LEFT BANK OF THE HUDSON
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JERSEY CITY AND THE ARTISTS OF 111 1st STREET

DAVID J. GOODWIN

Empire State Editions
An imprint of Fordham University Press
New York 2018
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Foreword

Gentrification is a difficult phenomenon to define. Since the word entered the vernacular in 1964, it has acquired a lot of baggage as each person comes to understand it according to individual experiences. It is always an idiosyncratic idea, reframed city by city, neighborhood by neighborhood, home by home. For those being pushed out of a neighborhood, gentrification is displacement; for those capitalizing on new development, it is opportunity; for those in government planning the city of tomorrow, it is the chance to bring infrastructure and amenities to underserved communities. The effects of gentrification are always determined by the person or organization facing localized circumstances. Yet so much of the political discourse about gentrification is abstract and theoretical; it tends to fall along very certain ideological lines, unleashing fierce emotions, belying the complex human nature that truly defines the phenomenon. This is a structural problem with how we talk and think about gentrification—and it often stands in the way of better understanding.

In most dictionaries, the headword is “gentrification,” the noun. It should be something that we can touch—a person, place, or thing. Any attempt to better understand how gentrification affects communities must be grounded in these tangible components. In Left Bank of the Hudson, David Goodwin does exactly this by grounding us at 111 1st Street in Jersey City, New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York City.

While conversations about gentrification in the greater New York City area became more exigent at the end of the twentieth century, as
the city applied strong policing tactics in an effort to encourage new investment, the process of gentrification has been playing out along the Hudson since the man for whom the river is named entered the area and seized much of the land from the Lenape people who already called it home. Even if the sixteenth century didn’t articulate the idea of gentrification, some of the phenomenon’s most notable hallmarks—chiefly, increased economic activity and displacement—have been around since Europeans arrived in North America. The importance of the unbroken line of increased economic activity and displacement over the centuries is not lost on Goodwin.

One of the most common misperceptions about gentrification is that it happens in one big wave: One day the casual observer looks up at the church on the corner only to discover it is now a coffee shop. But in reality, gentrification plays out in wave after wave of activity, each affected by what came before, each affecting what will follow. By starting with the construction of 111 1st Street in 1866, Goodwin is not just providing a comprehensive history of one address; he is recognizing the full dynamism of gentrification, yanking us from a theoretical space in order to submerge us into one tangled, complicated story capable of deepening our understanding of gentrification.

As with most gentrification narratives, the story of 111 1st Street starts with the capitalization of land. Gentrification is never, strictly speaking, about new restaurants or tobacco factories or artists’ studios: It is always about extracting money from the soil. A building is constructed in order to generate money, and it often outlives its original use, evolving to suit different interests and needs over several decades. But money, always restless, has a tendency to move on—a better opportunity materializes in a new neighborhood or in a new city—and the building that was once monetized becomes neglected. Often enough, artists looking for an affordable place to live and work sniff out the neglect and make use of the empty space. What artists lack in hard currency they make up for in cultural capital: They bring cachet and cool, tempting the people who buy their work to follow them to their epicenter of activity. Soon the money comes charging back, clasping the coattails of cool, and developers are not far behind, promising a skyscraper with world-class design. With talk of revenue and prestige, they convince a municipal government that tabula rasa is the way forward: Demolition follows, wiping away the past and destabilizing the future. Too often the promised skyscraper never materializes.

In *Left Bank of the Hudson*, Goodwin synthesizes the economic and the
cultural analysis of gentrification. Yes, there is the story of how 111 1st Street has been capitalized across generations, but there is also the story of how it has affected the lives of the people who worked and lived there.

In the end, gentrification is defined by the confluence of all possibilities that a noun presents: People and place compose the story of this thing called gentrification. As Goodwin captures with the story of 111 1st Street, gentrification plays out in a physical space where lives and interests intersect and compete with one another. The actions of these people in this space define gentrification over time. Readers might not necessarily know the address, but they will certainly recognize the complicated story that emerges when a place is taken away from the people who give it life.

DW Gibson
Introduction
Why Does 111 1st Street Matter?

