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Geismar 2003

Martyrs' Monument/Monument Lot Block 44, Lot 14, Brooklyn

Memo Report on Archeological Investigations



Monument Lot (Geismar 11/12/03)

Prepared by:
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Prepared through:
The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
The J.M. Kaplan Fund
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MEMO

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The Martyrs' Monument/Monument Lot
Block 44, Lot 14, Brooklyn, New York
End of Field Memo
December 19, 2003

With the support of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, and with partial sponsorship by the J. M. Kaplan Fund, professional archaeologists who volunteered their time carried out two full field days at the Monument Lot (Block 44, Lot 14) in Brooklyn, a small, triangular property situated just outside the brick wall that surrounds the Brooklyn Navy Yard (Figure 1). The goal was to determine if there was any remaining evidence of an 1808 burial crypt that once held the bones of possibly thousands of Revolutionary War prisoners who died aboard British prison ships anchored in nearby Wallabout Bay.¹ The 1808 interment involved several hogsheads of human bones, each hogshead equivalent to 63 gallons, collected from shallow graves or washed ashore by the tides during the decades that followed the Revolutionary War. The bones, distributed among thirteen coffins, were placed in the crypt with great fanfare on May 26, 1808.²

The crypt was then allowed to deteriorate. Benjamin Romaine (Romayne), the treasurer of the original tomb fund, acquired the lot for 999 years by advancing unpaid taxes totaling \$291.08 when the lot was auctioned in 1828.³ Romaine was himself a survivor of British prisons, and was incarcerated either on one of the ships or in one of several landside prisons.⁴ Sometime between 1828 and 1839, he added an above ground antechamber to the crypt. After Romaine's death in 1844 or 1845, and his interment with his fellow prisoners at his request, the crypt again fell into disrepair, a situation decried by many, among them Walt Whitman.⁵ On June 18, 1873, the tomb was emptied of its bones when they were quietly removed to a second crypt in Olmsted and Vaux's newly-created Fort Greene Park⁶ where they have remained.⁷ A full century after their interment in the Monument Lot crypt, and thirty-five years after being moved to the tomb in Fort Greene Park, the remains were again moved, this time within the park to a Gustovino-tiled vault. These unidentified martyrs were then, and continue to be, honored by a marble Doric column that soars above the park's memorial plaza designed by McKim, Mead, and White in 1908.

At this writing, the triangular lot on Hudson Avenue (formerly Jackson Street named for an early landowner and the donor of the Monument Lot in 1808) is scheduled for development. It was the prospect of this development that prompted archaeological investigation of the lot, its goal to determine 1) if any evidence of the original crypt remained in an archaeological context, and 2) if any human bone was left behind. To this end, on November 12th and then again on December 10th, 2003, monitored backhoe trenching was undertaken on the lot. Archaeologists, Dr. Joan H. Geismar and Shelly Spritzer, conducted the two-day exploration, and Dr. Sophia Perdikaris, a faunal expert, was in attendance on the first day of testing. Also in attendance both days were Otis Pearsall, a lawyer and noted preservationist, and Amanda Sutphin, Director of Archaeology at the Landmarks Preservation Commission, both of whom were instrumental in expediting the investigation. Jim Buscarello, assisted by James Samuels, operated the backhoe.

Aided by an 1855 Perris insurance atlas that identified the location of the crypt or the later antechamber (Figure 2), excavations on November 12th were first carried out along the Navy Yard wall. This did not reveal any evidence of the crypt, but did document a deep, mixed fill that included bricks, building debris, and fragments of early to late 19th-century ceramics (later, bottle glass, animal bones, and clam shells were also found in the debris). The extent of the fill suggested there had at one time been a deep void, but no foundations were encountered to define the void. It was also noted that the stone foundation under the Navy Yard's brick wall was very deep, suggesting its construction had required extensive excavation. The large, exploratory pit or trench, which extended west from the Navy Yard wall, was backfilled.

Next, in an east-west trench that extended west toward the street, the backhoe encountered a construction about 22.5 feet from the Navy Yard wall in very unstable sandy soil. This proved to be a segment of a 2.5-foot (30-inch) wide stone masonry wall with a shell-tempered mortar that suggested age. The backhoe traced the wall, which was also exposed with shovel and trowel, and it proved to be about 14 feet long (Figure 3). Neither a step-like southern end nor its northern end appeared finished, nor was there any evidence of adjoining walls. Instead, it appeared to be an isolated wall segment. Of note, however, were postholes revealed about 6 feet west of the wall, one of them filled with what appeared to be a cloth bag (Figure 4). The instability of the soil made it impossible to examine the postholes that had been partially impacted by the backhoe; the sandy soil around the postholes ultimately fell away. An attempt to reach the bottom of the wall was unsuccessful since the collapsing soil created a dangerous situation.

