Modeling Urban Scenes

by

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Objective of Clinic

- Enhance awareness of what elements contribute to an urban scene
- Examine those elements in more detail
- Show examples of how modelers have captured those elements in urban scenes

What are Urban Scenes?

- Urban - of, relating to, or designating a city or a town
- There can be a variety of scenes that can be considered “Urban”
- e.g., a small town, an industrial area, or a large city

All Usually Have Several Things in Common

- Congestion
- People
- Commercial buildings that are close together
- Traffic
- Signs

How to Start?

- First decide what role your railroad is going to play in the urban scene (or what role the urban scene will play in your railroad)

- For example,
  - Will it just be the mainline passing through?
  - Will it have a passenger terminal, and if so, how big?
  - Will it have industrial sidings for switching?

- **Will it be a terminus for your railroad?**
- **Will it be the basis for your railroad?**

Determine what kind of Urban Scene it will be

- Large City?
- Smaller town or city?
- Industrial?
- Modern or run down?

- My original plan was to model the Long Island Rail Road's Port Jefferson Branch, which ran from Hicksville to Port Jefferson. I also wanted to model the portion that ran from Hicksville to Jamaica in Queens

- The plan for my first expansion was to model the City Terminal Zone, which ran from Jamaica to Pennsylvania Station in NYC

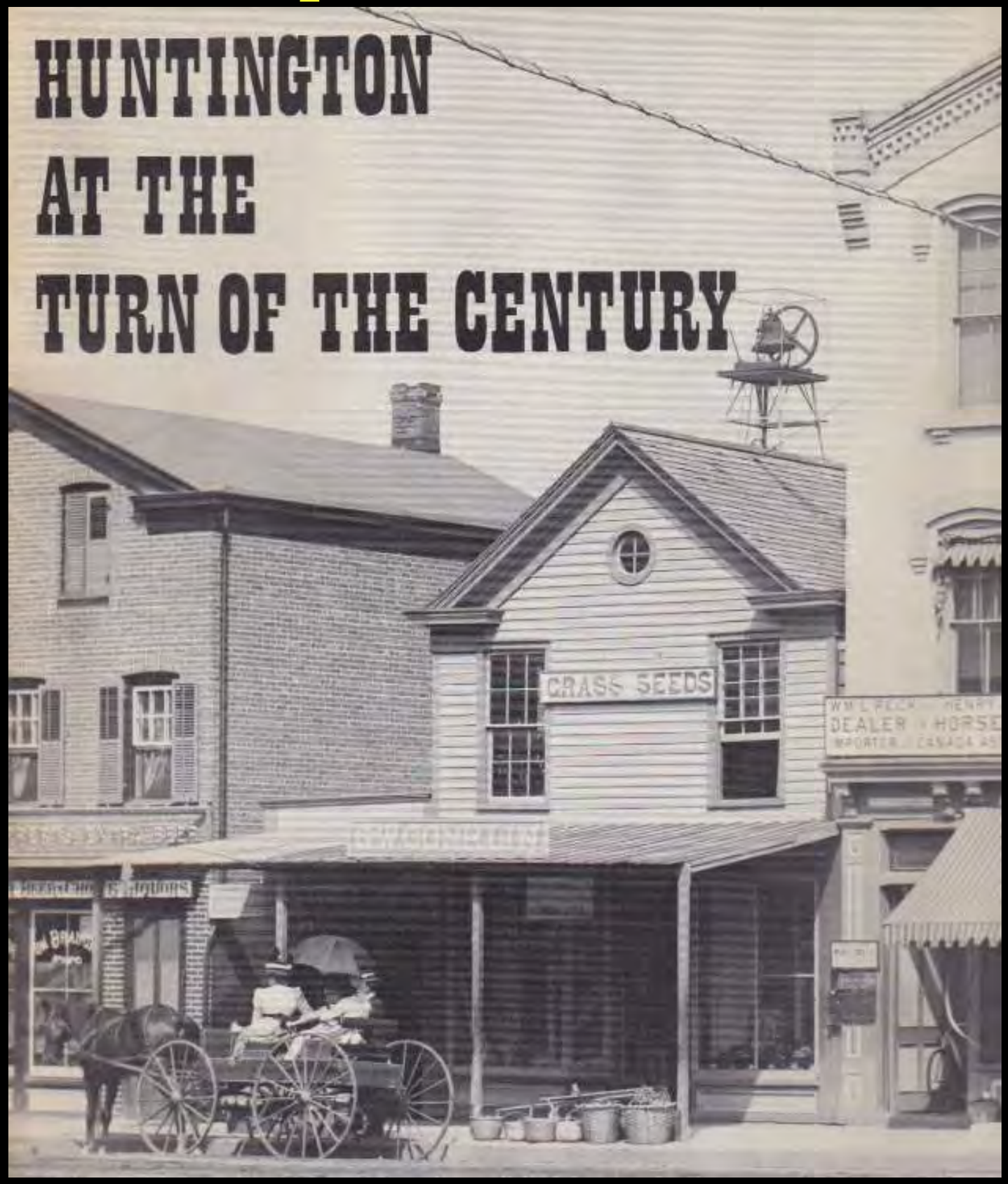
- The plan for my second expansion was to model the car float yard in Long Island City and to capture the "ambiance" of Brooklyn by modeling Flatbush Avenue