In the late spring of 2015, a Jersey City blogger, Charles Kessler, posted a confession detailing his strained relationship with the city’s artistic community and his own self-imposed exile from it and, more sadly, from his own art. Looking back on his life, Kessler dated the birth of his alienation and his sense of failure as January 2005 and its source as the loss of 111 1st Street, the center of the Jersey City cultural world at that time. For years, he had worked to raise the profile of 111 1st Street and its neighborhood and to preserve both as havens for artists and art. The artists of 111 1st Street were evicted in 2005. Two years later, in 2007, the building itself was demolished. After those two events, Kessler abandoned his career as an artist and isolated himself from his colleagues and from the social life of Jersey City. Thankfully, Kessler’s story had a happy ending: He gradually reengaged with the arts and cultural scene in Jersey City, started a blog, and recently enjoyed a career retrospective exhibition. Nevertheless, 111 1st Street haunted his memories and his imagination. The building had held so much potential, so much promise for Jersey City.

Many artists who worked or lived at 111 1st Street echoed sentiments and memories akin to Kessler’s: They recollected a fertile, colorful, and sometimes chaotic collection of painters, sculptors, musicians, photographers, filmmakers, and writers. Their time at 111 1st Street was a treasured period in their professional careers. Some even viewed their experiences at 111 1st Street as the pinnacle of their very lives. Other residents, especially more recent arrivals to Jersey City, have little memory of the
building and its community. If approached about the topic, most city residents—even those who consider themselves members of the local creative class—will likely answer with a tilted head and a quizzical look. The building at 111 1st Street is largely forgotten, if it was ever known at all.

For most of its life, 111 1st Street was the P. Lorillard Tobacco Company warehouse, a site of work and production (arguably, the artists continued this tradition). The building was erected in 1866 as the headquarters of the Continental Screw Company. The Lorillard Tobacco Company moved to the building in 1870 and operated manufacturing and storage facilities there until 1956. The company figured prominently in the industrial history of Jersey City. By the end of the nineteenth century, Lorillard was the largest manufacturer of tobacco products in the United States. Noting the centennial of Hudson County in 1940, an article in the *Jersey City Observer* claimed that “[n]o industry has been more completely identified with Jersey City throughout the years than Lorillards [sic].” The centennial also “furnishe[d] the occasion for paying tribute to this family which has done so much in an industrial way to put Jersey City on the map.”

After Lorillard closed its operations in Jersey City in 1956, 111 1st Street fell into neglect and disuse. Various light manufacturers, storage companies, and other businesses cycled through 111 1st Street over the next thirty years. Finally, a handful of artists priced out of Manhattan and desperately needing affordable studio space discovered the building and Jersey City in the late 1980s. They crossed the formidable Hudson River and braved the urban wilderness of the Garden State. Maybe, just maybe, Jersey City would become the next bohemian scene with their newfound home at 111 1st Street as its epicenter. More artists joined them, and a community slowly emerged at 111 1st Street and its surrounding neighborhood, a wasteland of abandoned warehouses and silent factories. From their studios at 111 1st Street, the artists could glance from their canvases and gaze at the Manhattan skyline. They had access to the excitement and opportunity of New York but with the benefit of solitude and the luxury of cheap rent, both found in Jersey City.

During this same period, the economic climate, reputation, and desirability of the New York City region—which includes Jersey City—improved after the dark decades of the 1960s and 1970s, when employment, neighborhoods, and population declined and crime spiked. The building at 111 1st Street was sandwiched between the booming Jersey City waterfront—the Exchange Place and Newport neighborhoods—now a cluster of offices, retail, and housing built upon the ruins of railyards and
shipping docks, and the picturesque brownstone neighborhoods of downtown Jersey City. Simply put, 111 1st Street was suddenly a very valuable and a very attractive piece of real estate. After several years of fighting with the building’s management and owner, the artists were forced from 111 1st Street in 2005.

To students and scholars of urban history, 111 1st Street might read like a too familiar story of gentrification and displacement. At first blush, there might seem to be nothing unusual or remarkable about it. Why, then, is the story of this one building—111 1st Street—so important to the people and the history of Jersey City? Beyond its former residents and few local preservationists, who would care to read about it? Why does it matter?

