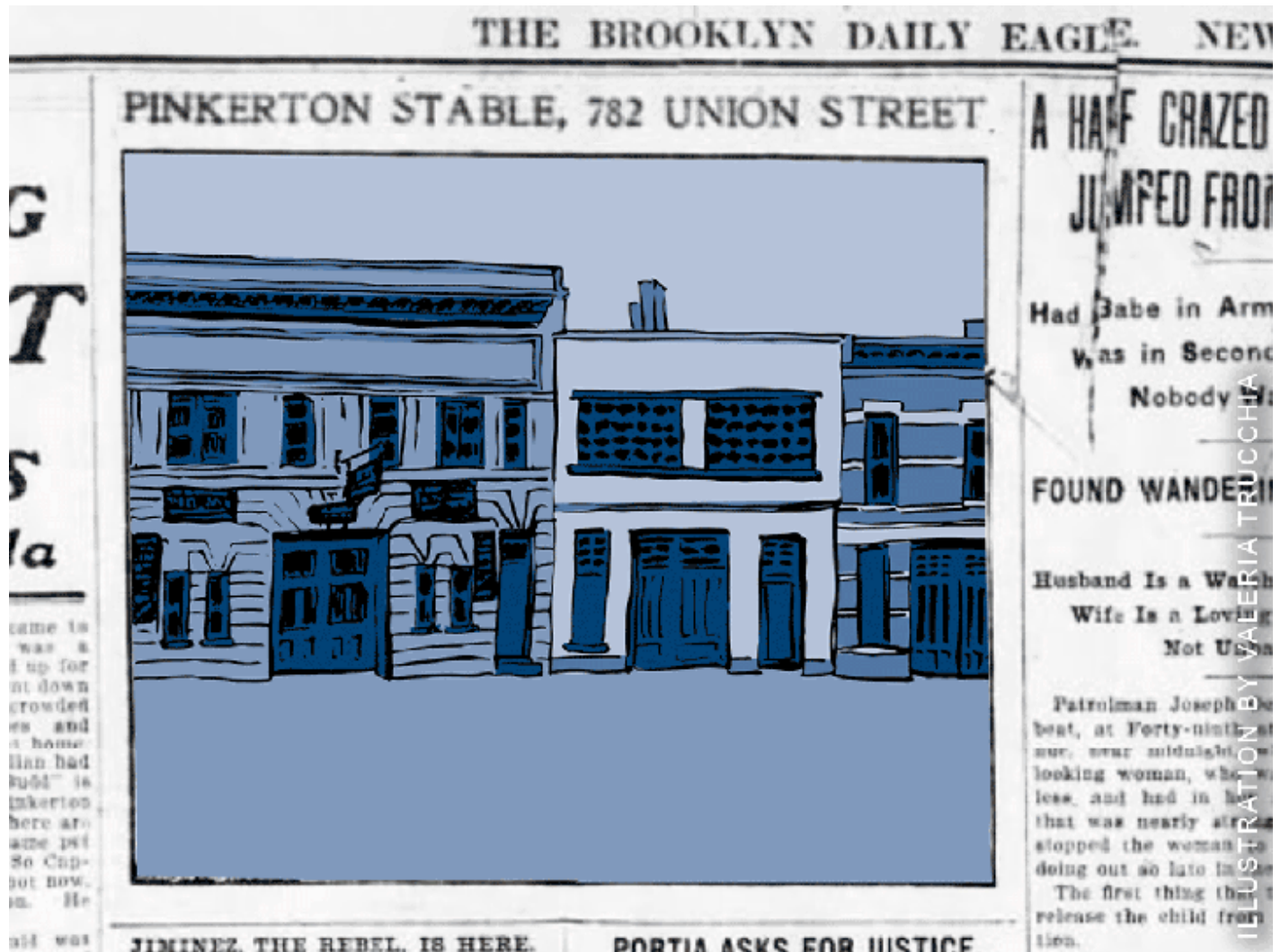


# AN ARCHITECTURAL PREHISTORY OF THE COOP

February 7, 2023



By Dan Bergsagel

Members may feel that they know about the Coop's inauspicious start upstairs in the Mongoose Community Center at 782 Union St. in 1973 and its subsequent expansions west into 780 Union St. in 1988 and east into 784 Union St. in 1999. These last 50 years represent the Coop's history as an organization and the physical structure that houses it. But what about the Coop's architectural prehistory? What took place beforehand in the three buildings that were consolidated to make up the present Coop building? The story of these three buildings can be seen as a microcosm of the recent development of the United States: from horses to cars and beyond.

THE PERMIT FOR THE BUILDING WAS GRANTED IN 1889 TO ROBERT A. PINKERTON, FOR A TWO-STORY STABLE. PINKERTON WAS THE HEAD OF THE EPONYMOUS PRIVATE DETECTIVE AGENCY RENOWNED FOR TRACKING JESSE JAMES AND BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID IN THE 1870S AND FOR CONDUCTING OPERATIONS AGAINST ORGANIZED LABOR.