Find Photos of Areas/Scenes you want to Model

- Unless you have a specific memory or image of an urban scene you want to model, some research can be helpful
- Books about the Railroad you model likely will have a wealth of photos
- Find books with historical photos of the area you want to model
- Internet, local historical societies, etc. are a good source of photos, maps, etc.

Example

- Book published by Huntington Historical Society in 1974



Example

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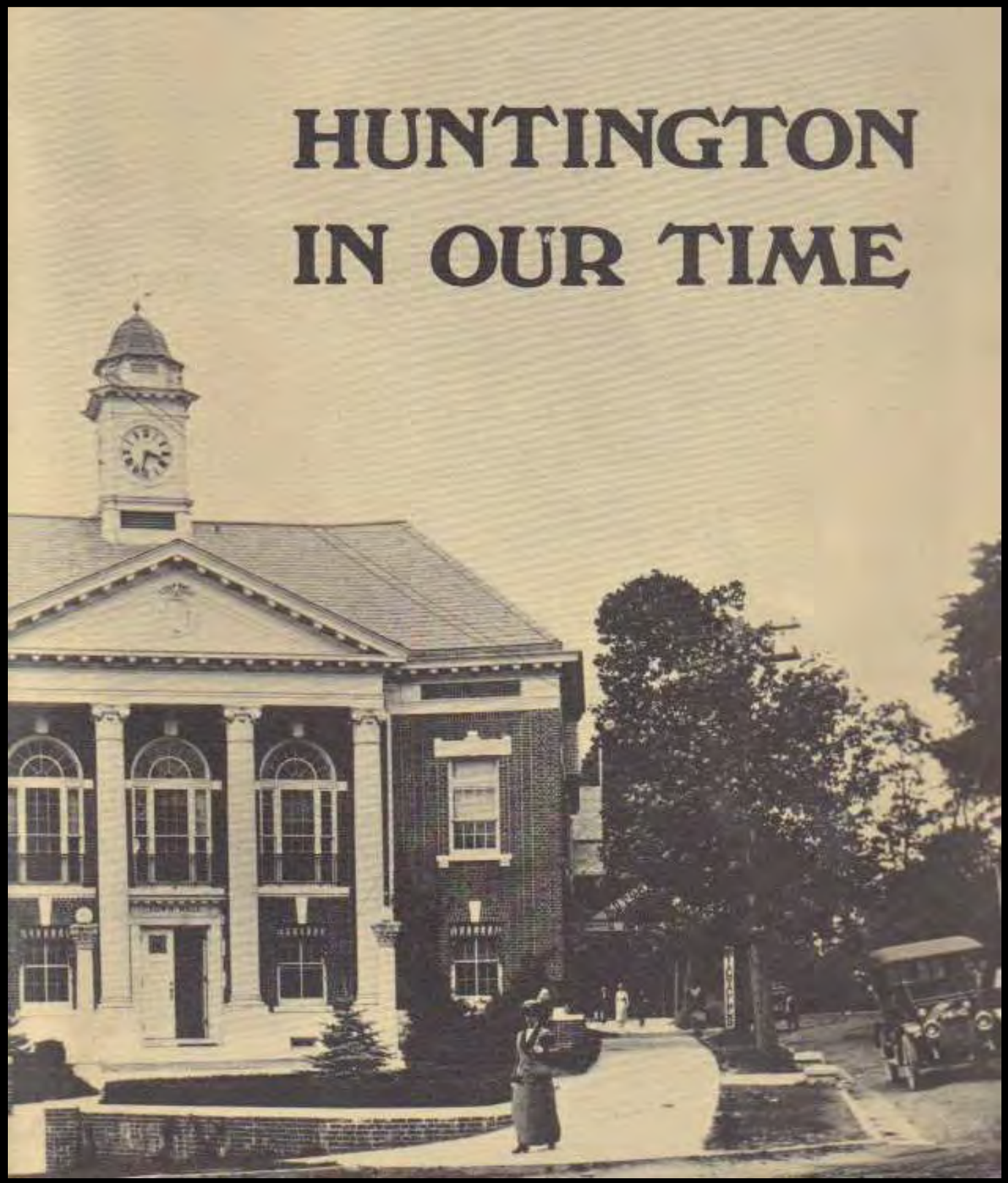

