

## A brief history of the Domino Sugar Refinery Building

(excerpted from the Archipedia Network, the Municipal Society of New York & the New York Times)

The neon Domino Sugar sign looms over the East River like a beacon, visible for miles. Gleaming above the Brooklyn complex where sugar has been refined for more than a century, it has become a symbol of a rapidly fading industrial legacy, a reminder that the city known for high-tech finance and elegant living was built on ships and machinery, brawn and sweat. The city at one time processed 60 percent of the nation's sugar.

The refinery - once the world's largest, according to a company brochure - and its related buildings fill an 11-and-a-half-acre swath along a quarter of a mile of the East River just north of the Williamsburg Bridge. Operating since the 1850's, it was built by the Havemeyer family and originally known as the American Sugar Refining Company. After a fire in 1882, the refinery was completely rebuilt with brick and stone buildings at least 10 stories high. Despite some alterations over time, the rounded-arch style buildings, a distinctive smokestack and an iconic lighted sign still remain.

Henry Osbourne Havemeyer was generally regarded as a 19th century robber baron due to shady business practices. A raid of the docks at the Brooklyn plant by the U.S. Treasury Department in the early 1900s revealed that the scales were not accurate and the firm had significantly underpaid import duties. The resulting public scandal may have contributed to Henry Havemeyer's sudden death. The American Sugar Refining Company founded the Sugar Trust, which owned or controlled 98% of the sugar processing capacity in the United States, essentially creating a monopoly on the sugar trade. A federal suit for its dissolution was brought in 1910 and ended with a settlement in 1922 that allowed the firm to remain intact but forced it to refrain from unfair business practices. At that time the firm's control had shrunk to 72% of capacity.

The company became known as Domino Sugar in 1900 and was officially recognized by the patent office on October 8, 1901. In 1916 Domino introduced individually wrapped sugar tablets, and in 1920 the transparent window carton. The Domino plant has the capacity to produce about 950 million pounds of sugar a year but produced only 400 million pounds in 2002. In 2004 the doors to the building were permanently closed.

After six years of sitting vacant, popular sentiment seems to indicate that the waterfront property would be far more valuable if reincarnated as luxury housing in a gentrified neighborhood where lofts can sell for \$1 million. Indeed, in 2010 a developer instigated a public review of a proposal to turn the vacant 11-acre industrial site into a \$1.5 billion residential complex, reusing the brick refinery and installing the historic, 40-foot-tall Domino Sugar sign (currently on the "bin building," which would be demolished under this plan) on top. There would be 2,200 apartments in all. The developer also plans to build a waterfront esplanade and a set of new glass and brick buildings that would range from 6 to 40 stories. If approved, the construction is scheduled to be done in stages and completed in 2021.

