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## SECTION VI

### “The Half Has Never Been Told:” Brooklyn’s Civil War (1861-1865)

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#### Lesson 17

#### Brooklyn’s Tobacco Factory Riot

**Grade Level:** High School

**Objectives:**

Students will

- Understand the causes behind violent clashes between blacks and Irish immigrants.
- Assume the roles of historical characters involved in the Tobacco Factory Riots and participate in a “hot seat” activity.

**Time:** Two 50-minute class periods

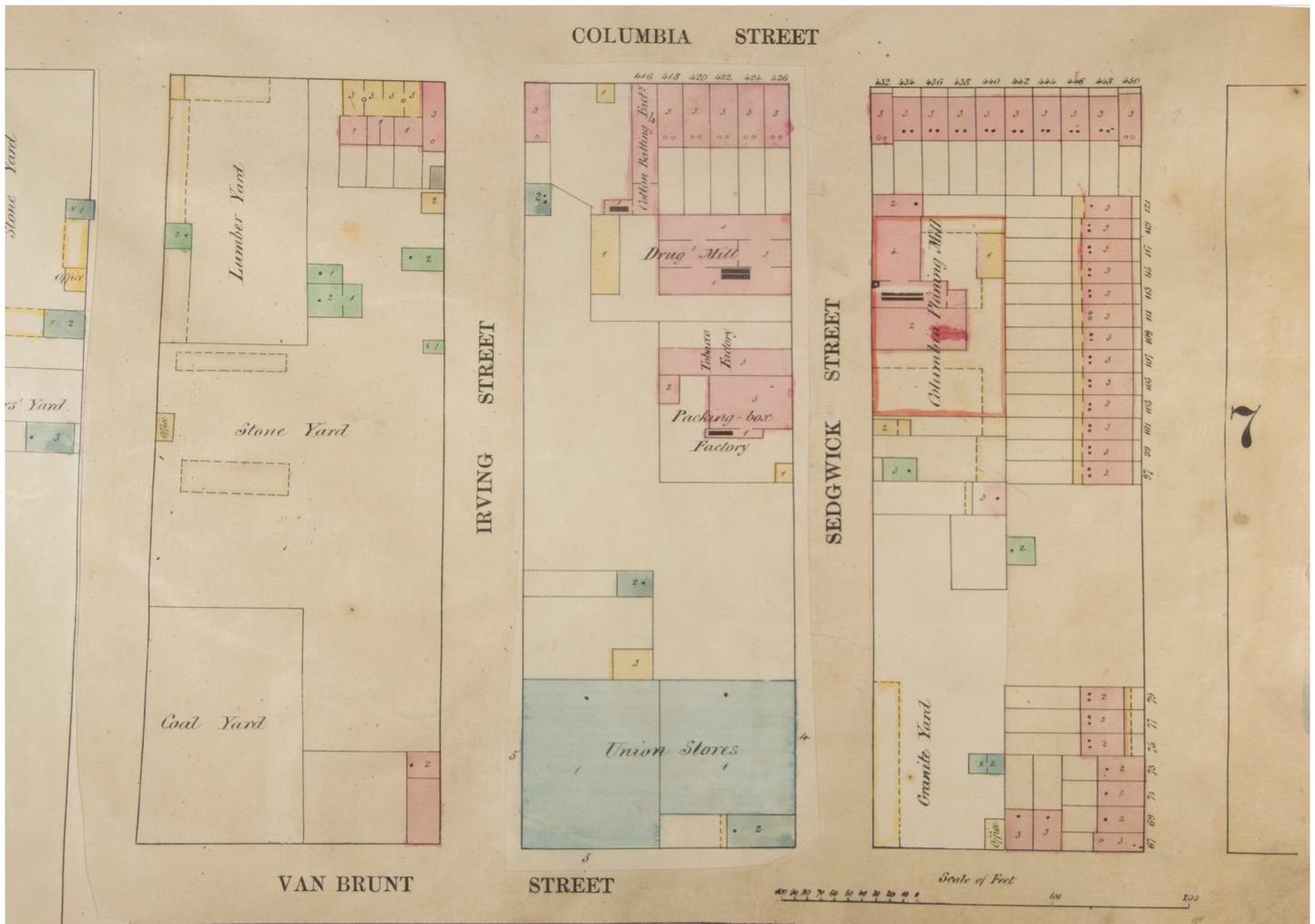
**Materials:**

- Worksheet 1: Newspaper Account of the Tobacco Factory Riot

**Background:**

On April 12, 1861, the attack on Fort Sumter marked the start of the Civil War. However, the conflict was not limited to the battlefields alone. By 1860, Brooklyn was the third largest city in the United States. The city’s residents were of Dutch, British, and African ancestry. There were also increasing numbers of German and Irish immigrants. African and Irish Americans often worked the same low-paying jobs. During the war, the growing competition for jobs and fear that scores of fugitives and newly emancipated men and women would arrive in Brooklyn exacerbated hostilities between Irish and African-American workers.

In the summer of 1862, racial conflict led to an assault on African-American workers at a Tobacco Factory in Brooklyn. The Tobacco Factory Riot acted as a precursor to Manhattan’s horrifying Draft Riots in 1863.



Map of the area surrounding the Tobacco Factory on Sedgwick Street, Detail from *Maps of the City of Brooklyn*. William Perris. 1860-1861. Atlas (4). Brooklyn Historical Society.

“Irishmen! The day will come that you will find out that you are making a sad mistake in assisting to crush out our liberties. Learn! O learn, that the protection of the feeblest of your fellow beings, is the only guarantee you have the protection for your own liberty.”

—*The Anglo African*, August 1862

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# LESSON PROCEDURES

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1. Ask students to identify why people have and continue to immigrate to the United States. What are some factors that drive people to leave their home countries? What are they coming here to find or achieve (push and pull factors?) What challenges do immigrant communities face?

