

## Community Profile

### Sheepshead Bay, New York

By Johnelle Lamarque

#### I. Community Description

Sheepshead Bay, a Brooklyn, New York neighborhood a little over one mile squared, lies along a bay of the same name. The bay is a small, dredged body of water with bulkheads on three sides and seems more like a wide canal than a bay. A wooden walking bridge crosses the bay to connect the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood with the more upscale Manhattan Beach, which lies directly on open water. Sailboats moor at the open end of the bay, closer to Rockaway Inlet. Sheepshead Bay is the location of a party boat fishing fleet that has historically complemented and anchored the seafood restaurants and bait shops on the bay's north shore. The fishing fleet benefits from dockage on a protected bay that affords quick access to the Atlantic Ocean.

Numerous websites tout Sheepshead Bay's party boat fishing opportunities and history. The Sheepshead Bay subway station features tile murals that depict recreational fishing and the bay with a historic flare. The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Bay Fest was held in May 2003. The festival, sponsored by the Bay Improvement Group (B.I.G.), promotes the neighborhood's waterfront features, including the party boat fleet. A few of the party boats participate in a sort of blessing of the fleet, but one captain said that the ritual is "mostly for sailboats." The neighborhood of Sheepshead Bay inspires public reflections like the following. "If you fish, if the glory of the sport reaches deep into your soul and life seems more alive when you cast your rod, if the sight of land far out from sea is how you celebrate the best in life, Sheepshead Bay delivers. The story of Sheepshead Bay will forever be told in its marriage of land and sea."

<http://www.sheepsheadbayhistory.com/history/sheepsheadbay-chapter6.html>

The boundaries of the Sheepshead Bay neighborhood are considered to be the bay on the south, Knapp Street to the east, Marine Park to the north and Gravesend to the west. The fishing infrastructure in Sheepshead Bay is located generally along Emmons Avenue, although there are for-hire boats and a seafood retail market on Knapp Street, as well as some boats dotting the canals and inlets around Sheepshead Bay – Gerritsen Beach and Shell Bank Creek. With only one trawler (that may not even currently be in service), another two or three small bay boats docked in Sheepshead Bay and no processing or wholesale markets in the neighborhood, recreational fishing interests dominate, including party and charter boats and bait shops that cater to individuals throwing lines into the small bay.

A row of about 12 for-hire boats dock along a stretch of 10 municipally owned piers at Emmons Avenue. Two bait shops and a few seafood restaurants are also located along that street. Men, women and children of all ages and a wide variety of ethnicities fish from numerous spots along the waterfront road. Despite the historic focus on recreational

fishing and leisure, the latest developments along Emmons Avenue include a multi-story Loehmann's department store and high-rise senior citizen housing.

To get to Sheepshead Bay, anglers can take the Q subway from Manhattan to the Sheepshead Bay stop. It's about a half hour ride on the express train, longer on the local. They emerge from the subway station onto Sheepshead Bay Avenue at a bustling sidewalk that includes a crowded, unsheltered bus stop and a cluster of street vendors and promoters under the shade of the subway overpass. One afternoon in August 2002, several Hispanic women and children waited at the bus stop, Hasidic Jewish men handed out pamphlets to other Jews, other men sold packaged electronics crammed on portable tables, and an Asian man was squatting on the sidewalk next to a tub full of little green turtles that he was selling for \$5 each.

Anglers walk from the subway station with their rods, reels and buckets down the busy Sheepshead Bay Avenue, which is tightly lined with two or three-story buildings, short enough so the sun comes through to the crowded sidewalks. Some six and seven story apartment buildings are found in the area, dating to the 1950s.

(<http://www.sheepsheadbayhistory.com/history/sheepsheadbay-chapter6.html>). A small sign high on one of the light poles along this walk directs visitors toward the bay at Emmons Avenue and also mentions the beach beyond the bay in Manhattan Beach. Among the many shops along the way are a few that sell summer and beach oriented items.

A majority of the fishing activity in Sheepshead Bay launches from the municipally owned piers concentrated on Emmons Avenue, a multi-lane road along the bay that is jammed with traffic at many hours of the day and night. Oriental Boulevard runs parallel to Emmons on the opposite side of the bay and serves as the bayside boundary of Manhattan Beach, beyond which is a public beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

Sheepshead Bay reflects the ethnic and racial diversity of Brooklyn in general although there is a particularly strong presence of people from the former Soviet Union. Sheepshead Bay is very near the ocean front communities of Brighton Beach and Coney Island, places known as "Little Odessa" because of their Russian and eastern European populations. Restaurants also reflect the area's racial diversity – Italian American, Greek, Turkish, Japanese, etc. A 1995 encyclopedia of New York City noted that immigrants from the Soviet Union, China, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Israel, the Philippines, Poland, and Guyana settled in the neighborhood (Fletcher 1995).

Two Census Tracts bisect the Sheepshead Bay area, and block-level data do not provide the information relevant to this report. Therefore, we rely on Brooklyn-level data for an overview of the area's demographics. Brooklyn comprises Kings County and is an ethnically, racially, and economically diverse urban area that covers less than 10 square miles. Brooklyn's total population grew slightly from 2.3 million to nearly 2.5 million between 1990 and 2000. Of the 2000 population, 41 percent were white and 49 percent non-white. African Americans made up 36 percent of the total population, Hispanics were nearly 20 percent, and Asians were 7.5 percent. Another 10 percent of the population was "some other race," according to the US Census.

