

A PEOPLE'S GUIDE TO NEW YORK CITY: HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT YOUR CITY?

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The new book A People's Guide to New York City traces a people's history of the city across the five boroughs.

By Meredith Kolodner

I'll admit that in all my decades as a New Yorker, I've only been to the Statue of Liberty once. But I assumed, despite my shunning of the tourist magnet, that I pretty much knew what was there was to know about the massive gift from the French.

Nope. It turns out that Lady Liberty was not an ode to the shared ideals of equality and immigration between the United States and France. It was, in fact, a celebration of the abolition of slavery. Not only that, but when the giant woman was unveiled, real live women were excluded from the opening ceremony.



Left: Carolina Bank Muñoz, Professor of Sociology, Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate Center. Middle: Emily Tumpson Molina, Associate Professor of Sociology & Director of the Center for the Study of Brooklyn. Right: Penny Lewis, Professor, School of Labor and Urban Studies

A new book, *A People's Guide to New York City*, documents this story and the histories of more than 120 other sites, some world-famous and others unknown even to most of their own neighborhood's residents.

"We are challenging traditional guidebooks that focus on glitz and glamour at the expense of what New York City really is, and the people and projects that make up the city," said Carolina Bank Muñoz, co-author of the book along with Penny Lewis and Emily Tumpson Molina.

"That's at least one of the book's core contributions—to have a from-below view of the city, from the perspective of regular working people," added Bank Muñoz, who is also a professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center and a long-time member of the Coop.

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The book is part of a series of “People’s Guides” to U.S. cities published by the University of California Press, with other editions focusing on places such as Los Angeles and Boston.

The authors were very conscious to include sites in all five boroughs, in contrast to many guidebooks that guide tourists only to Manhattan. Each borough has its own chapter, with a map and a quick introduction to each of the sites. It allows tourists and New Yorkers alike to plot their trip, whether it’s a pilgrimage to one spot or a full day of sightseeing. Many of the entries include nearby bar and restaurant suggestions.

It’s hard to decide which entries to mention in such a short article, and my one-sentence description will not do them justice. There’s the story of the Brownsville Labor Lyceum, which was “the beating heart of Brownsville’s intellectual community and radical politics” for the first few decades of the 20th century.



PHOTO BY UNKNOWN / WIKI COMMONS

Colored School No. 2 (PS 68) Brooklyn, NY, 1892

Not too far from there is "Colored School No. 2," which opened in 1840 in Weeksville. It was the first school that hired both Black and white teachers to teach both Black and white students. In 1869, half the students were white and half were Black, and it remained integrated for several years, even after the Brooklyn school board stated that it was "unhealthy for Black and white students to have such an intimate relationship."



Ebinger Baking Company is long gone, but the their name is still present on the facade of the old truck depot.



Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) members walking down Fort Hamilton Parkway, Brooklyn on their way to Washington D.C., 1963

A self-storage spot in Flatbush was once a trucking depot for the Ebinger Baking Company and the site of a successful civil disobedience campaign in 1962. The company was famous for its Brooklyn Blackout cake, and while many of its customers were Black and Puerto Rican, all of its well-paid staff were white. I won't spoil the story, but the campaign established the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as one of the most radical in the country. The organizing efforts even inspired students at Erasmus High School to establish their own CORE chapter.



The Lesbian Herstory Archives, the largest archives for, by, and about lesbians in the world is located in Park Slope, not too far from the Coop. Here, members of the Archives march with a banner in the New York City Pride, March, 2008.

Not all of the sites are historical. Readers can read about and find the Arab American Association of New York, which is still a major force in New York politics. There are important LGBTQ+ current and historic sites that go far beyond the Stonewall Inn. The history of St. Vincent's Hospital in the village is particularly poignant for its role in preserving the health of New Yorkers before, during, and after the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

A visit to the Bronx can take you to what's considered the birthplace of hip-hop (yep, it's in New York, not Los Angeles). Further north are a series of cooperative housing sites, which were constructed due to the efforts by left-wing Jewish organizations. The history details the aspirations, failures and successes of the cooperative housing movement of last century.



Founded in 1833 Sandy Ground was a community of free African-American oystermen and farmers. Historians believe that Sandy Ground, the third free Black settlement in New York, was a station on the Underground Railroad.

The chapter on Staten Island includes the Stapleton Union American Methodist Episcopal Church, which was established in 1801, and is the oldest African-American church on the island. There's also the Sandy Ground Historical Society, which marks the site of the oldest community established by free Black people in North America. The site and struggle that led to a 2020 Amazon warehouse walkout provide telling insight into the first few months of the pandemic, even as the issues underlying the strike have their roots in years of inequity.

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RICH HISTORY AND THAT THEY CAN HAVE A ROLE IN SHAPING HOW THEIR STORIES ARE TOLD.” – CAROLINA BANK MUÑOZ

The book also includes thematic tours, including Brooklyn Chinatown, an Environmental Justice Tour, a #7 Train Tour of Immigration in Queens, and the “Wall Street: Capitalism and Protest Tour.”

“My dream is for it to be in the public schools, particularly middle and high schools, as resources for social studies,” said Bank Muñoz. “I want students from poor neighborhoods that are criminalized to see their city from a different perspective and from a different lens. It’s so important for them to know that where they come from has a rich history and that they can have a role in shaping how their stories are told.”

Meredith Kolodner is a journalist and lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two daughters. She’s been a member of the Coop since 2006.

