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Greenhouse

2000



DOCUMENTARY STUDY
OF THE OLD GRAVESEND CEMETERY
BOROUGH OF BROOKLYN
KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK

LPC 95-1360

Commission Report 95-0013

prepared for:
City of New York
Department of Citywide Administrative Services
Division of Real Estate Services

prepared by:
Greenhouse Consultants Incorporated
40 Exchange Place, 13th Floor
New York, New York 10005

August 2000

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LIST OF PERSONNEL

William I. Roberts IV, R.P.A.	-	Principal Investigator Documentary Researcher Author
Richard Clark	-	Documentary Researcher
Paula Crowley	-	Word Processor



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this background research study is to determine whether or not it is possible that graves could extend beyond the fences of the Old Gravesend Cemetery in the Borough of Brooklyn. Old Gravesend Cemetery is a New York City landmark. The City of New York intends to replace the fence along the street frontages of the cemetery. This investigation will examine the history of the cemetery in an attempt to determine whether graves could extend beyond the present fences.

Gravesend is located in the southwestern portion of the Borough of Brooklyn. The project area consists of Lot 1 on Block 7146. See Figure 1 for the location of the project area. The cemetery is presently covered with grass. A number of grave markers are present. It is surrounded by a chain link fences.

This study begins with a review of the prehistory of the project area and vicinity. A section on the history follows, subdivided into subsections on general history of Old Gravesend Cemetery, the deed evidence, and the cartographic evidence. This is followed by the results, and the conclusions and recommendations.

It was our intention to use the resources of the Brooklyn Historical Society in this study. Their library and archives are currently unavailable due to remodeling of their building. This study relied primarily on materials at the New York Public Library, The Gravesend Historical Society, and Offices of the Borough of Brooklyn.