With an average per capita income of almost \$26,000, about 25 percent of Brooklyn's population lived below the poverty level in 2000. The civilian labor force included about one million people, with a nearly 6 percent unemployment rate. The top industry in Brooklyn was education, which accounted for nearly 26 percent of the employment. Professional, science, management and finance and insurance, each account for another 10 percent of employment in the area. Of the 930,000 housing units in Brooklyn in 2000, about 50,000 were vacant and about 2600 were used for seasonal recreational use. The census recorded 881,000 households in 2000, about 22 percent of which were female headed. About 27 percent of the residential population graduated high school and another 13 percent of the adult population had graduated college.

## **II. Dependency and Engagement in the Fisheries<sup>1</sup>**

### **History and Current Description**

Sheepshead Bay and the oceanfront Manhattan Beach were resort areas in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the New York City elite, with luxurious hotels, a jockey club, bathing, famous seafood restaurants and pleasure boating. For-hire and leisure uses have always dominated the fishing activity in Sheepshead Bay. The bay itself was dredged and its edges stabilized by bulkheads through a WPA project in the 1930s mostly to accommodate the party boat industry and their clients. In the 1930s, there were about 40 boats between 35 and 180 feet in length that fished for cod, pollock, flounder and bluefish in the spring, sea bass, porgies, mackerel, flounder and fluke in the summer, and blackfish, cod and pollock in the fall and winter (Lines 1949). The boats carried up to 200 passengers who came from all over Long Island and along the Jersey Shore as far south as Atlantic City.

As early as 1929, concern emerged that commercial fishing threatened the pleasure-oriented boats. “[In] 1948 pleasure fishing was again threatened,” writes one local amateur historian (Lines 1949:22). “Beam trawlers and commercial net fishermen invaded the local fishing grounds sending tons of fish to the market daily while amateur fishermen returned home without any.” Also around that same time, there was a wholesale fish packing business operating on a barge moored in the bay directly across from one of the famous old hotel-restaurants. Currently, a 70-foot trawler and a couple of small bay boats for lobstering or gillnetting dock in Sheepshead Bay and are visible from Emmons Avenue. Sources say that 10 years ago there were more commercial boats, including boats that sold bait to the for-hire industry. Currently, the fishing community revolves around recreational for-hire operations. Although the larger boats in Sheepshead Bay typically have federal permits for recreational ocean fishing, their principal ports are usually not listed as Sheepshead Bay, but rather Staten Island, New York City, or Brooklyn.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the limited presence of commercial fishing in Sheepshead Bay (both currently and historically), this report merely notes commercial fishing activities within the context of recreational and for-hire fishing in the area.

The for-hire recreational boats in Sheepshead Bay are all party boats that leave at a certain advertised time of day and sail for half or full day trips. The boats also sometimes hire out charters for groups. The number of party boats fishing from Sheepshead Bay has declined drastically in the last 40 years. In the 1940s and 1950s there were 45-50 for-hire boats docked in Sheepshead Bay; today there are only about 15. “By 1960, Sheepshead Bay was the fastest-growing community in Brooklyn. It became widely known as the center of recreational fishing in New York City, and a number of private boats moored at its ten piers and used it as a port from which to launch cruises for bluefish, snappers, and striped bass” (Fletcher 1995). In the 1980s boats started launching dinner and site-seeing cruises to make up for a decline in fishing clients.

The Sheepshead Bay for-hire boats are typically owner-operated. They range in size from around 65 to 100 feet in length. This is an increase from when boats averaged 40-60 feet each. Most dock on Emmons Avenue at municipal piers. Another boat docks at a small marina on Knapp Street behind a large movie theater and parking garage. A few others dock in nearby Gerritsen Beach and Marine Park. This research found 11 boats on Emmons Avenue involved in for-hire recreational fishing in October 2002, excluding several smaller boats docked on Emmons Avenue that seemed to be used only as fish markets, with whole fish displayed for sale on their bows. These floating markets seem to be a remnant of the now-illegal tradition of selling recreationally caught fish from the party boats. One informant identified 15 for-hire by including the boats docked in Marine Park and Gerritsen Beach. Informants say this is about one-fourth the number of boats involved 40 years ago. By 2005, another informant said that number had been reduced to only 12, replaced on Emmons Avenue by large dinner-cruise boats.

In addition to the decrease in the number of for-hire boats, Sheepshead Bay has lost what one informant called “row boat stations.” These businesses rented small boats to individuals who often used them to go fishing. The informant said that an increase in costs for liability insurance and land value has forced out the small row boat stations, although one boat rental business in Gerritsen Beach remains.