The wall, which was approximately 4 feet below the current ground surface, was measured, and a trace of brick mortared to its southern end noted. Before backfilling, Robert Chambers, an artist with a studio in the building that adjoins the lot to the north (87 Hudson Avenue) invited the excavators and observers up to his third floor studio where a hall window overlooked the Monument Lot. "Aerial" photographs were then taken of the wall and site from this window before backfilling (Figure 5).

Mr. Chambers informed us that another neighbor, Nicholas Evans-Cato, an artist who has painted the lot in various iterations and has been a champion of its history, believed that a cement patch on the surface south of our excavation was the location of the crypt. The backhoe was then used to explore this area, but nothing was found. This excavation, too, was backfilled.

On December 3, a second visit to the site was aborted when problems with the backhoe and an inadequate substitute, as well as biting cold and wind, caused us to suspend the exploration. On December 10th, with the backhoe once again in action, the investigation resumed in an attempt to locate any additional crypt elements, and to more fully explore the wall segment found earlier. To this end we revisited the wall and the surrounding area. This included excavating somewhat south of the original trenches along the Navy Yard wall. Exploration in this area failed to reveal any additional information about the crypt.

Measurements from an 1842 manuscript plan compared with the aforementioned Perris atlas revealed that 87 Hudson Avenue, which now borders the north side of the Monument Lot, was built between 1842 and 1855; moreover, it had encroached on the Monument Lot⁸ (compare

Figures 2 and 6). It should be noted that a board fence rather than a brick wall separated the lot from the Navy Yard in 1842.⁹

An 1840 history discovered in the interim between field episodes described a post and rail fence on the street side of the crypt. The fence had comprised thirteen posts, each with the name of one of the thirteen original states; there was also a rail fence around the lot.¹⁰ The post fence and wooden antechamber erected by Mr. Romaine are depicted in an 1839 engraving as is the deteriorated antechamber in 1867 (Figure 7). The location of the wall discovered on November 12 in relation to the 1842 plan and the 1855 insurance atlas, as well as the post holes about 6 feet west of the wall, seem to confirm the identification of the stone wall as part of the original crypt. This time, backhoe exploration determined that the wall was 5 feet high. Despite continued testing, no additional walls were encountered, and the trench was again backfilled and the wall covered.

The wall segment was located about 15 to 6 feet from 87 Hudson Avenue (a dumpster on the north side of the lot made measurement somewhat difficult), approximately 26 feet east of the lot's western property line on Hudson Avenue, and 22.5 feet west of the brick Navy Yard wall (Figure 8). Attempts to find a detailed description of the crypt have so far been unsuccessful, although there are several historical accounts that suggest a commodious space. One such account, written in 1864 by an old Brooklyn resident reminiscing about a schoolboy exploit, is included here:

...I determined to penetrate the depth of this tomb, and sought the building, fully bent on gaining the interior, and knowing all that could be revealed to the astonished eye. This was not very difficult—the fastenings were loose—and after some little toil, the exterior door swung open and revealed a sort of vestibule, in which were a few plaster busts of distinguished heroes, covered with the incrustations of dampness and neglect. There were steps leading below into a vault. These I fearlessly descended, and then stood entranced and nearly paralyzed by a sense of awe which has not left me to this day. Standing, chiefly in perpendicular positions, around the vault, were thirteen immense coffins, each having thereon the name of the thirteen original states. I could see enough through interstices to show me that these were filled with bones, and I knew I was standing in the midst of that noble army of martyrs whose blood had gone up as a holy and acceptable sacrifice on the alter of American freedom...resting on one or two of the coffins which were laid horizontally, was one smaller coffin of the ordinary size of one individual. This was vacant, but had upon its lid the name of Benjamin Romaine...¹¹

In summary, two episodes of field investigations involving backhoe exploration uncovered a segment of a relatively massive mortared stone wall 4 feet below the current ground surface. The wall was 5 feet to bottom and 2.5 feet wide. Its location, orientation, and relationship to a row of postholes from a long-gone fence, and its agreement with an early to mid-19th century

manuscript map found in the National Archives (Figure 9), suggest it is a remnant of the former burial crypt located on the lot in 1808 (a comparison of the 1842 plan with current measurements indicates that 20 feet of what is now the 87 Hudson Street lot to the north was originally part of the Monument Lot; see Figure 9). No explanation for the absence of other structural elements has been forthcoming. It is possible that the deep excavation required to build the brick wall now separating the lot from the Navy Yard may have necessitated extensive excavation that infringed on the former crypt. However, at this writing, no date has been established for the wall's construction, and why it would have required removal of three of the crypt's walls remains a mystery.