The torrid web of local politics; the transition to a new economic model; and the social, demographic, and even physical changes undergone by Jersey City in the past three decades can all be witnessed and explored through the history of 111 1st Street. More specifically, 111 1st Street fig-
ured greatly in the minds and careers of the mostly unnamed artists who dreamt and toiled within its labyrinthine halls. When I began this project several years ago, I believed I would have trouble locating enough willing sources, let alone any with valuable and intriguing information. Instead, I was surprised at how many individuals were waiting for someone to reach out to them, listen to them, and chronicle their shared past. They all had something worthwhile to say. The story of 111 1st Street deserved to be written and preserved for these reasons alone.

As a historian, I feel compelled to document the narrative of 111 1st Street as an act of cultural preservation. Jersey City has changed dramatically in the last several decades, and it continues to grow and evolve, as any healthy, vibrant city does, yet buildings, places, and memories are lost and forgotten during such an ongoing and now increasingly rapid and radical process. The artists who worked or lived in the building have scattered. Future generations of Jersey City residents and lovers of history and culture should be able to read about 111 1st Street and speculate on what it might have become.

If an accurate story of 111 1st Street is not written, then a narrative verging on the apocryphal may very well take its place. Because of its tradition of colorful political figures and an insular culture, Jersey City (and Hudson County) is a fertile ground for tall tales and local legends. The arts community, especially the remaining veterans of 111 1st Street, is not immune to this local predilection. Although exaggeration might infuse a story or an anecdote with mirth and playfulness, it just as likely might darken it with vitriol and ugliness. The latter seems to be happening in the retelling of 111 1st Street.

In the spring of 2013, I introduced a documentary ostensibly on 111 1st Street at the Jersey City Free Public Library. Not having seen the film nor knowing anything of its content or thematic structure, I summarized the history of 111 1st Street and then articulated the hope that its destruction might lead to a heightened awareness of architectural preservation in Jersey City. The documentary was named 111 First Street: From Paris to Jersey City, They Showed No Love, and it was directed by a filmmaker with the nom de plume Branko. As a film, it was rather amateurish and consisted of little more than haphazardly edited footage. The movie began with a montage of images and television news clips from September 11, 2001, and a not very cryptic insinuation that Lloyd Goldman, the then (and still current) owner of 111 1st Street, was involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center complex. This segment bled into an equally strange screed about the deceased American Jesuit theologian Cardinal Avery Dulles and
Vatican City. In effect, this film suggested that a wealthy real estate investor, Goldman, plotted with the Catholic Church to attack lower Manhattan and Washington, D.C., in order to trigger a decade of military action in the Middle East—all for no specified reason. Who could have guessed that a single former factory, 111 1st Street, would figure so prominently in geopolitics and the machinations of world powers? Within just a few minutes, the film sullied its narrative with an ugly anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic element. If I had been aware of this content in the documentary, I would have declined the invitation to introduce it. After the film screening, a former tenant of 111 1st Street asked me about my thoughts on the supposed connections between Goldman and September 11. I politely voiced my skepticism. This was not my first time encountering this conspiracy theory.

Aside from my own personal fascination with the subject and my professional aspirations, this anecdote provides another compelling reason for documenting the life and death of 111 1st Street: setting the facts straight. An accurate and fully researched history would provide the strongest counter-argument to any falsehoods on the subject and dispel the more bigoted rumors and innuendo.

When I moved to Jersey City a decade ago, I enjoyed riding the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail to gain a sense of the city. From my seat, I watched 111 1st Street being demolished. Although I did not know the significance of the building at that time, I wondered why such a historic and visually intriguing building was not being repurposed. Its destruction seemed very shortsighted. Several years later, I read an article on 111 1st Street and its arts community in a local magazine. I wanted to know more. I had to know more. Who worked in the building? What happened within its walls? Why did Jersey City squander this opportunity to compete with the exploding arts and music scene in Brooklyn? A few more years passed, and I briefly discussed 111 1st Street in a graduate seminar paper. Later, I served as a commissioner (2010–14) and chairman (2011–13) of the Historic Preservation Commission of Jersey City. During my tenure, the body voted to landmark several of the remaining warehouses in the neighborhood of the former 111 1st Street, and I encountered other people who cared about such buildings and spaces. I wanted to tell the greater, richer story of 111 1st Street. When I started this project, I looked through the fence surrounding the empty lot that had been the mythical 111 1st Street and stared at the piles of trash, forgotten construction equipment, sprouting trees, spreading vegetation, shredded plastic blowing in the wind, and the carefully arranged piles of bricks salvaged from the
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demolished tobacco warehouse and displayed like trophies from a bloody, hard-fought war. Today, a parking lot sits at 111 1st Street.