Although Sheepshead Bay has traditionally (and adamantly) been a leisure-oriented fishing community, commercial fishing occasionally occupied members of some families of for-hire boat owners in the past. There also was a well-established history of selling recreationally caught fish from neighborhood docks. The Sheepshead Bay Boat Owners Association in 1917 suggested a the creation of a central fish market on Emmons Avenue to replace the “objectionable small stands over the water where thousands of fish were sold daily (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle* Jan. 24, 1917, cited in Lines 1949: 23). Bans on the sale of fish from docks emerged again in the 1940s and in the 1980s. In the 1980s the crew of for-hire boats sold fish caught recreationally by their clients, or by themselves. The fish from clients would have been like a tip for the crew, and the boat owners would allow the sale of those fish from their decks as a fringe benefit of the job. Since a 1980s ban on selling recreationally caught fish, and since health department crackdowns on the questionable handling of the product, boat sales of recreationally caught fish have largely (though not completely) disappeared. Now, rather than selling their or their clients’ catch, crew and others sell a wide variety of fish purchased from the Fulton Street Fish Market,

including some fish found in distant tropical waters. These informal fish markets as well as the restaurants along Emmons Avenue take advantage of (and often promulgate) the misperception that the seafood bought and sold on Emmons Avenue is freshly caught from local waters by the boats docked at the piers.

### **Seasonal Round**

The seasonal round for Sheepshead Bay for-hire boats is the same as the for-hire industry in Freeport, Long Island. The most often heard complaint about species accessibility concerns the size limits of the fleets staple fish: fluke, or summer flounder. Fluke size limits in New York are smaller than the limit in neighboring New Jersey and affect how many fish party boat clients can keep and bring home.

Most for-hire boats stop fishing in the winter, usually finishing up for the year by late October or possibly early November if the weather is mild. The boats usually resume work in March. The winter of 2003 has been unusually cold and the water has been slow to warm this year and “the fish have been late coming into our area,” says one Freeport-based informant. For-hire boats once fished for cod in the winter, but have not been able to since the institution of a moratorium on cod in recent years.

Targeted species depends on water temperature and when the fish arrive in the area. As a general guide, the for-hire fleets in Sheepshead Bay and Freeport target the following species in the noted months:

Flounder: Late March to May

Mackerel: April to May

Stripped Bass: May to December

Fluke: May to October

Blue Fish and Sea Bass – May to November

Shark: June to November

Tuna: Late June to October

Porgies (scup) – July to November

Black Fish – October to May

Years ago, the fleets fished year round, but the loss of the “regular” fishermen along with the loss of popular winter species (cod and whiting) have squeezed the for-hire fishing activity into the months of spring, summer and fall.

Most of the boats in Sheepshead Bay tie up during the winter, fishing from March to November and are busiest from May through October. Few boats try to fish year round. In years past, most of the boats fished all year. This changed as the winter species became less available (because of decreasing stocks and/or regulations limiting catches) and as clients opt for more comfortable alternative forms of recreation. Because of the lack of year-round work, crewmembers tend to have alternative forms of employment. The captains generally take that time to do maintenance and repairs on their boats and to go on vacation. Business slacks at the bait shops in Sheepshead Bay during the winter months and on any day of inclement weather. Most employees are seasonal.

The for-hire fishing seasons are mostly affected by regulations and what the boats are allowed to land, say informants. When asked to discuss his annual round of fishing, one Sheepshead Bay informant said “You don’t even have to know this because there’s regulations about it all.... There are regulations on everything now. [For example,] There are regulations on dogfish now, even though we don’t ever target dogfish. We never kept them to begin with.... We used to beat dogfish and monkfish off the lines. We didn’t want those.”

### **Fishing Grounds/Fleet Activity**

The fishing grounds for Sheepshead Bay boats range from Jones Inlet in New York south to the Manasquan Inlet in New Jersey, including deep ocean trips to Hudson Canyon and the Mud Hole for tuna and shark. Information on the location of New York-area reefs can be found at <http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/marine/access/reefs1.html>. New Jersey is currently undertaking a project to map the best ocean fishing grounds along the state’s Atlantic coastline. Information about this project can be found at <http://www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/oceanmap.htm>.

### **Crew Description**

Most Sheepshead Bay boats carry two crewmembers and a captain and have separate night and day crews. Estimating 15 boats, there would be about 130 crewmembers. It is uncommon now for the captain and crew to be related but probably about 80 percent of the current crewmembers fished with the Sheepshead Bay fleet as children. The crewmembers’ attention to customer service is important. “I want them to take care of the people [passengers],” says one captain who added that each boat has a different way of operating and it’s hard to break old habits that people have learned on other boats. He suggests that the tenure of most crew members averages about 5 years, although some people have been crewing for nearly 30 years. “Because it’s seasonal, we grab whoever we can get to work as mates,” says one captain. One captain argues that a crewmember can make a lot of money, “if he hustles like a bastard,” but adds that they often leave the industry because wives or girlfriends consider the job to be “dead end”. Indeed, with declining tips and profit margins and the diminishing numbers of boats, opportunities for advancing to captain and boat owner are rare. It used to be common for mates to advance to captain. Additionally, some crewmembers are unable to advance or lose their jobs because they fail tests for illegal drugs.