In addition to uncovering this wall segment, the field investigations established that proposed development, although unfortunate on this historical site, will not impact an intact feature with integrity. On the other hand, this does not diminish the historical significance of the lot as the location of the original tomb that held the skeletal remains of possibly thousands of Revolutionary War martyrs. Therefore, at the very least, a plaque commemorating the significance of the site is appropriate and is being considered by the developer. While no intact feature with integrity was found on the site, this is a prime example of a situation where "Place Matters."

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The writer, Joan H. Geismar, is extremely grateful to all those who encouraged, supported, and expedited this investigation. Among them the aforementioned J. M. Kaplan Fund, Otis Pearsall, and Amanda Sutphin, and the developer, Mr. Sau Lam Cheung, who allowed access to the site and the time to conduct the excavations. Grateful thanks also are extended to the Honorable Robert B. Tierney, Chair of the Landmarks Commission, who recognized the importance of assessing the resource and made it happen in concert with the Landmarks' Counsel, Mark Silberman. All are to be thanked for their recognition and support of an extremely sensitive and important historical/archaeological issue.

¹ See Stiles, Henry, *History of the City of Brooklyn, New York*, Volume 1:363-376, privately published, for historic details of the Martyrs' Monument.

² *Municipal Register of the City of Brooklyn and Manual of Kings County for the Years 1848-9*: 141. Edited by Thomas P. Teale and published by E. B. Spooner, Brooklyn, 1848.

³ Liber of Deeds 25:229

⁴ Stiles says Romaine was incarcerated in the Old Sugar-house prison in New York (Volume 1 1867:371), while an 1873 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* says he was an inmate of the prison ships (June 19, 1873:backpage, columns 3 and 4).

⁵ McCullough, David, *Brooklyn*:109. Dial Press, 1983.

⁶ E.g., *New York Times*, June 19, 1873:page 2, column 5; *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 19, 1873:backpage, columns 3 and 4.

⁷ Undoubtedly merely a coincidence, this was a month after Whitman suffered the first of a series of paralytic strokes.

⁸ Profile and Elevation of the Ground and Boundary Wall from the Wharf to Grade in York Street, Navy Yard, Brooklyn, October 1842. Ms. plan. October 12, 1842. National Archives, Bureau of Yards and Docks, Estimates 1843-1844. Part of October 19, 1842. However, an accompanying letter refers to 1828 (R.G. 71. Ms. Annual Report of Expenditures and Estimates. 1828 map (??). Letter citation is Book 56, Plan L.