Brooklyn's Union Street, Sixth Avenue, and Seventh Avenue were laid out by 1849. Insurance maps of the City of Brooklyn in 1888 record the site of the Coop as undeveloped, although the buildings' future lot sizes and addresses had already been assigned. By 1898, 10 years later, all three of the Coop's buildings were complete but still with open lots to their east and west. By 1903, the closest tenement buildings to the west—774 and 772 Union Street—were constructed, and the firehouse to the east was active by 1908.

## 782 UNION STREET—EGGS THROUGH CHEESE

The original 782 Union St. building stood in the area of the present-day Coop that houses the egg case through the frozen foods and bread aisle and back to the cheese cabinets. The permit for the building was granted in 1889 to Robert A. Pinkerton, for a two-story stable. Pinkerton was the head of the eponymous private detective agency renowned for tracking Jesse James and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in the 1870s and for conducting operations against organized labor.

PINKERTON STABLE, 782 UNION STREET,  
WHERE POLICE STOPPED A COCK FIGHT.



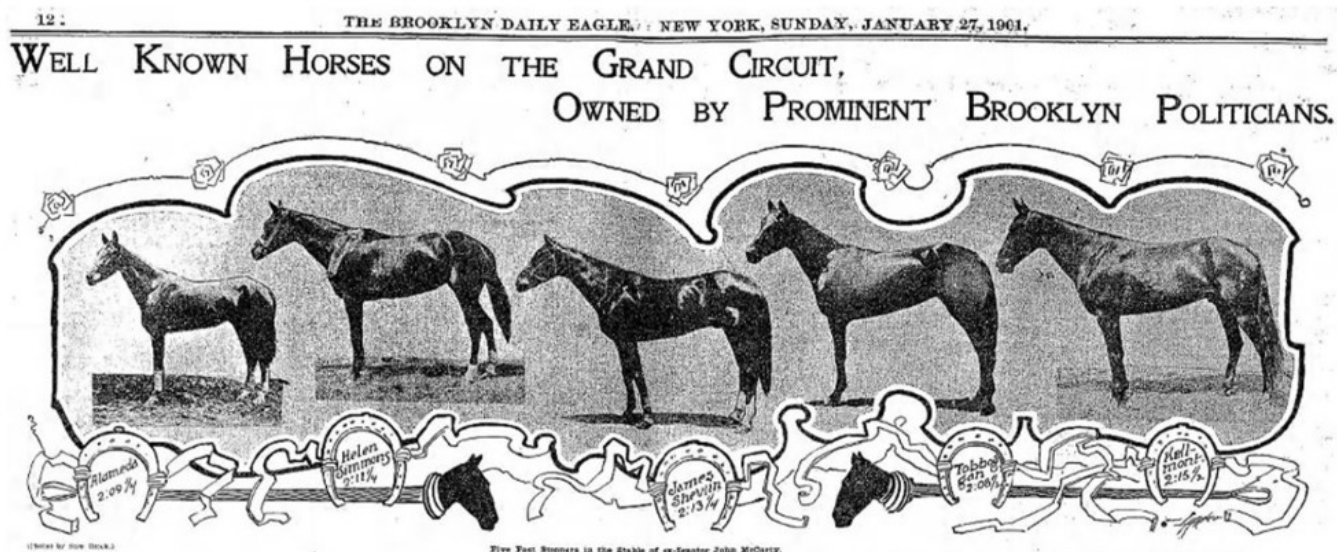
PHOTO FROM BROOKLYN DAILY EAGLE

(Fig 1): The original facade of 780 and 782 Union St. (B'klyn Eagle Photo, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Apr. 11, 1904)

Construction of the Pinkerton stables at 782 Union St. was complete by 1891. While it was built as a private stable, records suggest that the building was the site of horse-play as well as horse racing. The early history of the stables was marred by encounters with police: In their first year, area residents Matthew McMahon and William Crowley were each fined the princely sum of \$1 for street fighting. In 1904, the stables

were in trouble with the law again: A well-publicized raid for illegal cockfighting resulted in 33 men arrested.

Soon after, the Pinkerton stables were back to producing winning race horses, but by 1912, Pinkerton sold the building to Messrs. Nicholas H. Cady and Brothers. We don't know much about the Cady Brothers' ownership, which lasted 12 years. In early 1924, Cady appears to have suffered a change in fortune and was forced to sell all his assets at auction, presumably including 782 Union St.