Only three or four families of crew and captains actually live in Sheepshead Bay. Most live up to an hour’s commute away in Long Island, Staten Island and elsewhere in New York. Crewmembers are paid by the trip, some determined by the day’s receipts, others on a flat, per trip rate. They also make extra money in tips, by cleaning fish and sometimes by selling those fish, although fish sales were more prevalent in the past. Tips have declined in Sheepshead Bay for the same reasons as in Freeport and Pt. Lookout. Since the late 1980s, the health department and NMFS regulations have curbed but by no means eliminated fish sales by crew. Some crewmembers and others purchase fish from the Fulton Street Fish Market to sell on the decks of boats in Sheepshead Bay. There are

no retirement and other benefits for crewmembers. Some crewmembers have other jobs, working for the New York City fire, police and sanitation departments or driving trucks. Sometimes they get extra income for helping captains with boat maintenance and repair. Some crewmembers also work on the dinner cruises and sightseeing cruises that some of the fishing boats also offer.

Because of the limited opportunities for advancing from crew to captain/owner in party boat fishing as well as reduced tips, crewmembers are leaving these jobs, often at the behest of a wife or girlfriend who calls the work “dead end”. One industry observer noted that decreased profit margins de-professionalized the industry a number of years ago and it has never recovered. The Marine Education program at nearby Kingsborough Community College aims to re-professionalize maritime trades, including for-hire fishing.

### **Infrastructure**

There is ample infrastructure for the for-hire fleet in Sheepshead Bay, although there are problems. The borough offers important infrastructure, including the 10 piers along Emmons Avenue that serve as a central location and draw anglers to the area. The piers were built with about \$10 million in city funds, replacing older wooden piers about 10 years ago. The boat owners lease dock space and slips from the city for about \$150 per foot per year, which is a good price compared to marinas in the area, says one city official. Captains did not complain about the lease price, although there were problems with poor maintenance of the piers and the perception that the City of New York was unresponsive to repair requests.

The clustering of boats at the waterfront and within a short walk from subway stations is an important feature in this densely populated community where waterfront property is mostly privatized and very highly valued. The for-hire boats draw their clients from the urban populations of Long Island, New York City and northern New Jersey, as well as New York City tourists. The neighborhood of Sheepshead Bay is accessible via the New York subway, public bus, and also the Belt Parkway, a major highway that links Brooklyn with the rest of Long Island. A grid of city streets stretching across Brooklyn borough also provides access. The piers nearest the subway stop are more expensive to rent than those farther along Emmons Avenue. Still, more of the party boat clients who come to Sheepshead Bay drive their own cars rather than take public transit, perhaps because the subway and buses operate less frequently during the early sailing times of many morning trips.

A shortage of parking for the boats’ clients is the main infrastructure problem the Sheepshead Bay fleet faces. In the past, more parking was available in the area surrounding the boats. Most parking in the area is metered, which is a problem for people on half and full-day fishing trips. Infrastructure problems such as parking, pier maintenance, and the effects of rising land values are discussed in more detail in the “Vulnerability” section of this profile.

Boat captains tend to fuel up in larger industrial areas, such as Bayonne, New Jersey, or have fuel delivered to them at dock. Some of the repairs to electronic and navigational equipment are completed by dockside repairmen who come from Cape May, NJ, although often such equipment is replaced rather than repaired. Nets, lines and other fishing gear are ordered from internet sites, and safety-at-sea equipment comes from catalogs and fisheries publications or one of the Long Island marine supply stores, such as Hamilton Marine or Freeport Marine. Fishermen tend to use local banks and to get their accounting and insurance needs met by firms in the New York/ New Jersey area. The wives of some captains keep books and participate in the day-to-day decision-making for their businesses. Major repairs and maintenance happens in a shipyard in Sayville, Long Island. Ice is not a significant expense and can be produced in personal freezers. Provisions for the fishing trips include pizzas, hot dogs, and soda and are typically purchased nearby in Brooklyn or Long Island at bulk retail stores such as Costco.

Bait, regardless of where it comes from is generally delivered to the boat at its dock. Silversides come from Canada, clams from Freeport, Long Island and other bait from a remaining bait fisherman in Sheepshead Bay. In recent years, there has been a loss of smaller businesses that support recreational for-hire fishing in the neighborhood.

### **Clients**

The party boats clustered in Sheepshead Bay have the advantage of that area being known for its for-hire fishing fleet. Individual boats attract clients through large colorful signs at each dock that advertise the boat's name and trip schedule. Crewmembers and sometimes captains call out to passersby, "hawking" -- trying to lure clients onto their boats. They also use websites and print media, particularly the *New York Daily News* and sports fishing publications.

The party and charter boats in Sheepshead Bay and vicinity draw their clients from the large urban populations of New York's boroughs and western Long Island, as well as tourists visiting Manhattan. One captain says he has seen "every different kind of nationality" on the boat -- including visitors to New York City who learned about the boats from the internet. Clients also reflect the many immigrant communities resident in the New York City area.

Different ethnic groups are associated with different species. For example, fluke are said to be favored by Jewish Americans. Russians, Asians and Middle Easterners favor sea bass and mackerel. Some captains even advertise these trips in local Korean newspapers. African Americans and Hispanics go for scup/porgies, and everyone likes bluefish. African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s tended to only fish for porgies and only during the summer. Now, however, they are more year-round clients. According to one captain a group of Norwegians go fishing with him each winter. One informant offered the story of his experience as a deckhand on a party boat in Montauk in the 1970s as a partial explanation for variations in fishing preferences in the New York area. All of his clients on this particular trip were African Americans from Harlem. The party boat passed a small charter boat carrying a group of white male passengers who were showing

off the big tuna or some similar trophy fish they caught that day. He says that one of his passengers, an elderly woman in a dress and apron had been catching buckets full of porgies. She was disgusted by the one big fish in the charter boat they passed. He quoted her as saying, “Six men fish all day and catch but one fish.” He added, “There was no way [the woman] would be happy with that fish – or vice versa. The value judgments are not transferable.”