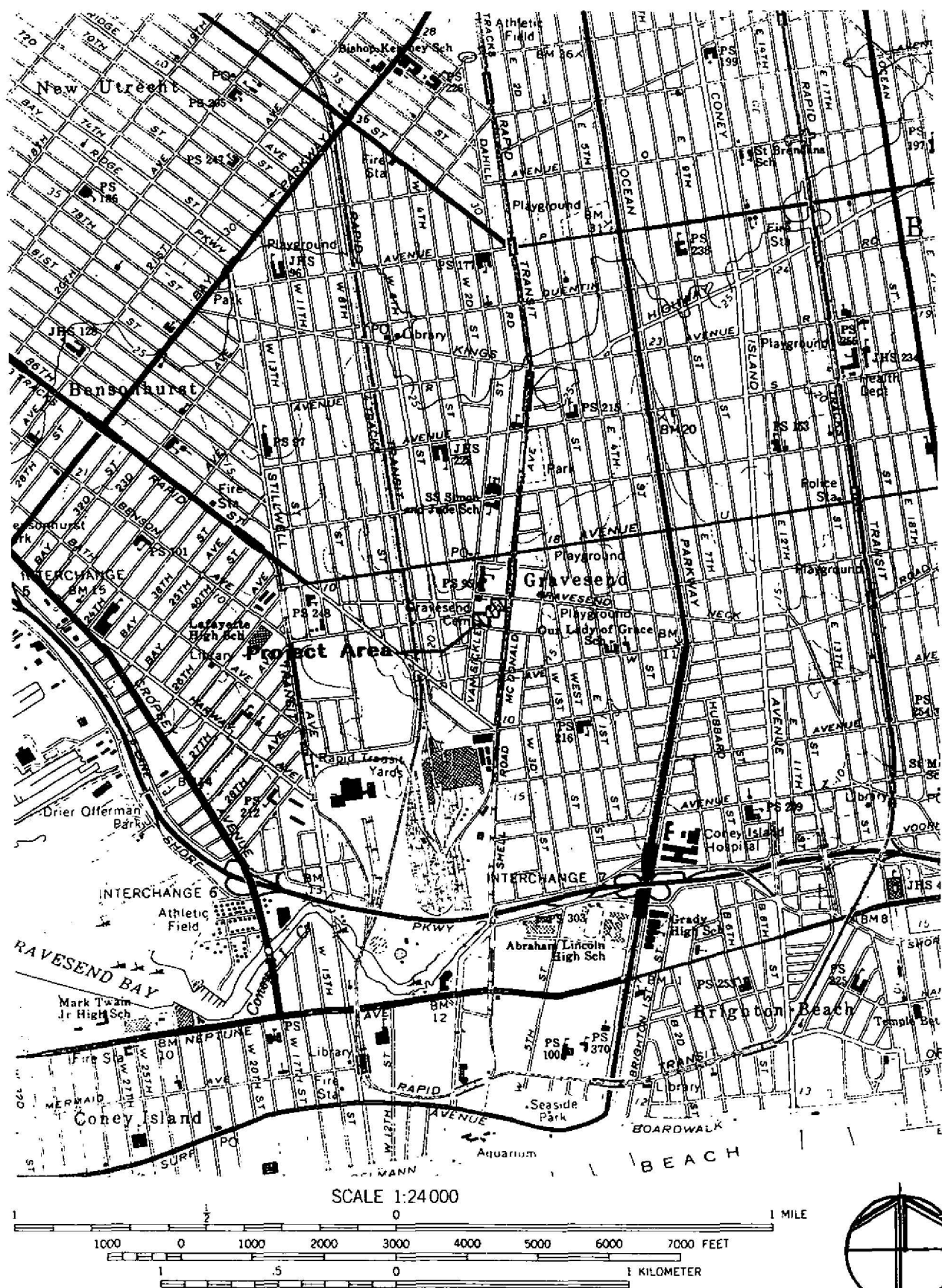


Figure 1

Project area location shown on portion of U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute series Coney Island, N.Y.-N.J. quadrangle 1966, photorevised 1979.



GEOGRAPHY AND PHYSICAL SETTING

The project area is located in the southeast section of New York State on the western part of Long Island and in the southern part of Kings County. See Figure 1. This portion of New York lies in the inner part of the Atlantic Coastal Plains Province (Fuller 1914:1). The basal deposits are of Cretaceous age and are overlaid by glacial drift (Fuller 1914:1; Broughton 1981:35). This region of the county lies in a glacial outwash plain south of the Ronkonkoma Moraine created during the Wisconsin period (Van Diver 1985: 70; Fuller 1914:1). There is no soil survey for Kings County.



PREHISTORIC SENSITIVITY

A search was made in the site files of the Historic Preservation Field Services Bureau of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and those of the New York State Museum. The search area was a circle with a radius of two miles centered on the project area.

There are two prehistoric sites located within two miles of the Old Gravesend Cemetery. Both of these were reported by former New York State Archaeologist Arthur C. Parker. These sites appear only as symbols on Parker's maps and are not described in his text.

The nearest site is New York State Museum Site 7877 which lies approximately 1.0 to 1.8 miles southeast of the project area. Parker describes this site only as shell heaps so no estimation of date range or cultural affiliation is possible (Parker 1922:Plate 179). See **A** in Figure 2.

The other site found is New York State Museum Site 7878. This site lies approximately 1.9 to 2.0 miles southeast of the project area, along the north shore of Sheepshead Bay. This site is described only as burials, so again, no estimate of date range or cultural affiliation can be made (Parker 1922:Plate 179). See **B** in Figure 2.

Although no archaeological evidence has been reported from any other locations within our search area, there are other locations probably occupied during the contact period based on documentary evidence.

Indian Pond formerly existed near Avenue P and West 11th Street, approximately 1.0 miles northwest of the project area. Planting grounds were located near this pond (Bolton 1922:Map VIII C) (Kearns et al. 1988:16).

A settlement known as Wichquawanck existed near the shore of Gravesend Bay. It evidently consisted of one long house and was depicted on a map of 1639. William MacCleod placed it near the southwestern terminus of Bay Parkway in his 1941 survey for the Works Progress Administration (Grumet 1981:59). This location is approximately 1.3 miles west of the project area.

In terms of potential prehistoric sensitivity, the project impact area was evaluated from two points of view:

1. the proximity of known prehistoric sites in or near the project area; and,
2. the presence of fresh water drainage courses in general, and particularly the identification of river or stream confluence situations, where two or more drainages come together, providing access to both water and food supplies of both systems.