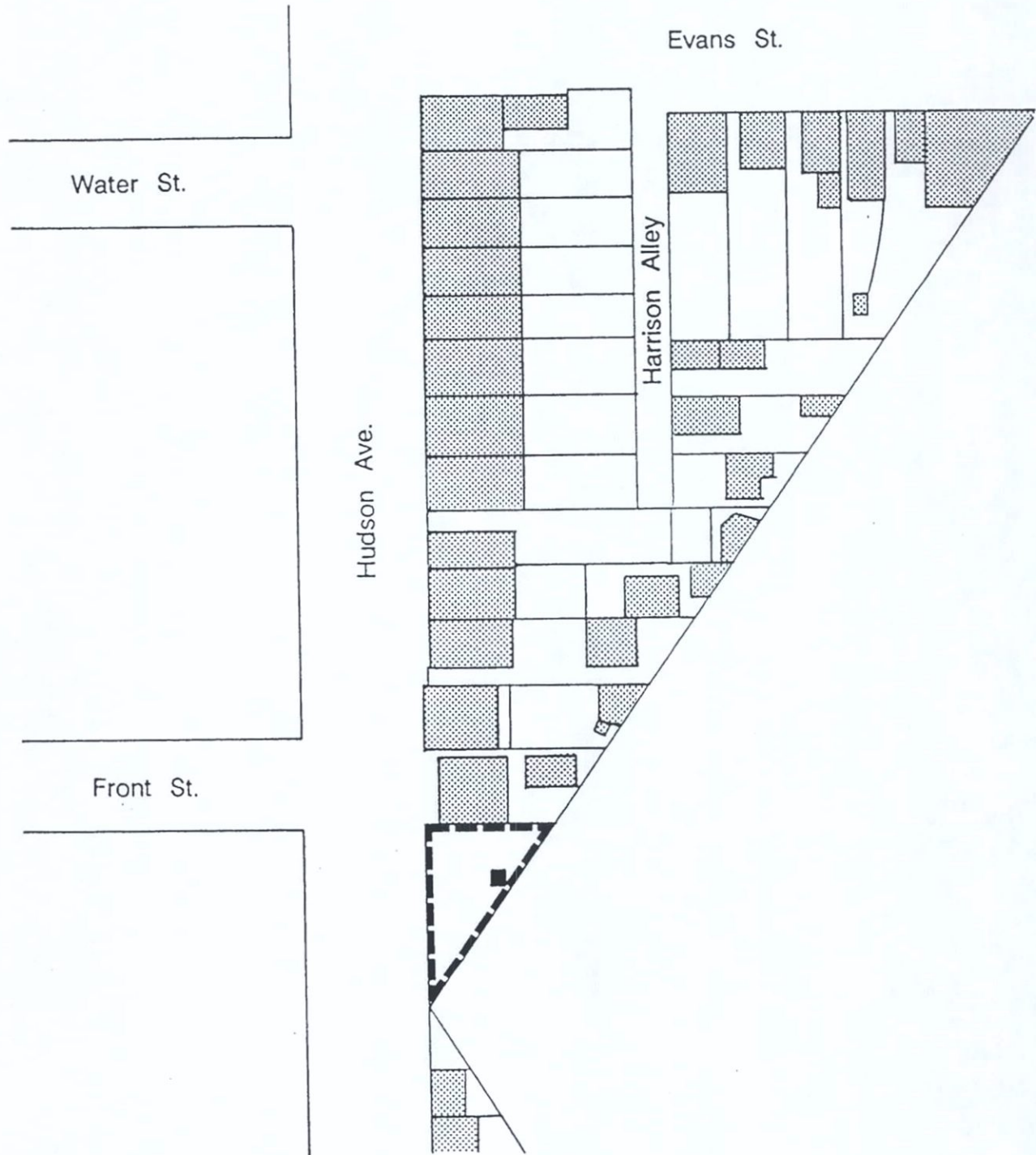
⁹ Although it is unclear if the date of the manuscript map found in the National Archives is actually October 12, 1842 as stated (see endnote 8), it is accepted for this analysis.




¹⁰ Bailey, J. T., *An Historical Sketch of the City of Brooklyn and the Surrounding Neighborhood Including the Village of Williamsburgh*...:36. 1842. Published by the Author, Brooklyn.

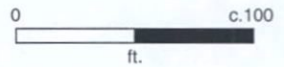
¹¹ A. J. Spooner in Stiles Volume I 1867:372-373.



1 Monument Lot looking northeast from Hudson Avenue in September 1996. No. 87 Hudson Avenue is the building to the left and the Navy Yard's brick wall is in the background and to the right. (Geismar 1996)