The groups of clients that keep the industry afloat in Sheepshead Bay are “tourists” in the summer and subsistence fishers who get “a bunch of meals” from their catch of porgies, sea bass, blue fish and mackerel throughout the year. In this context the term “tourist” does not mean visitors from elsewhere but a new sort of unskilled, fair-weather-only fisherman. The clients, as found in many for-hire fishing communities, tend to be less skilled in angling than 20 years ago. Many of the skilled recreational fishermen who were once for-hire clients opt to fish from their own private boats. The loss of winter flounder has also contributed to the decrease in the party boat client who is skilled in fishing. Captains in Sheepshead Bay, as elsewhere in the area, started half-day trips in the 1990s “purely for tourists.” A majority of party boat clients are men, but the numbers of female clients has been increasing. The socio-economic status of party boat clients in this area tends to be lower to middle income. There are more families fishing half-day trips from Sheepshead Bay than in the past. “The people I carry now are all tourists. This is a great area to fish in because there’s plenty of places to hide – out of the weather.” While Sheepshead Bay itself is essentially a large canal, a lot of protected water lies just beyond it in the Rockaway Inlet that allows for calm fishing trips, preferred by “tourists”.

Captains say that many of their former clients fish from their own boats. Technology like GPS and boats made of fiberglass rather than high maintenance wood make private vessels a more attractive option for those who can afford them. However, one informant optimistically notes that as the number of private boat owners has increased so has the cost of gasoline to run those boats. Also, with the economic slump that New York has faced in recent years, costs to maintain and store private boats may become more prohibitive for many, who may then return to party boat fishing. One local bait shop owner says that many anglers have switched the ways they fish and are now more likely to use a 4-wheel-drive vehicle to go onto a beach in Montauk, Breezy Point or Ft. Tilden than go out on a party boat.

### **Economic Networks**

As in Freeport, Long Island, the Sheepshead Bay for-hire fleet is economically tied to the seafood restaurants that use the boats as a back drop. Also, the bait shops and local bagel and donut stores depend on the early morning business of party boat clients. On one chilly Wednesday morning in October 2002 before the sun came up, crew and clients crowded a deli shop across the street from the boats on Emmons Avenue, buying sandwiches and snacks for an all-day striped bass trip, as well as coffee and breakfast to eat before debarking. The employees in the deli were a mixture of men and women, various ages and ethnicities and seemed to know many of the customers and their orders. All of the customers were white men. The industry once supported more small businesses than it does now, but still provides a significant portion of business for several owner-operated enterprises – such as sandwich shops and grocery

stores, service people and bait shops. Some of the independent bait vendors and small-scale suppliers have gone out of business. “There used to be a sinker guy who was a little cheaper. He’s no longer here,” says one boat captain, adding that this is “little stuff” that “made a little bitty difference in money, but it was nice to keep someone else in business.”

Clients of the party boats provide a significant portion of business to Sheepshead Bay bait and tackle shops. “If we lose our boats, we’ll lose a good percentage of our business – not all of it but about 30 or 25 percent of it,” said one bait and tackle shop owner. “As long as we keep the party boats here, everything will be fine.” Although party boat anglers are an important client for local bait shops, the party boat owners and crew buy from the shops only “in a pinch”. This shop does both retail and wholesale, supplying about 25 other stores in the New York boroughs with tackle and bait, and draws customers from New York City who go fishing all over the world.

Most of the crew and captains on the party boats and employees and owners of ancillary stores tend to live within a 30 or 40 mile radius of Sheepshead Bay and so reintegrate their earnings into the local economy. Some for-hire boat owners, captain and crew draw on their position in the New York metropolitan area by offering commuter services themselves or working for one of the separate commuter ferry services. Several for-hire boats in the area have gotten into what one captain calls “commuter.” As New York City tries to eliminate the numbers of cars clogging its streets, boats particularly in northern New Jersey transform into water taxis. To operate such a business, the boats need to be fast (faster than is typically necessary for for-hire fishing) and there need to be extra boats available in case one breaks down. Now a couple of captains/owners in Sheepshead Bay are getting the right boats for the job.

### **Social Networks and Community Relations**

Fishermen referred to Sheepshead Bay as a fishing community because of the boats docked at the municipal pier but they themselves did not feel a part of a community. The fishermen who work out of Sheepshead Bay do not socialize, help each other out or form any sort of cohesive social network as they did in past years. Also there has been a decrease in the numbers of family groups involved in the for-hire fishing industry.