The project area lies within two miles of two known prehistoric archaeological sites, and two locations of contact period settlement known from documents. All of these are one



Figure 2 Prehistoric sites within two miles of the project area.



mile or more from the project area. There is no source of fresh water near the project area as shown on historic maps. The nearest stream is approximately 0.3 miles to the southwest shown on the 1859 Walling map. This situation gives the project area a low to medium probability of having supported occupation during prehistory. Should this location have been used, it is unlikely that any remains would survive undisturbed given the 350 years of historic development and use of this land.



HISTORIC SENSITIVITY

Gravesend was founded by a group of settlers led by Lady Deborah Moody. She came from Lynn, Massachusetts to New Netherland in 1642 with a group of Anabaptists and political dissidents. They were seeking a place to settle with guarantees of religious freedom. They were joined by Nicholas Stillwell and his associates, who had recently been driven from their settlement in eastern Manhattan by Indian attacks. This group was given permission to settle in New Netherland by Governor William Kieft during June 1643 (Kearns *et al.* 1988:20; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission 1976:1).

Gravesend was the only English settlement within present Kings County founded under Dutch rule. It was also the first settlement in North America to include a woman as a patentee, and one of the earliest to guarantee religious freedom. The patent for Gravesend was the first land document written in English in New Netherland. The charter was confirmed by Governor Kieft in 1645. Gravesend was the only town in this region laid out according to a plan. The center of the town was a village laid out as a sixteen acre square. This square was bisected by two main roads. The north-south road was Gravesend Avenue, now McDonald Avenue. The east-west road remains Gravesend Neck Road. This created four square blocks each four acres in size. The perimeters of each block were subdivided into ten house lots, but the center of each block was left as common land.

The land beyond the village was laid out as 40 wedge shaped "plantation" lots radiating out from the central square. The village itself was surrounded by a palisade for protection against wild animals and Indian attacks. The common land in the center of each block was initially used to protect the settlers' livestock at night, instead of leaving them on the "plantation" lots outside the palisade (Kearns *et al.* 1998:21; New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission 1975:1-2).

The above plan did not make any provisions for a church or burial ground. It is obvious from the location of Old Gravesend Cemetery that the common ground within the southwestern block of the village was made the location of the burial ground. The earliest reference to the burial ground is evidently the 1658 will of Thomas Spicer. In this document he leaves 20 guilders to enclose the cemetery with a fence (New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission 1975:2).

During 1687 John Tilton willed land to the burial ground. This land enlarged the burial ground (Stockwell 1884:183). It must have been along the southern or western side of the block.

During the interval between these two events, Great Britain took control of New Netherland. The patent for the Town of Gravesend was confirmed by the new governor. There was little change to Gravesend Village during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Kearns *et al.* 1998:21-22).

Deed Research



Deeds for the land that makes up Old Gravesend Cemetery were sought in the Office of the City Register for the Borough of Brooklyn. The cemetery currently consists of Lot 1 on Block 7146. Only two deeds were found. The earlier of the two dates to August 1875. This deed transfer land from J.C. Van Sicklen and Elizabeth Van Sicklen to the Town of Gravesend. The land is bounded to the north by the highway leading to Gravesend Beach (now Gravesend Neck Road). It measures 46.86 feet along the north side, 112.86 feet on the west side, 43.73 feet on the south side which abuts the Gravesend Burial Ground, 110.88 feet on the east side. The east side abuts a 16 foot wide pathway leading to the Burial Ground (Liber 1213:37).