(Fig 2): The race horses of John McCarty from the private stable at 780 Union St. (Photos by Sam Brook, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Jan. 27, 1901)

Comparing photographs from this period suggests that significant changes were made to the facade of 782 Union St. around the time of the Cady Brothers' ownership. The brickwork was painted white, loft-style second-story windows were added, and an ornate cornice at roof level was removed. Together, these changes gave the building a more modern appearance than its direct neighbors. These changes are clear when comparing photographs from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1904 (Figure 1) and New York City Tax photographs taken 1939-1941 (Figures 3-5), but we don't know who ini-

tiated them, or why. Could it be the expense of these renovations that bankrupted the Cady Brothers?

## 780 UNION ST.—PRODUCE THROUGH MILK

As for the area of the Coop that now houses the produce aisle back to the milk cabinet, that's the site of the original 780 Union St. building, which the the Coop purchased in 1988. The 780 edifice was also originally constructed as stables, an identical sister building to 782 (Figure 1). The two-story stables at 780 were constructed for John McCarty, a Democratic politician and New York State Senator, from 1892–1893. Unlike its rowdier neighbor, 780 Union St. appears to have quickly achieved success as a serious stable. In a 1901 spread in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* showcasing “Well Known Horses on the Grand Circuit, Owned by Prominent Brooklyn Politicians,” five of the eight horses hailed from McCarty's stables (Figure 2). However, the stables' fame was short-lived. Less than 10 years later, in 1910, 780 Union St. was being rented out as a simple two-story brownstone with basement, with no further mention of horses.

The McCarty estate sold the property in 1916 to the automotive innovators the Sage Brothers. Through the late 1910s and early 1920s, the Sage Brothers were inventing new technology to assist with a rapidly developing industry: the functioning and fueling of automobiles. They produced strainers to filter gasoline entering the carburetor and new-fangled air pressure gasoline delivery systems that were popular throughout the city.

In 1930 the 780 Union St. building was sold again, this time explicitly as a garage to a client of the Hayward Manufacturing Company. Articles from the time suggest that Park Slope real estate was seen as a desirable investment—a trend that may sound familiar today. The building's use as a garage ended in 1938 when the property became the founding home of Reynolds Electric Company, an electrical equipment and contracting company. St. Francis Xavier's Roman Catholic Church took the building over in 1959, and they owned it nearly until the Coop bought the building in 1988.

## 784 UNION ST.—CASHIERS THROUGH MEAT

The current Coop's main entrance through the cashier zone and stretching back to the meat and yogurt cabinets was formerly the site of 784 Union St. Unlike the narrow neighboring stables of 780 and 782 Union St., 784 featured a spacious, uninterrupted 44-foot internal space and a distinctive cream brick facade.

THE SHIFTING USE OF THE THREE BUILDINGS TELL A STORY OF TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS IN SOCIETY AND THE CHANGES IT BROUGHT TO UNION STREET.

Despite the physical grandeur of 784 Union St. and the presumption that the developer who built it was likely wealthy, it is not as well recorded as the other Coop buildings in the available archives. This may have to do with its many alternate historic addresses as a double-wide lot: From 1888, the building has been listed as 784, 786, 784-786, and the delightfully Hogwarts-esque address of 784-786-6½.

One of the first records of the address is an advertisement from a 1910 edition of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*: The resident business, Union Garage, lists an s-cylinder Ford for sale in "A1 condition." Local maps and advertisements continue to show the building in use as a garage throughout the 1910s and early '20s—just like its neighbor 780 Union St.



PHOTOS FROM CITY TAX RECORDS

(Figs 3-5): City-wide tax photographic records of 780, 782 and 784 Union St. 1939-1941

In 1930, commercial tragedy struck the resident of the site, General Electric Company. A fire gutted the store, causing damages of \$5,000 (equivalent to approximately \$90,000 today). It's not clear whether this fire spelled the end of the General Electric Company at that site, but they were gone by the 1940s, replaced by Cline's Rug and Furniture Service. Cline's seems to have had more success at 784 Union St. Throughout the 1940s and '50s, Cline's was actively recruiting workers, typists and chauffeurs, as well as advertising prolifically in the local newspapers. The company lasted longer in the space than most occupants: Incredibly, they remained at 784 Union St. right up until the building's sale to the Coop in 1999.

What can we conclude from this archival investigation? The shifting use of the three buildings tell a story of technological progress in society and the changes it brought to Union Street. The architectural prehistory of the Coop was initially equine and competitive, based on the finances of prominent wealthy Brooklynites living nearby. In parallel with the development of commercial automobiles in the United States, the horses and private stables were soon replaced by cars and public garages. After the

garages had gone, businesses found the wide, street-level doorways of the three buildings, initially designed for easy horse access, were equally well-suited for machinery related to light-industrial manufacturing and contracting services.

Architectural mysteries remain: Who was responsible for the initial, grand 1890s construction at 784-786-6½ Union St.? How much of that building survived the fire in 1930? Who instigated the major renovations at 782 Union St., which significantly changed the character of the facade? As the first owner at 782 Union St., Pinkerton Detectives, may have said: We are open to anonymous tips and leads.