2. Explain that the Irish came to Brooklyn and New York to escape the horrors of the Potato Famine which devastated Ireland between 1845 and 1850. With little money, the Irish hoped to take advantage of the economic opportunities available in these big cities. Explain that the Irish were greeted with discrimination and limited economic opportunities. Many Irish immigrants worked in some of the same occupations as blacks: as laborers, waiters, servants, and washerwomen.

3. Ask students to speculate what the consequences of job competition between blacks and Irish immigrants might be. Help students understand that racial tension and conflict resulted from growing competition for jobs. Ask the following questions:

- If Irish immigrants and African Americans shared similar experiences with economic marginalization and low wages, why didn't they join in solidarity to gain greater opportunities for all?
- How might race prevent different groups from finding common ground? What other factors may be at play?

4. Explain to students that in August of 1862, long festering tensions between Irish and black workers exploded when mobs of angry Irish workers marched on several tobacco factories on Sedgwick Street in South Brooklyn. Distribute **Worksheet 1: Newspaper Account of the Tobacco Factory Riot**. Once students have read the article, ask students the following questions:

- Who was involved in the riot?
- Why were black and white workers paid differently?
- Describe the circumstances that lead up to the riots.
- Is there bias in this reporting? What side do you think readers will take after reading this account?
- What questions do you have for the rioters? The black workers? The police officers?

5. Place students in groups of three and assign each student one of the following characters involved in the riots: an Irish rioter, a black worker, or a police officer. Explain to students that they will take turns sitting in the "hot seat" while their classmates assume the roles of investigative reporters who are doing a follow-up report on the riot. While in journalist roles, students can ask questions about the characters' behavior, motivations, and roles during the riot, using the five Ws of investigative reporting: Who, What, When, Where, and Why.

### Linking Past and Present

- Have students identify and research one contemporary race riot, collect articles about the event, and investigate the contributing factors, motivations, and outcomes. Students can then compare the Tobacco Factory Riot to their chosen contemporary riot.