-  monument
-  structures
-  Monument Lot



Note: from photograph, dimensions approximate



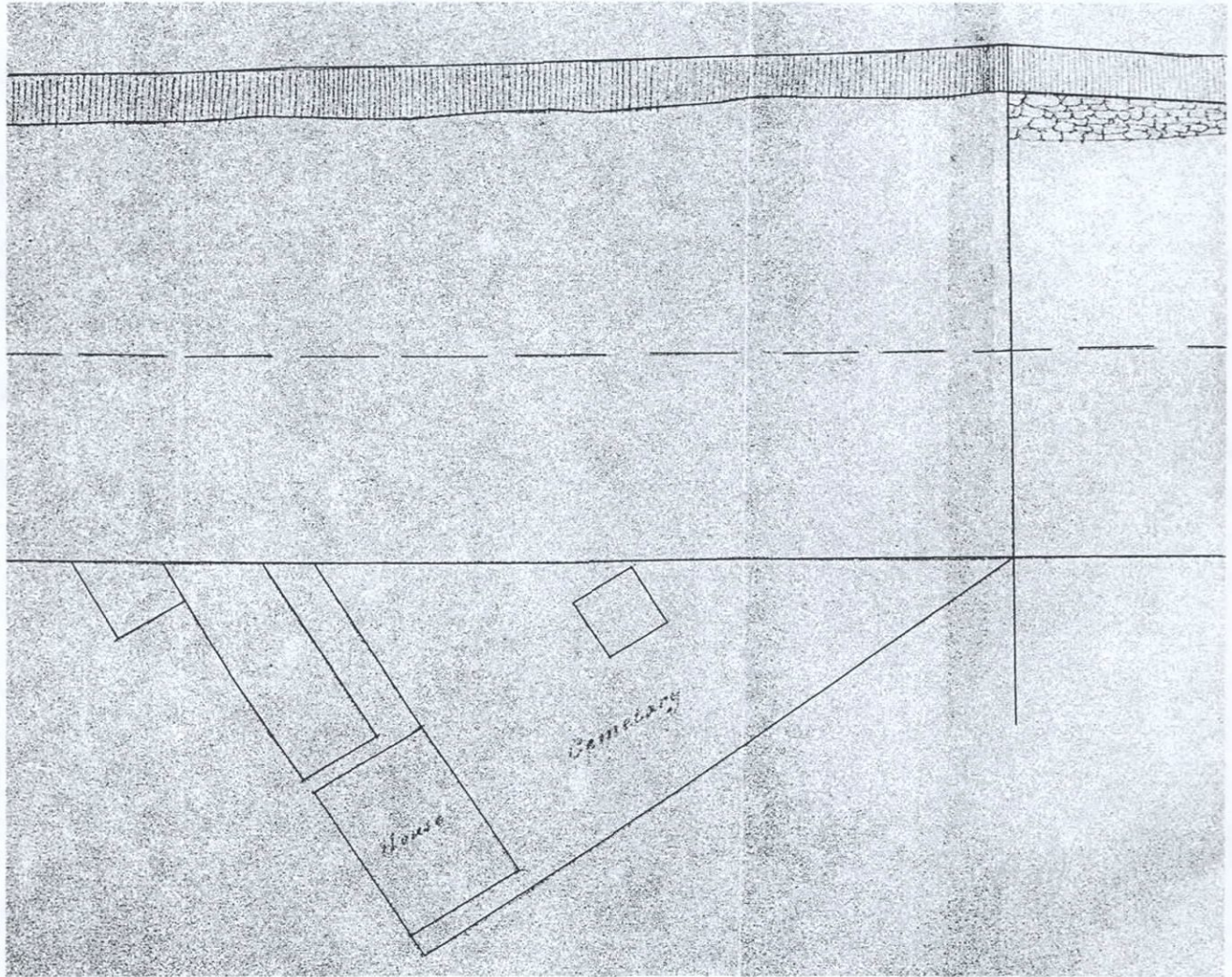
3 Excavated wall segment looking northeast. The wall proved to be 5 feet high under about 4 feet of fill. (Geismar 11/12/03)



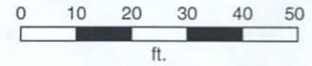
4 Post-holes (arrows) exposed about 6 feet west of, and parallel to, the exposed stone wall segment. (Geismar 11/12/03)

