

**Partial transcript of original memorandum to
Mr. Van Derpool dated October 31, 1963**

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To: Mr. James Van Derpool, Chairman
Landmarks Commission

From: Jane Jacobs

We understand that the Commission will shortly consider the attributes of Greenwich Village as a historic area, and that there may be some question as to where the western boundary of the area is drawn. This concerns us, both as West Villagers and as citizens of New York who take considerable pride and interest in Greenwich Village as a whole.

We urge that the proposed historic area include all of western Greenwich village--that is, that the western boundary be drawn not short of West Street. There are a number of cogent reasons for including, most particularly, the westernmost blocks. As you know, the West Village was the old river-landing settlement. From its beginnings, the settlement combined work, residence and transportation, and these activities, while local were not provincial. They all had ties, in part, to the larger settlement of New York. With truly remarkable integrity and fidelity, this historic land use persists today; work, residence and transportation, with very similar links and the same quality of being local but unprovincial. As an instance, consider Oelhaf's marina works (177 Christopher) where the most exacting emergency repairs are made on the equipment of great passenger liners putting in at New York. Because he must be ready for emergencies, Mr. Oelhaf and his family live above one portion (11 Weehawken Street) of their quite extensive marine shops. One of the features of their home is the great pipe organ; the installment itself is a marvel to behold and word of its quality has gone out on the sea lanes of the world so that an international roster of organists visits here and plays the instrument. This is just one example of the functional continuity of the river-front Village; it can be found in much of the industry and most of the crafts.

Visually, too the Village waterfront shows unique evidences of its unbroken historic continuity -- and, again, not as ghostly lore or nostalgic pretense, but as part and parcel of the living reality. Enough of the early buildings remain so that the historic scale of the old town can be understood and felt. I do not know of any other part of the old Manhattan waterfront where this is true.

The "quaintest" building in the general popular view, the old wooden building at 8 Weehawken Street (or 392 West Street) is not the oldest. This is apparently the remnant of the city market, erected in 1834; subsequently it was occupied by a Clam Broth House -- once a popular and fashionable type of restaurant -- which advertised itself as the first one established in New York; now the broth house is a charming residence. This building is presumably the original structure on that edge of land, for the city-owned market was

the initial enterprise after Weehawken Street was laid out on newly-made ground. Although the little house is assumed to be the oldest in the vicinity, there is at 398 West Street, in the block to the north, between Tenth and Charles, one still older, a sloping roofed, four story building of 1829. Well maintained on the interior, its great rough old beams visible under the high double-pitched roof, it affords a first-class demonstration of the workaday construction in the riverfront town of 1829.

Behind this West Street frontage once stood Newgate, the first New York State prison (built 1796-97) which was converted into a brewery after the prison was moved up the Hudson to what is now Ossining. The brewery is gone now, but in the next block north, at 159 Charles between West and Washington, what is said to be the brewmaster's handsome house still stands, and the great rusticated stones of the prison-brewery edifice can be seen today in the handsome Shepard's warehouse building, 667 Washington Street. Still a little farther to the north, beginning alongside 412 West Street, is Charles Lane, the only remaining portion of the lane that led straight from the river landing to Sir Peter's Warren's Mansion. (The mansion lay directly eastward at about what is now Forth Street.) Along the lane, several old houses remain, also old stables converted to new work uses. It is the rule, not the exception, that the houses in the westernmost tier of blocks retain their original moldings, mantles, and other details, including in many cases their front doors, doorway and window detail, cornices, iron railings, etc.

Another kind of continuity that has persisted, both functionally and in the tangible presence of the buildings, is the areas service to wayfarers. The Weehawken-West Street area was known, in the latter part of the last century, as a hotel center, and the three principal hotels- one at 180 Christopher, one at 305 West Tenth-remain, still in use as hotels. (They are mainly patronized, appropriately enough, by truckers whose work terminus at the New York end is the local waterfront.) Another, the smallest of the quartet (three stories high, situated to the north of the old Broth House), at 395 West Street stood empty for a long time but has been reclaimed as a residence and studio. A curious building at 391 West Street, to the south of the Broth House, is what appears at first sight to be a tenement of rather standard appearance. But there is nothing standard about it. Its floor area is remarkably small (and the apartments it contains singularly pleasant), and it obviously always stood alone. It was built in 1903, was gay with awnings, and was known as "the skyscraper on West Street." It could easily look as gay and lighthearted again and probably will. The buildings mentioned are by no means a roster of what is old or unique or surprising in the far west Village, but they are illustrative.

The point is perhaps clear, that waterfront blocks of Greenwich Village are important as establishing a historic sense of the life, the contribution, and the meaning of the village. Given respect, they can provide Greenwich Village with a priceless face, and moreover a face which is utterly valid and living, and this face can be enhanced with the passage of time. The local people are well aware of this quality and its potentialities. For instance, this is one reason that the West Village Plan for housing, on Washington Street (where the New York tracks have been removed) so carefully retains and respects the existing edifices and conforms with the old area in scale and texture...