Huntington, NY in the 1950's

Small suburban town 40 miles east of NYC

Photo of Huntington, NY in 1960's

Current Photo of Huntington, NY

New York City

New York City

New York City

New York City

Industrial Siding in NYC

Industrial Siding in NYC

Brooklyn Street

Brooklyn Street

Brooklyn Street

Brooklyn Street

Note NYC Skyline in background

Brooklyn Street

Brooklyn Street

Characteristics of these Scenes

- Buildings in Huntington are primarily one and two story buildings.
- Many building have awnings
- Streets are two lane with parking on each side
- NYC photos show tall buildings and streets depicted as “Canyons.”
- NYC streets are also primarily two lane with parking on each side
- Hardly any fire escapes on front of buildings

- **Industrial sidings are amid factories**
- **Buildings show weathering and grime**
- **Tracks are set in road pavement**

Brooklyn Streets

- Colorful, unique signs
- Lots and lots of signs
- Some stores are closed with burglar bars
- Most buildings are colorfully painted and no more than 3-4 stories high
- Many with fire escapes in front

Elements of an Urban Scene

- Railroad Tracks
- Streets
- Buildings
- Background
- Congestion

Railroad Tracks

- If railroad tracks are main line with no switching, they can run in background with street scene in foreground. Consider elevating track behind buildings
- If tracks are in industrial sidings or run through town, move to foreground or such that viewers can see trains.
- Operating sessions that involve coupling and uncoupling cars favor tracks that are easily accessible
- For industrial sidings, use smaller gauge track if possible

Railroad Tracks Run Through Center of Main Street in Moorehead City, N.C.

Moorehead City, N.C.

Cross harbor RR in NYC

22
UTCX
47076

Cross Harbor RR in NYC

Note different pavements (concrete, cobblestone, and worn off asphalt on top of cobblestone)

Vic Smith's City Edge RR

Note tracks both running up center of foreground street and elevated in background

Another picture of Vic Smith's City Edge Railroad

Another View of Vic Smith's City Edge Railroad

Nostrand Avenue Siding in Brooklyn on my LIRR layout

Mainline tracks are in front at edge of layout. While siding trackage is in background, it is within arm's reach and accessible during operating sessions

Holban Yard On My LIRR Layout

Yard and mainline tracks are in foreground and easily accessible. Urban scene (Flatbush Ave. in Brooklyn) is in background

Another View of Holban Yard on my LIRR Layout

Streets

- Urban streets are often just 2 lane with parking on both sides
- There are sidewalks for pedestrians
- Parking is at a premium in urban areas so parking meters are common
- Utilities are often underground, so manhole covers are in roads and sidewalks
- Rainwater has to go somewhere, so curbs should have sewer grates
- Streetlights are common in urban areas

- Add fire hydrants, phone booths, sidewalk elevators
- Add street signs (e.g., speed limit, stop, no U-turn, no right turn)
- Add traffic lights at intersections
- Add street markings (e.g., RR crossing, crosswalk, double line in center, parking spaces)
- Many urban areas often have trees planted along sidewalks
- Streets can be a mixture of concrete, asphalt, cobblestone. Try to model what was used in your area
- Add people! Lots of people going about their business are indicative of the hustle and bustle of cities.

Buildings

- Buildings should be prototypic of the local architecture
- Weathering buildings will add realism
- Add interiors to storefronts that viewers will see
- Use wax paper or other transparent, light-diffusing material on windows
- Add signs and awnings to storefronts
- Fire Escape Landings and ladders are common on City buildings. Adding these to your building increases realism

Trying to Capture the “flavor” of Huntington, NY in the 1960’s

Night time View of Huntington

Trying to Capture the “Canyons” of New York City

Another Attempt at Creating "Canyons" on my LIRR Layout

High-rise Buildings in New York City on my LIRR Layout

Rod Stewart's Layout is a Good Example of Urban Modeling

- High-rise Buildings are in the background
- Lower buildings are in the foreground
- Having the entire 3rd floor of a mansion to house a layout also helps!

