Because the G train does not reach Manhattan, but runs within Brooklyn and Queens, some residents in Fort Greene and Clinton Hill argue that the limited transportation into Manhattan deters middle and upper class professionals from moving into these neighborhoods, which are currently struggling with and successfully rebounding from economic struggle.

Wealth has both come and gone to these areas, its streets adorned with their share of mansions and prestigious institutions, yet still juxtaposed with the high crime rates and economic strife. The economic status of inhabitants of the Fort Greene and Clinton Hill have undergone great changes since its establishment in the 18th century, but are currently in an upswing and returning to past prestige and prominence.

Established around the 18th century Revolutionary era, Fort Greene and Clinton Hill began to grow and take shape when the United States government purchased an area in Brooklyn called Wallabout Bay in order to build the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Fort Greene began as a community of a few Dutch farming families, and as early as the 1840s, the area expanded as these families broke their farms into smaller plots and sold them for
development. Fort Greene’s population then grew from 4,000 to almost 100,000 by 1850. In response to New York’s rapid growth in population, rural Brooklyn slowly became both a “fashionable brownstone district for middle class families” but also a “refuge for new immigrants” in “underdeveloped areas.”

Since its growth, there has been an ongoing struggle between the rising wealthy and the downtrodden impoverished in Fort Greene. An 1858 New York Times articles “Homes of the Poor,” commented on Brooklyn’s urban development and examined these tensions. Fort Greene was particularly appealing to “new immigrants who could not find or afford housing in overcrowded Manhattan,” which included the Irish. They settled on unoccupied and unsold land along Myrtle Avenue, which later became known as “Young Dublin.” “Lower income residents” lived in undesirable conditions that involved “dire poverty, growing crime and infant mortality rates, rampant unemployment, and a potential city wide public health crisis.”

However, just as impoverished immigrants flocked to Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Fort Greene, and Clinton Hill to escape overcrowded Manhattan, when the area improved and expanded, middle to upper class Manhattanites were “attracted to the spatial wealth of Brooklyn and able to afford the high price of its grand scale Neo-Gothic brownstones.” These new wealthy professionals considered these neighborhoods to be “second only to Brooklyn Heights in prestige.”
But what was described in the Times article as a “real estate boom” in the mid 18th century created conflict between these two groups: the lower class, longtime residents on one hand, and the incoming middle to upper class homeowners on the other. Although the area was gaining prominence and a favorable reputation, these benefits did not reach all levels of society. Long-standing middle and lower class residents faced “constant threat of eviction” as landlords attempted to charge high rents and encourage undesirable tenants to relocate so they might sell their properties to the highest bidder.” Although property values increased and the area was gaining a good reputation as a “desirable quarter in which to raise middle class families,” only a small fraction of the community’s inhabitants had access to the privileges for which Fort Greene and Clinton Hill were becoming known. The lower class inhabitants, by contrast, did not have the means to enjoy the housing and real estate boom, and largely lacked both employment and health care.

In the years immediately following World War II, these neighborhoods faced extreme economical decline. The Brooklyn Navy Yard employed over 71,000 workers during World War II, which spurred the demand for housing. However, after the war, production declined and workers either moved away or suffered financially. Newsweek later described the housing project built for the workers as “one of the starkest examples’ of the failures of public housing.” Poor living conditions included “broken windows, cracked walls, flickering or inoperative
lighting, and elevators being used as toilets.” The Navy Yard was later decommissioned in 1966 and Manhattan commuters were deterred from moving into the neighborhood after the Myrtle Avenue elevated train was dismantled in 1969. All of these combined factors contributed to the decline of Fort Greene and Clinton Hill good economy and prestige. This trend of decline continued as recent as the 1960s through the 1980s with difficulties such as “city-wide poverty, crime and drugs.”

Despite persisting economical and social difficulties, Fort Greene and Clinton Hill have seen improvements since the late 1980s. Problems still exist, such as the high crime rate in Fort Greene that is attributed to housing projects and their connections to gang violence, drugs, and prostitution. Fortunately, as recent as the late 1980s and early 1990s, “artists, preservationists and Black professionals” have started the process of restoring Fort Greene. Fort Greene currently boasts the presence of various prestigious and vital institutions, such as the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Williamsburgh Savings Bank Tower, and Brooklyn Technical High School.

Clinton Hill is slowly making towards gentrification. It now has a growing art community “due in part to the presence of the Pratt Institute,” which invites many artists and bohemians to the industrial areas near the Brooklyn Navy Yard that have not yet been gentrified. In past years, neighborhoods were largely deserted and covered with graffiti, but recent “retail
and residential developments” reflect well on “neighborhood’s growing appeal.” As more middle and upper class people move into the area, locals describe Clinton Hill’s upward trend as “the crossroads of Fort Greene and Williamsburg” in that it is a “‘mix of the former’s established brownstone character and the latter’s “up and coming” feel.’”