The second deed located dates to April 29, 1903. This deed transfers land from Seth Low, the Mayor of New York City, to the Trustees of the Gravesend Cemetery, including George Stillwell, William B Lake, Stryker Williamson and others. The description begins at the south side of Gravesend Neck Road along the west line of land formerly of Samuel Hubbard, and runs south for 272 feet. It then turns west and runs 122.5 feet, then south again for 148 feet to the north side of Village Road. The line then runs west 110 feet along the north side of Village Road. It then turns an angle to run northwest still along Village Road for 76 feet to another angle where it continues 30 feet along Village Road to the east side of Van Sicklen Street. It then runs north for 90 feet along Van Sicklen Street, then east for 138 feet, then north again for 42 feet. It then turns west and runs 16 feet to where it turns north again to run 106 feet. The line then runs 79.8 feet east along the properties of S. Stillwell, John S. Johnson and the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery. It then runs north 112 feet on the south side of Gravesend Neck Road, then east for 59 feet along the road to the place of beginning (Liber 14:341). This second deed proves that the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery was still a separate plot during 1903, and therefore that the land added to the cemetery during August 1875 was not that cemetery. This 1903 transaction was probably made because the former common lands of the Town of Gravesend became property of the City of New York during 1898, and the city evidently did not want the responsibility of maintaining the burial ground.

Cartographic Evidence

Figure 3 presents a copy of the original plan for Gravesend as laid out by Lady Moody in 1645. The future burial ground includes the central "common yard" in the southwestern block and adjacent parcels. This map is unscaled, but comparisons with the present tax maps indicate that the blocks were approximately 410 feet on a side, and the common yards approximately 194 feet on a side.

No representations were found of the village of Gravesend or the cemetery dating to the late seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. The next map found is by John Terhune, but includes no date. John Terhune was Supervisor of the Town of Gravesend during 1824. The Shell Road, an extension of Gravesend Avenue (now McDonald Avenue), to the south of the village, was built that year (Ierarde 1975:64). This map does not show the Shell Road, so it is probably circa 1820. It shows the four blocks of Gravesend Village, but not the cemetery. See Figure 4.

Figure 5 is taken from the 1858 Walling map. This map shows that the southern two blocks of Gravesend Village were not square but had rounded corners on the southwest and southeast. The southwestern corner of the project area block is rounded. The