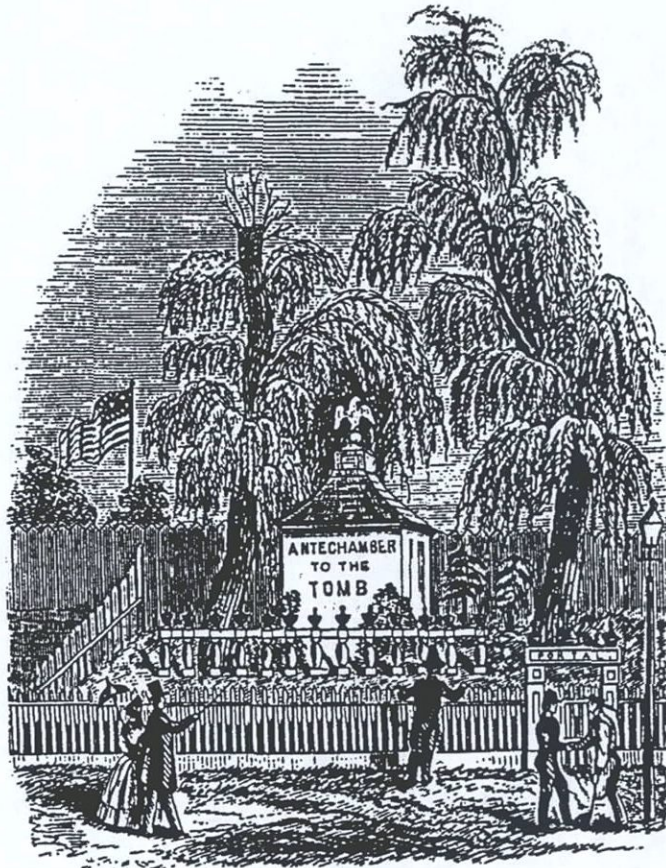


5 "Aerial" view of exposed mortared stone wall from a third floor window of 87 Hudson Avenue. Note angle of wall compared with Navy Yard's brick wall and compare with Figures 2 and 6. (Geismar 11/12/03)



Note: the base map from the National Archives, which is labeled October 12, 1842, also notes an inexplicable 1828 date