Kinship is not nearly as important in for-hire fishing in Sheepshead Bay as it was in the past. It is not common for the crew to be related to the captain, owner or each other. Few family groups participate in the industry today. In one exception, a boat captain’s daughter serves as crew and his wife does the bookkeeping for the boat. This boat also has a long family history stretching back to the 1920s when the current captain’s grandfather is said to have started the party boat industry in Sheepshead Bay. The changes in the industry (particularly the regulatory restrictions) seem to have brought an end to the family tradition. “I should have been able to bring my daughter up in this business,” the captain said. “My father never discouraged anybody from getting into [this] business. I’m telling you, the future in this business is very, very bleak.”

There seems to be more competition than cooperation among the various captains docked on the Emmons Avenue pier regarding local resources, such as potential clients, dock space and other issues. Although fishermen in the NY/NJ area say that Captree State Park is the most competitive and “cut throat” where mean-spirited behavior among captains and crew is common, Atlantic Highlands, NJ and the New York City area, including Sheepshead Bay, tie for second.

This has not always been the case. In the 1950s and 1960s, captains and their families would gather for parties, even taking bus trips together to parks in New Jersey and New York. That no longer occurs. Of course, one informant notes that there has always been aggressive competition among the party boat owners. For example, the boats used to all charge \$7 for a bluefish trip, then coordinated a slow build up a dollar at a time to eventually charge \$15 per trip. It was very hard to build up to that price when the competition was so severe, but through cooperation, the boats managed to increase their prices. Then a new guy came along who charged only \$10 and wrecked the higher price. Competition and aggression are nothing new among the Sheepshead Bay for-hire boats.

One city official suggests that the boats would reduce their operating costs if they coordinated their efforts on major purchases like fuel and both medical and liability insurance, but says such suggestions are unappealing to the boat owners and captains. Unlike the captains in Freeport, New York, the captains in Sheepshead Bay rarely coordinate their efforts in any way. Typically, when boats appear together on lists, it is because a third party has compiled the list, i.e., internet websites about Sheepshead Bay that list some of the boats comprising the local fishing fleet. However, some of the captains do cooperate by consolidating clients so that one boat can have enough passengers to make a trip worthwhile one day and another boat another day. This is a survival strategy that seems to come from the declining numbers of clients who appear at the party boat piers on any given day.

In addition to rarely cooperating with one another regarding business issues, boat captains also rarely work with businesses or economic development organizations that might share their interests. The president of the Bay Improvement Group, for example, considers his organization’s interests in main street revitalization and waterfront preservation to overlap with the interests of the party boat fleet. He works with two boat captains in particular but finds the group in general difficult to work with. “I must say, they are the most ungrateful group I’ve ever met,” he says, noting that they do not cooperate with each other or with the B.I.G. organization, which has been working to preserve their spot on the waterfront.

However, some social ties with clients remain. Despite the decline in clients whom captains and crew consider to be “real fishermen”, some passengers continue to have special relationships with captain and crew of particular boats. On one early morning field visit, a young Asian American man with an evening-shift job settled into the seating on his favorite party boat and told the crew that he had “brought the bags” for the trip – clear plastic in which to put his and others’ catches. When the captain decided not to go out fishing that morning because of too few clients, he waited around while the crew

pondered a striped bass fishing expedition of their own, until the captain put the crew to work on other boat maintenance. Only four paying customers were on the boat that morning, and the captain said he needed 12 to break even. He sent three of the customers to a neighboring boat and the young man stayed behind. Had there been more regulars, like the young man, he would have gone out fishing that morning despite the cost. This captain tells the story of how his father, during the Depression, used to take one of his regular customers out fishing at no charge so that he could feed his family.

This speaks to the social role that these party boats can play as they provide pleasure in the boat ride and the thrill of catching fish for city dwellers while also providing high quality nourishment for many of the clients. The always evolving immigrant populations of Brooklyn have historically benefited from this opportunity. Newly arrived and first generation immigrant families often do not have the disposable income that more firmly established ethnic groups do, notes one industry observer, so their recreation on the weekends may be to go down to Sheepshead Bay, throw rocks in the water and watch the boats come in, and occasionally take one of those boats out fishing.

### **Discussion: Community/fisheries dependency and engagement**

The community of Sheepshead Bay is economically dependent on for-hire fishing in that the boats serve as an important draw to the area. People enjoy strolling along the esplanade and looking at the boats before having a meal at one of the area's restaurants. In the past there was a "ton of money" to be made by the captains, crew and neighborhood businesses in town from the crowds of people going out on party boats. Now boats contribute ambience more than income, says one captain. He notes that people come to Sheepshead Bay to walk around and look at the party boats because the area is known historically as a fishing community and because it's a treat to watch a boat go by. "It's just visual. Monetary-wise, I don't think we're a great asset to Sheepshead Bay," he says, adding that his passengers enjoy watching the people on shore too. As in Freeport where commercial boats draw tourists to local restaurants, the Sheepshead Bay party boat fleet seems to have an important symbiotic relationship with the non-fishing economy. "Can you imagine what those piers are like without the boats? Why go there?" says a Brooklyn planner who grew up in Sheepshead Bay. He maintains that the borough officials want the fishing boats to remain on Emmons Avenue but admits the government has done little directly to keep them there. "Is it a backdrop?" he adds, "Yep." But he argues that as a backdrop, the boats are extremely valuable to the borough, particularly as part of its campaign to increase tourism in the area.