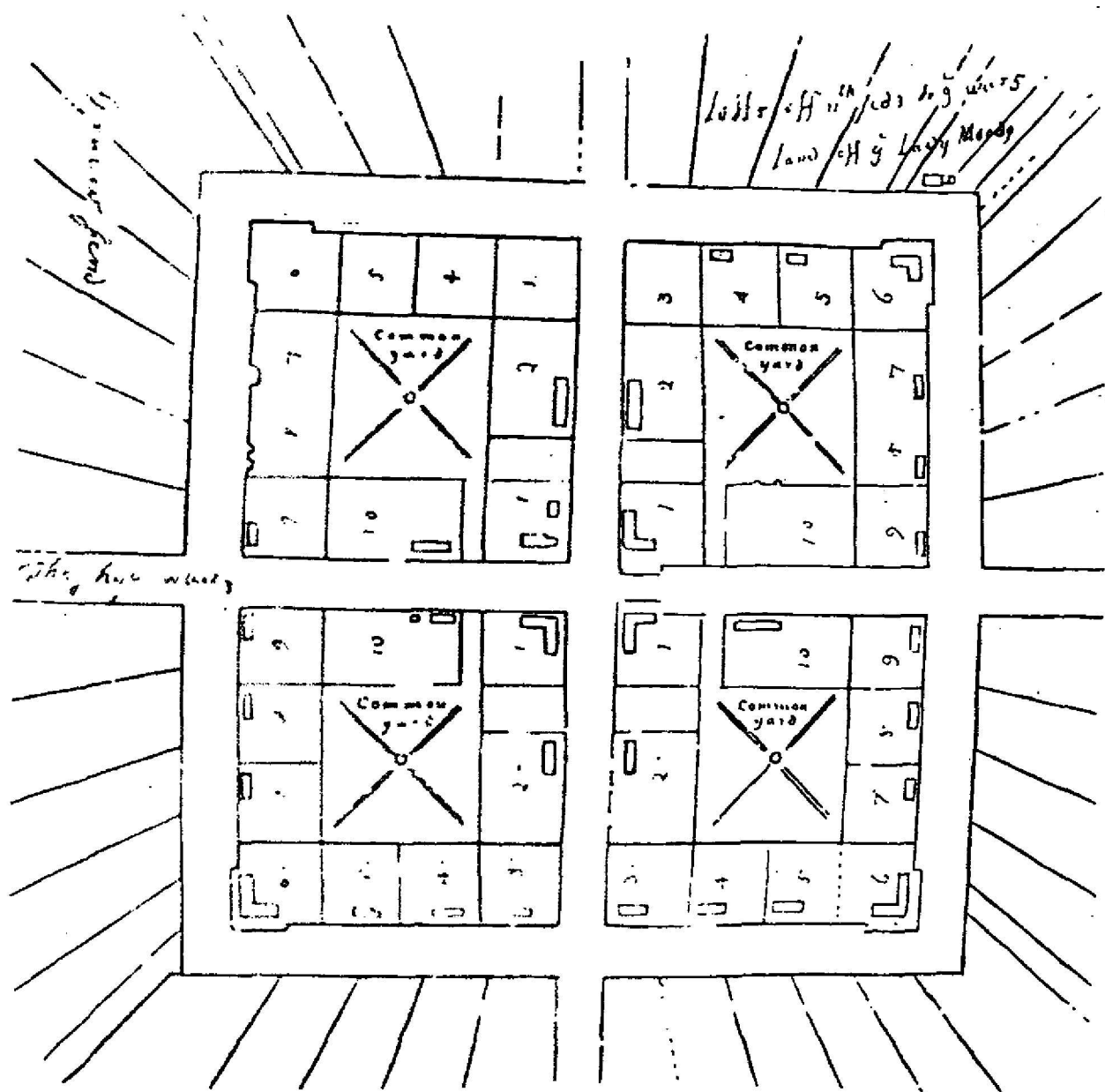


Figure 3 1645 Plan of Gravesend by Lady Moody.