In order to accomplish this goal, I reviewed scholarly and popular literature, conducted archival research, and, most important, interviewed various individuals associated with the building. In the course of my research, I contacted fifty-one individuals or entities. These parties included artists and residents of 111 1st Street; nonprofits, civic institutions, and community activists; government officials; and area businesses servicing artists or related to the local arts community. Twenty-seven artists or residents of 111 1st Street were contacted; thirteen artists and residents were interviewed. Four businesses were contacted; two businesses were interviewed. Nine government officials were contacted; three government officials were interviewed. Eleven nonprofits, civic organizations, and community activists were contacted; five nonprofits, civic organizations, and community activists were interviewed. In total, twenty-three parties agreed to interviews. These interviews occurred between May 2011 and September 2011 and between July 2013 and September 2013. I held additional conversations and exchanged follow-up e-mails with certain sources. Such communications were not counted as unique or separate interviews; nonetheless, the citations include the actual date of the interview. Table 1 offers a complete analysis. Several individuals declined to meet with me.

Several artists and former residents of 111 1st Street complained of psychological and spiritual wounds from their struggle for the building and voiced no desire to revisit their memories. All sources were interviewed with the assurance of confidentiality, which explains the lack of attribution to many quotations throughout the book. Such quotations are noted with an interview date but without a named source. While conducting my research, I believed I would achieve more success if I promised confidentiality. I still believe this. However, as this book neared publication, I contacted many of the sources—especially the artists of 111 1st Street—and asked if their names and identities could be included in the text. Nearly all those I contacted agreed to my request. Those who granted me permission are now fully part of the story of 111 1st Street. I thank them for helping me one last time.

Businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community activists all presented me with their stories, observations, and impressions concerning 111 1st Street and the arts in Jersey City. Aware of the controversial decisions made regarding 111 1st Street and, even more important, fully com-
prehending the long and rich history of political malfeasance and corruption in Jersey City and Hudson County, I was pleasantly surprised by the willingness and general helpfulness of county and city officials to speak with me and assist me in this project. However, past and present elected officials were far less responsive. Indeed, several promised to speak with me and then failed to reply to my queries or simply broke appointments.

This narrative will follow a simple chronological structure. The first chapter details the history of the P. Lorillard Tobacco Company, the business and the industrial interest that occupied 111 1st Street for the majority of its working life. Chapters 2 through 5 explore the history of 111 1st Street as an arts community. Chapter 6 chronicles the battle to preserve 111 1st Street as a historic structure. Chapter 7 unpacks the lessons to be drawn from the loss of 111 1st Street. The Conclusion looks at the present state of the neighborhood of 111 1st Street and offers final speculations and thoughts.

As noted, very little has been written about 111 1st Street, and no scholarship has documented the building and its community. After years of legal and even physical combat, the final residents left 111 1st Street in 2005, and the community scattered. Some of the artists still reside in Jersey City and remain active in the local arts and culture scene. Other artists still live in the surrounding area or elsewhere in New Jersey. Some artists settled in New York City. Some residents even packed their possessions and left for perceivably more welcoming environs throughout the United States. With 111 1st Street demolished and its community dispersed, the site as a physical entity and its significance drifts further into the past, and the danger of its being forgotten exists as a very real possibility. Many of the records and documents concerning the building have been lost or de-

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Introduction

destroyed. William Rodwell, sculptor, photographer, and former 111 1st Street resident, recounted:

Years ago, in order to purge his house of the countless documents he’d accumulated over the years (boxes and boxes of them) [my friend] offered them to me but what was I going to do with them? . . . Regrettably, I turned him down. I believe that he chucked them in the garbage, a fitting end to an era of betrayal.7

Tris McCall, a local musician, author, and all-around New Jersey booster, concluded his interview with the remark that “now nothing is left but bricks. That’s the whole story.”8 This book aspires to disprove that assertion. As many of the interviewed artists stated: “The spirit of 111 lives on.”