Tichy Fire Escapes on a high-rise building

More fire escapes

And more

And more

Signs are an Integral Part of Urban Scenes

- Signs are designed to attract customers
- Therefore, signs are designed to be eye-catching, stand out, and be noticed

A street in Brooklyn

Another street in Brooklyn

Making Signs

- An easy way to make unique, eye-catching signs is from internet photos
- The signs for the stores on the Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn part of my layout are from photos of real stores on Flatbush Ave. and other parts of New York City (Queens, Manhattan)

- Search for photos of storefronts
- Find photos with the storefront sign viewed head-on (not angled)
- Make sure there are no obstacles (tree branches, telephone or power lines, fire escapes, etc.) in front of the sign
- Move the photo into an editing program and crop the photo so everything but the sign is eliminated.
- Resize the resulting sign to fit the building you plan to mount it on
- Print it out (I use glossy photo paper), cut out the sign, and mount it on stiff cardboard or styrene plastic, then glue it to the storefront

Storefront Sign from the Internet

Signs made from photos on the internet

- **Store Sign from Internet**

More signs made from internet photos

RUSS & DAUGHTERS
APPETIZERS
Garry JEWELERS
NAVAL UNIFORMS
Smith's BAR
ENOX LOUNGE
PLUMBING

And more

Miller Engineering Theater Marquee Adapted to Walthers PalaceTheater

Consider Adding Icons to Some of Your Signs

- Small icons of various objects are available in most craft stores

- You can identify your industries and then see if appropriate icons are commercially available

- Or you can find icons you like, and fashion a store or industry around the icon

- **Coffee Cup Icon mounted above a cafe**

Guitar and “Fender” Icons Mounted on a Rooftop Sign

- **Beer and Beer Mug Icons on a Piels Beer Brewery Sign**

- **Doughnut and Coffee Cup Icons Above a Cafe**

Backgrounds

- The intent of backgrounds is to give the illusion of depth
- For urban scenes, backgrounds should make the viewer feel the city extends far beyond the actual back of the layout wall
- There are numerous ways to do this

- smaller scale buildings glued on top of scale building flats
- high-rise buildings behind lower, foreground buildings
- Building Flats
- printed backdrops glued to the back wall of the layout
- A combination of all of the above

Smaller Scale Buildings Glued on Top of scale Building Flats

- If you model in HO scale, use HO scale building flats against the back wall of your layout, making sure they rise above all foreground buildings

- Glue N scale building flats on top of the HO scale building flats.

- If you model in O scale, use HO scale building flats on top of the O scale buildings. If you model in N scale, use Z scale building flats

- Cut pieces of cardboard or sheet styrene into a trapezoid shape the same height as the N scale building front, paint them several shades darker than the color of the N scale building front, and glue them along one side of the N scale building front

- This will give the illusion of depth

NATIONAL FURNITURE CO.
COMPANY

Meadow Gold
LILCO
RAVENSWOOD
POWER STATION
LILCO

High-Rise Buildings Behind Lower Foreground Buildings
Rod Stewart's Layout

High-Rise Buildings behind Lower Foreground Buildings

Vic Smith's City Edge Layout

Building Flats

- Building Flats are photos of individual buildings. Can be mounted on foam board
- Very realistic-looking, very thin, and convey a 3-dimensional picture
- They can be the same scale you are modeling, or a smaller scale to convey distance
- A wide variety are available from Trackside Flats (tracksideflats.com)
- Inexpensive (most are in the $5-$8 range)

RIA & RESTAURANT
Caporal

Printed Backdrops

- One way to get the illusion of depth is to use printed backdrops
- There are several companies that sell photographic backdrops of a variety of scenes, including industrial areas and cities
- These can usually be purchased with or without an adhesive backing and to lengths specified by the customer

NYC Backdrop From Backdrop Junction in front of Sunnyside Yard on my LIRR

Sky has been cut away from backdrop photo and then backdrop glued to wall

- Another option is to find a photograph of a scene you like, and and have it made into a custom backdrop
- If it is not free, you may have to purchase it from the person who took the photograph

Brooklyn Skyline Photo from Wikipedia

Note that since I only wanted a skyline, I did not need the water or roads in the lower part of the photo

Brooklyn Backdrop Mounted

Note that I cut away the sky, and raised backdrop 3” above the layout track elevation.

THEATER
NOW SHOWING
CASABLANCA
DINER
STEAKS · CHOPS · SEAFOOD
Ditmas KOSHER MEATS & POULTR
ABC
FABRIC
RUBBER
STERN'S PICKLE WORKS
STERN'S PICKLE WORKS

Example #2 - NYC Scene

Example #3 - Another Brooklyn Skyline Backdrop Made From Merging Two Photos Found on Pixabay (photos there are free)

Same Merged Photo with Sky Cut Away and Mounted 3” Above Top of Benchwork

- More information on Backdrops, including making custom, photographic backdrops is available at http://potomac-nmra.org/Clinics/BrianSheron/Backdrops-Brian.pdf
- This clinic will be posted at http://potomac-nmra.org. Follow the links to “Clinics”

Thank You Very Much for your Attention

Questions?