Q & A

Q: Why did you decide to write this book?

A) My two previous books focused on the New York Central RR on Manhattan Island and included the High Line and the RR piers along the west side of Manhattan Island. I also witnessed the rebirth of New York and the Manhattan waterfront and knew there was a “story.” My wife Mary and I sold our suburban home in Fairfield, CT in 2014 and moved to Stuyvesant Town in the Lower East Side for two years. I spent countless hours walking the parkland (and some still undeveloped spaces) along the East and Hudson rivers. This experience directly led to the proposal to JHUP and Bob Brugger.

Q: What were some of the most surprising things you learned while writing/researching the book?

A) The complicated conflict between private vs public control of the waterfront from colonial times to the current controversy over Diller Island.

Q: Did you encounter any eye opening statistics while writing your book?

A) Just how catastrophic was the decline in the labor needed on the waterfront as a result of the container revolution. The world of the longshoremen and the waterfront immigrant neighborhoods disappeared in the space of a few decades.

Q: Does your book uncover and/or debunk any longstanding myths?

A) Today, one political party argues that all government, at any level, fails and only private enterprise succeeds. After the Civil War, the private control of the Manhattan waterfront failed and threatened the entire prosperity of the City. In 1870 the City and State established the Department of Docks, a public agency, which took over control, repurchased the shoreline and rebuilt the absolutely essential maritime infrastructure. For 50 years the D of D generated a surplus!!

Q: What is the single most important fact revealed in your book and why is it significant?

A) The “made-land” surrounding Manhattan Island where billions and billions of dollars of property stands is vulnerable in an era of climate change.

Q: How do you envision the lasting impact of your book?

A) Providing a history of the waterfront and linking the past with the current rebirth. Raises the question of who enjoys the new waterfront – in New York the questions of class (and race) and politics never end.

Q: What do you hope people will take away from reading your book?

A) An appreciation of the complexity of urban life in New York, historically and today. Cotton and slavery fueled the American economy during the 19th century. The evil of slavery was a national sin not just for the South. The maritime prosperity of New York was tied to slavery and cotton.