



# Brouwer's or Freeke's Mill

## Brooklyn, New York

by  
Earl Taylor  
Tide Mill Institute

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Brooklyn has been home to several tide mills through the centuries. Today's Gowanus Canal in South Brooklyn is heir to the former Gowanus Creek, that drained the tidal wetland area from the present neighborhoods of Red Hook, Carroll Gardens, Gowanus, Park Slope, Boerum Hill, Cobble Hill and Sunset Park. Due to many years of industrial pollution, the canal was designated a Superfund Site in 2009.

In *Gowanus: Brooklyn's Curious Canal*, Joseph Aliexiou writes that the earliest tide mill in New Netherland was "Brouwer's Mill, or Freeke's Mill, erected sometime before 1661, serviced by a hand-dug millpond." Brouwer's Mill was located in the upper reaches of Gowanus Creek.



**Illustration of Freeke's Mill from *Historic and Antiquarian Scenes* by Thomas Field.**

Alixiou provides the following ownership history and description of the tide mill:

*While owned by a rich merchant, John C. Freeke, by the late eighteenth century, the mill was first called Brouwer's Mill after its original proprietor, Adam Brouwer, and was also known as the Old Gowanus Mill. The land itself first belonged to Jan Evertse Bout, but it was Bout's tenant, Brouwer, who constructed the mill with business partner Isaac Deforest. Brouwer eventually acquired Deforest's share and bought (or traded) the land rights from Bout, who in 1667 bequeathed "the corn and meadows and place whereon the mill is grounded" to the children of Adam Brouwer. Because the Gowanus is an estuary regulated by tidal flow, the pond was a necessary piece of aquatic engineering to produce a functioning mill. Controlled by a sluice gate, this millpond filled to capacity at high tide; once the tide went out, the gates were opened and a steady flow water was established, forcing the millstone to turn.*

The description of the use of the water in the pond above is a little misleading. There would have been large gates to allow the tide to fill the pond, and when the pond was full, as the tide receded, it would have closed the pond gates. When the level of the tide was low enough, the sluice gate could be opened to produce a flow of water directed at the mill wheel. The flow forced the mill wheel to turn, and gearing inside the mill transferred the force to the shaft that turned the millstone.

Alexiou goes on to say, "In 1709 the colonial government contracted yet another mill road at the northern border of the Vecht plantation, on land that had originally been held by Jan Evertsen Bout, who had gifted (or sold) this particular portion to Nicholas and Adam Bruwer Jr., sons of the first proprietor of Freeke's Mill. The two enterprising sons had dug a millpond by damming a branch of the Gowanus that same year and on it built the Yellow Mill (also known as the Lower Mill, and eventually Denton's Mill) at the northeast side of present-day First Street between Second and Third Avenues."

The site of the mill is shown on Eymund Diegel's 2015 draft map on the *Red Hook Water Stories* website, "Red Hook Streams, Ponds & Place Names, Based on the 1766 Bernard Rutzer Survey & the 1867 Stiles History of Brooklyn" (<https://redhookwaterstories.org/items/show/1347>). The mill also appears on the 1776-1767 Bernard Rutzer map (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-f437-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>).



**Brouwers Mill location (circled in red) on the 1776-1767 Ratzel map.**

"Documenting the Brouwer Mill at Gowanus, Long Island" provides a detailed exploration of the Brouwer family's connection to the mill (<https://brouwergenealogy.blogspot.com/2015/11/documenting-brouwer-mill-at-gowanus.html>). It also describes the mill's involvement in the Battle of Brooklyn: "On August 22, 1776 British troops landed at Gravesend, just south of Gowanus. On August 27, 1776, the Battle of Brooklyn, more often referred to as the Battle of Long Island, began. During the battle it was ordered that the Brouwer's mill and stores were to be burned so as not to fall into the hands of the British."

Eymund Diegel has produced a slide show about the Battle of Brooklyn and the research into the cemetery for those who fought in the battle, "Make Gowanus Great Again: Research Notes for the Restoration of a 1776 Battle Mill" ([https://issuu.com/proteusgowanus/docs/0\\_2016\\_ghost\\_mill\\_restoration\\_1776](https://issuu.com/proteusgowanus/docs/0_2016_ghost_mill_restoration_1776)).

The *Brouwer Genealogy* website, in a 2011 article about Alonzo Chappel's 1858 painting, "Battle of Long Island," describes the battle in relation to the mills (<https://brouwergenealogy.blogspot.com/2011/09/battle-of-long-island-by-alonzo-chappel.html>):

*The Battle of Long Island, as it has traditionally been called, or more appropriately, The Battle of Brooklyn, was fought on August 27, 1776. An excellent, current account of the battle can be found in John J. Gallagher, The Battle of Brooklyn, 1776 (De Capo Press, 2001). Much of the fighting took place around the tide mills owned by the Brouwer family at Gowanus. On orders of the retreating Gen. George Washington, the mills and all their stores were burned so as not to fall into the*



*hands of the British. Many later day accounts of the battle refer to the mill property as "Freeke's Mill," which is not completely correct. At the time of the British attack, the mill properties were owned by the families of brothers, Abraham and Jeremiah Brouwer. It was only in 1798, that John C. Freeke became owner after purchasing the property, and rebuilt mills, from Adolph Brouwer (d. 1827). In 1818, descendants of Abraham and Jeremiah Brouwer petitioned the U. S. Congress in an effort to gain compensation for the losses which resulted from the British attack and the subsequent burning of the mills.*



***The Stand of the Maryland 400 at the Battle of Brooklyn. Alonzo Chappel, The Battle of Long Island, 1858, oil on canvas. (M1986.29.1, Brooklyn Historical Society.)***

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