## **III. Vulnerability and Cumulative Impacts**

### **Gentrification and Economic Development**

In the 1980s and 1990s, the city developed plans for Sheepshead Bay that provided for the improvement of the piers, private residential and retail construction, and an esplanade along Emmons Avenue (Fletcher 1995). The location of the party boats at a municipally owned pier is very important to the industry's survival in this area. Property values are high and much development in recent years has included a retail building (with garage parking) anchored by a discount women's clothing store (Loehmann's) and several high-

rise assisted living and senior residences along Emmons Avenue. Currently four such residences and one nursing rehabilitation center are located in waterfront areas. People involved in the recreational fishing community had hoped the area would develop into more of a “fishing village.” One bait shop owner mentioned the Nautical Mile in Freeport Long Island as an example of what could have happened in Sheepshead Bay. The construction of Loehmann's required a deviation from existing waterfront zoning ordinances. One informant who is active in local development issues noted, “Once you break zoning it creates a domino effect.” He said the area is undergoing a “condominium explosion.” For-hire boats are leaving the bay because of limited parking and limited potential for increasing the parking as the building boom in Sheepshead Bay continues.

At one time generous benefactors made parking available for the fleet, but their heirs revoked the free parking. The city sold vacant land that the boat owners thought should have been converted into a municipal parking lot. A planner in the Borough President's office estimated that there are 75 percent fewer parking spaces in the area than there used to be. At one time, the city leased land in vacant lots on the north side of Emmons Avenue to parking lot operators. The planner downplayed the parking problem, though. He said that from the city's point of view, the fishermen should have bought a parking lot if they thought they needed one; the city did not supply parking for other businesses—and other businesses in the area are also coping with reduced parking. However, parking may be even more of a problem for party boat clients than the clients of other businesses. Early morning trips leave before public transportation options (the subway and bus) are readily available and parking meters run expire before the boats return from their half- or full-day trips.

The piers, while critical to the fishing fleet, are in disrepair and poorly maintained by the city government, say boat owners. Two problems with the city-owned piers include deteriorated utilities for the boats and dangerously deteriorated steps. The water, telephone and electricity junction boxes and connections to boats were designed poorly so that in just 10 years they have deteriorated from weather. The steps leading from the dock down to the water are vital because the bay has a five-foot tidal range. At times the boats can be sitting on the water's surface well below the dock. However, these steps have also deteriorated because of poor design. A borough official estimated that the repairs would cost \$3 million and argued that the city and borough have other priorities such as the education system on which to spend that money. Besides, asserted the official, “The boat owners don't give a shit about the piers.” He said that they “tear the hell out of them”, by ignoring the cleats on the dock and tying up to lampposts and steps and other inappropriate anchors. The Ports and Terminals agency used to be in charge of the piers and were said to be more responsive to calls for repairs than the New York City Parks Department, which is now in charge of the piers.

One local advocate for the party boat fleet noted that the fleet had been reduced from 45 boats to 12 in recent years, “because New York City is turning its back on their needs.” He also bemoaned the increasing presence of huge dinner cruise boats that had nothing to do with the area's fishing history. He called the fishing fleet a “great resource” because it

offers recreation, entertainment and a psychological benefit to people who go out fishing. “It’s great to have a resource like that in New York City,” he said.

### **Environment**

There has been significant physical change to the Sheepshead Bay waterfront over the years, including the dredging and bulk heading in the 1930s that accommodated larger party boats. The bay was once much wider and Emmons Avenue was a field of flowers, informants say.

Some worry that residents and visitors to Sheepshead Bay blame the party boats for the garbage that floats at the enclosed end of the bay, when, according to industry members, they have cleaned up their acts and do not litter the bay. One captain says the garbage washes down storm drains from Prospect Park, another Brooklyn neighborhood.

In 1986 New York and New Jersey coastal communities were the victims of medical waste contaminants that had been dumped and floated ashore. The medical waste scares affected all facets of the fishing industry from for-hire to commercial because people did not want to eat fish that might have come into contact with such contamination. Both commercial and for-hire captains in Sheepshead Bay and in Freeport, Long Island said that this environmental damage had deleterious affects on their industries which had to do with the perception potential clients and customers had of the seafood coming from the contaminated environment.

For-hire captains in both areas argue that commercial otter trawls are destroying fish habitat. “I had a piece of bottom that’s gone now – the Getaway Channel,” said one Sheepshead Bay boat captain, claiming that otter trawls destroyed the bottom and that a commercial boat wiped out the mussels on a stretch of bottom that he used that nobody knew about.

### **Fisheries Management**

The for-hire industry in Sheepshead Bay has the same problems with fisheries management as the industry in Freeport and Pt. Lookout, particularly regarding the fluke size limit compared with the smaller limit in New Jersey and considering the smaller-sized stocks that migrate into the New York fishing area. For-hire captains in all of those areas also complained that the NMFS works for the commercial industry and against the party and charter boats, which is of course not the way the commercial boats see things at all. As evidence, however, one Sheepshead Bay captain calls to mind the government-guaranteed loans to build boats to work the Bering Strait of Alaska that could hold 60,000 pounds of pollock per boat. “Who in their right mind thought they could pay this boat off?” says the captain, arguing that those boat owners went out of business because there are no more fish.