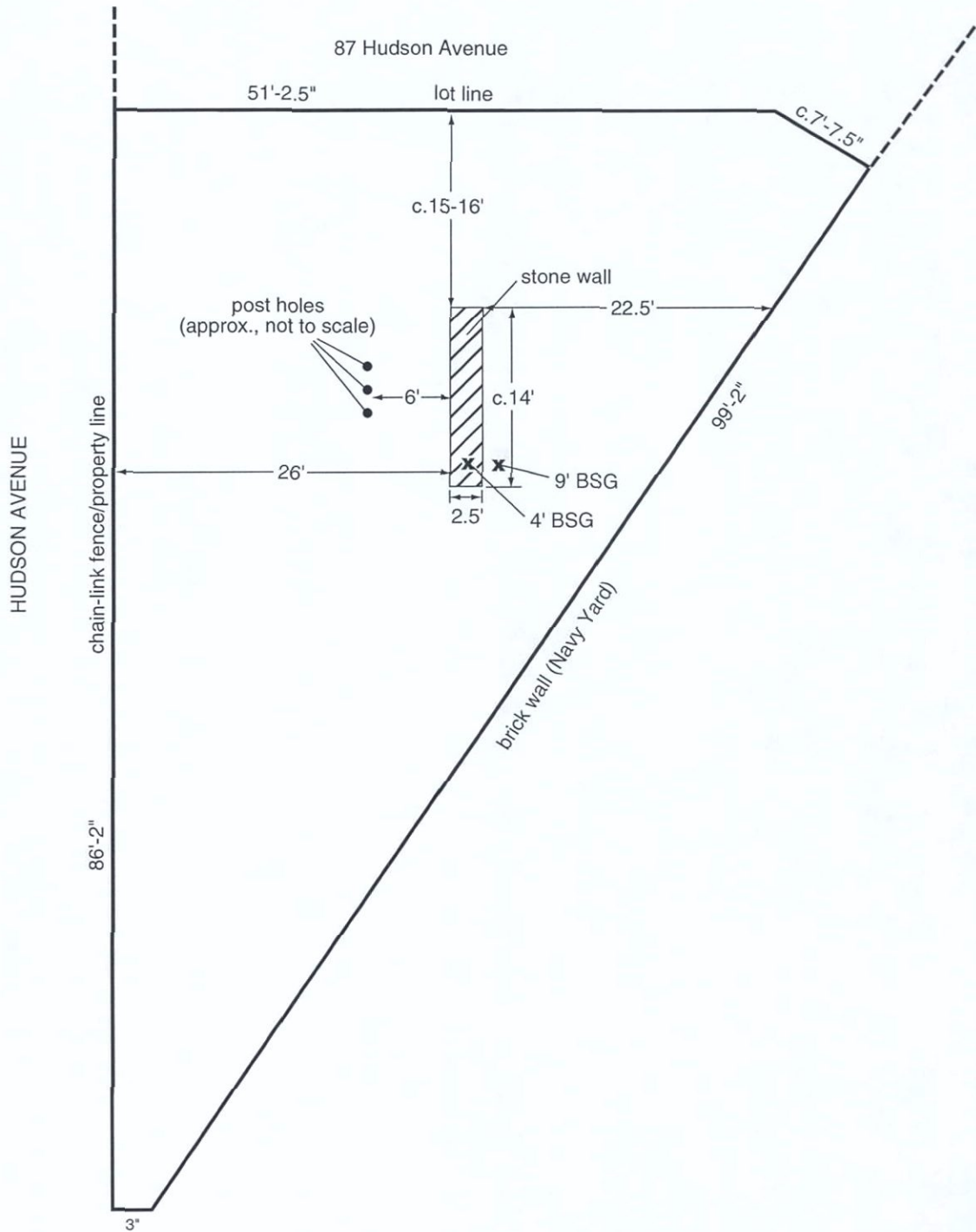


THE TOMB OF THE MARTYRS.

(As restored by Mr ROMAINE, in 1839.)

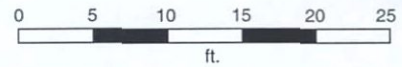


THE PRESENT CONDITION OF THE 'MARTYRS' MONUMENT.' [1867]

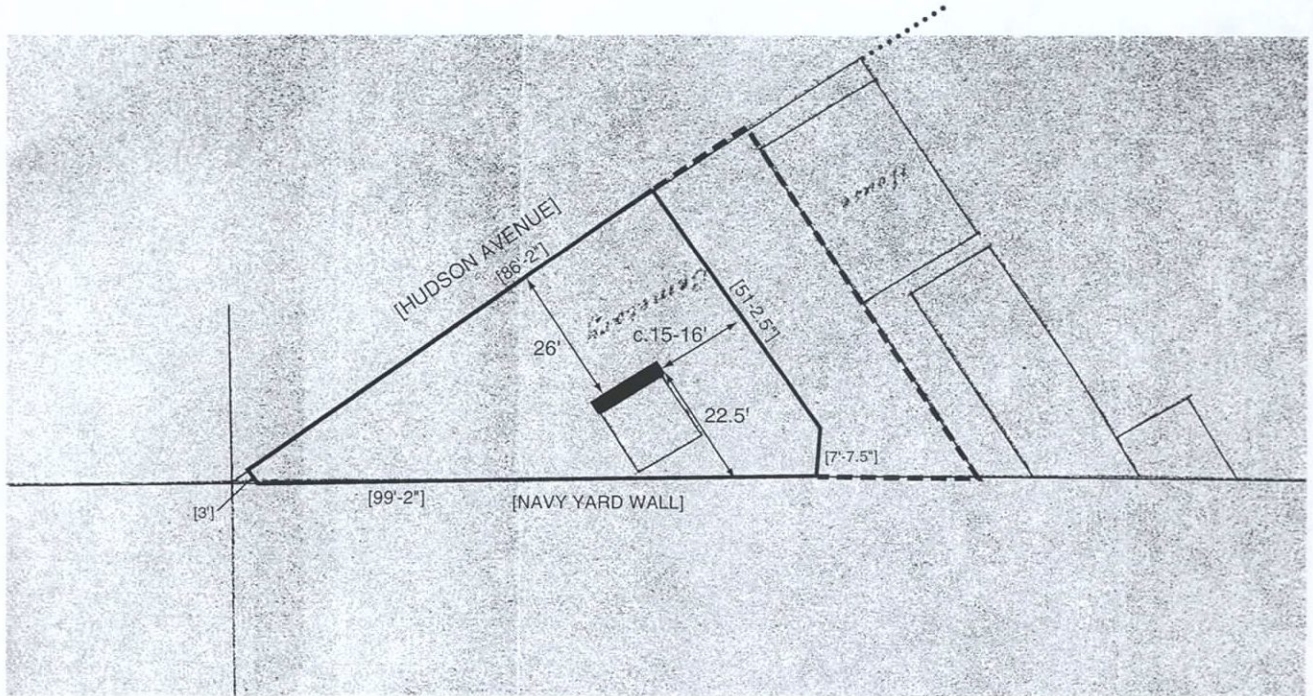


BGS = below ground surface
 depth of excavation 9 feet (12/10/03)

Note: lot dimensions courtesy of Montrose Surveying Co., LLP



MONUMENT LOT Plan of Monument Lot and Navy Yard Wall (October 12, 1842) with Excavated Wall Superimposed, Reoriented



Note: the base map from the National Archives, which is labeled October 12, 1842, also notes an inexplicable 1828 date

- Monument Lot
- - - part of Monument Lot 1842
- █ stone wall segment