Participation by Sheepshead Bay boat captains and crew in the federal management process has been limited to one captain and his wife and a local college professor who runs a charter boat in New York City part-time. One captain notes that fishermen don’t

have time to sit on committees because if it rains they are out of business. He has to fish when weather is good and gets his days off when the weather gives them.

### **Resilience and Representation**

Brooklyn borough officials have launched a campaign to increase tourism in the area. One borough planner said while New York was the third highest tourist destination in the world, Brooklyn ranks as high as 15 mostly as a result of the Caribbean Day parade that is said to draw more people than Mardi Gras does in New Orleans. Borough officials want to bring a “vacation” type atmosphere back to Sheepshead Bay. However this seems in contrast to the construction of a Loehmann’s store and elderly assisted living and condominiums in the neighborhood. Still, he said the fishing boats in Sheepshead Bay become a part of the larger effort to market Long Island and Brooklyn’s ethnic diversity and other features. While the borough is not doing anything directly to keep the party boats at the piers, the borough doesn’t want to lose the industry as a backdrop for the tourists who visit Sheepshead Bay.

“The only reason Sheepshead Bay has survived is because people want it. Everyone in Brooklyn remembers going to Lundy’s [restaurant] and going to look at the boats.” Although the emphasis of local development has been on new residential units and retail, one industry observer says that focusing on the area’s fishing heritage is “an element of survival.” Another observer notes that the planning board and borough officials could have regulated the boats out of business if they did not want that neighborhood to be portrayed as a fishing community.

The Bay Improvement Group, established in 1993, claims boat owners from the Sheepshead Bay for-hire fleet among its approximately 500 members, although industry informants did not mention this organization during interviews. In fact, industry members mentioned a captain who had been active representing the fleets interests in the borough during the 1970s and 1980s who left because he did not get a spot at the new piers for his boat. Informants say that since then, no one has stepped forward to represent the for-hire fishermen in local government. However, the Bay Improvement Group president insists that his organization works with a couple of boat captains to preserve the fishing fleet’s existence on Emmon’s Avenue. The group’s mission is “1) to create and disseminate educational materials on the history, development, and preservation of the waterfront and bay areas; 2) to mobilize and organize community energies and organizations for a comprehensive strategy and vision for the future; and 3) to promote commercial, tourist, cultural and recreational uses and activities which foster and are complementary to the port and waterfront activities.” <http://members.aol.com/bayimpgrp/page9.html>

Although the Sheepshead Bay Fishing Fleet Association is listed on the Bay Improvement Group’s website, informants did not mention this group either and efforts to contact the group for this profile were unsuccessful. A former president of the Association was listed as a member of B.I.G.’s executive board. The president of the Bay Improvement Group is an attorney who is from Sheepshead Bay and has been working with the party boat fleet since the 1980s as part of his pro bono work in the neighborhood. He noted that the group fought hard to stop the zoning change that

allowed Loehmann's to locate on the waterfront and also proposed a failed-plan to add 7,000 parking spaces in the area. Perhaps more collaboration among boats, the local organization and even restaurants and other ancillary businesses would have netted better results.

Regarding fishery management issues, the for-hire fishing industry finds representation in the regional and recently resurrected United Boatman's Association. Similar reasons for re-instituting this organization were discussed by informants in Sheepshead Bay and Freeport. The Association includes for-hire fishermen from New York and New Jersey ports. Also, a marine education program at nearby Kingsborough Community College encourages the maritime professions. A professor there has many years experience serving on the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee and is also a charter boat captain working out of Manhattan.

One boat captain and his wife have been going to the state and federal management meetings for years and continue to attend many meetings, but say they have been disheartened by the results.

### **Conclusion**

The boats in Sheepshead Bay target a wide variety of locally available fish – as dictated by current state and federal regulations. Informants feel constrained by the existing regulations and suggest that existing fisheries could support a stronger industry without so much regulatory control.

Boat captains and crew already engage in economic activity outside the fisheries. A few boats are used as commuter ferries or water taxis. Most captains supplement their fishing trips with dinner cruises, fireworks cruises and other sightseeing trips. Many crewmembers work other jobs, as discussed above. While the urban area offers a wide range of jobs at a variety of skill levels, two industry observers said psychological stresses involved in taking a non-fishing job weigh heavily on both commercial and for-hire recreational fishers. This is discussed a bit more in the Freeport profile.

“The industry is dying. There used to be more fishermen,” says one boat captain, referring to the skill and dedication of past clients. “Now nobody knows fishing. They don't want to come down here and throw everything back,” he said, referring to the fluke size limit. He said that a client can “catch 500 fluke a day but only bring home five. You can't develop fishermen that way.”

With catch limits and size limits that have decreased the amounts of fish clients can bring home, the industry is losing out to the increased competition from other forms of entertainment. As the family traditions of for-hire fishing fade away, fewer crew and fewer loyal clients are reproduced. The profit margin of the boats is diminishing and the value of the boat slips in the area is high. Thus, the boats are dependent on the municipally run piers to stay in business. The good news for the fishing community is that the borough seems committed to the boats' continued presence on Emmons Avenue,

even if the commitment is limited to maintaining the boats as a visual backdrop for the other leisure activities in the neighborhood.

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