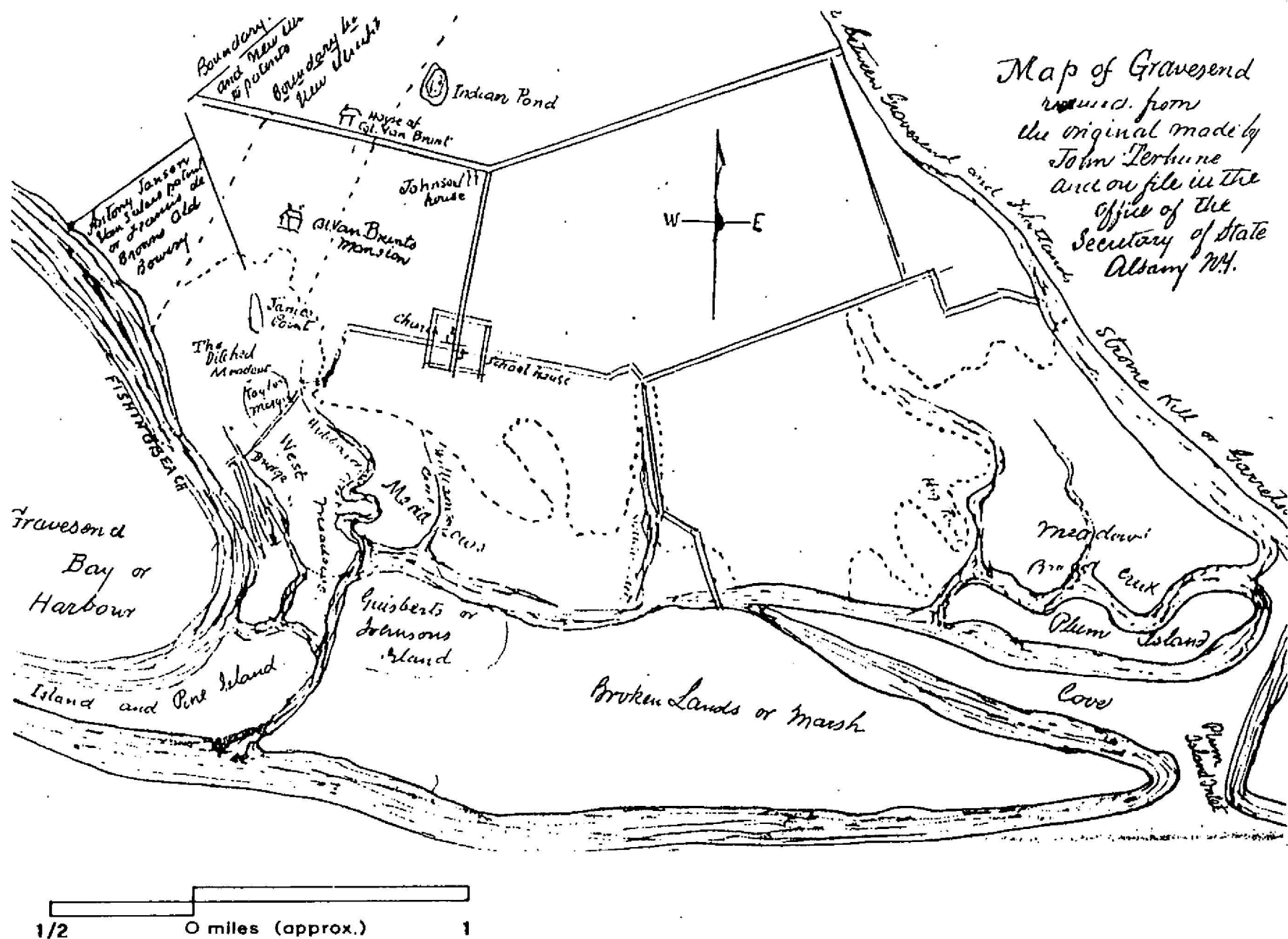


Figure 4 circa 1820 Map of Gravesend by John Terhune.



Figure 5 From the 1858 Walling map.



cemetery is not marked, but the northeastern corner of the block is owned by S. Hubbard.

The next map found is from the 1873 Beers atlas. See Figure 6. This is the earliest depiction to show the project area block in detail, and the earliest map found that labels the cemetery as such. The southwestern corner of the block and the cemetery is rounded. The northern section of the cemetery adjacent to Gravesend Neck Road is the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery.

Figure 7 is taken from the 1889 Robinson Atlas. This map shows essentially the same situation seen in 1873, except that the extreme southwestern corner of the block, following the angle of Village Road, is not included. The Van Sicklen Family Cemetery is not included with the main cemetery. It is the rectangle just east of the Jane Stillwell property and north of the main cemetery.

The next map found is from the 1899 Ulitz atlas. This volume was too fragile to be copied. It shows essentially the same situation as seen in Figure 8, taken from the 1907 Bromley Atlas with one exception. The Van Sicklen Family Cemetery is shown as a separate lot by Ulitz in 1899, but is incorporated into the main cemetery in the 1907 Bromley Atlas. The southwestern corner of the block and the cemetery is rounded in both depictions.

Figure 9 is taken from the 1929 Hyde Atlas. Two changes are evidence since 1907. The rounded corner where Village Road meets Van Sicklen Street has been changed and Village Road is straightened. This work appears to be in progress since one of the lots from the block to the south of the project area is still seen covering part of the street. The boundary of property facing Van Sicklen Street owned by Jane Stillwell in 1889 has been changed to eliminate the projecting piece at the southeast. The new boundary is straight. The cemetery lost a small amount of land in this change.

The final map presented here is from the 1988 Sanborn maps. See Figure 10. Only one change is evident since 1929. The boundary of the property owned by Borden's Farm Products has been changed. The new boundary along the western end of this plot has been shortened, giving approximately nine feet of land to the cemetery.

In summary, the nine maps found appear to provide evidence of the expansion of the Old Gravesend Cemetery from its inception in the 1650s until the present size and shape were attained between 1929 and 1988. The cemetery began as the square common yard in the center of Block 7146. A walkway led to Gravesend Neck Road from its northeastern corner. By 1873 the cemetery had expanded to include the southwestern corner of the block up to the edge of the curved road surrounding the block. The Van Sicklen Family Cemetery had also been created to the north. Since 1873 there have been two major changes: the roads to the southwest have been straightened and the southwestern corner of the cemetery expanded, and the Van Sicklen cemetery and the rectangular lot east of it have been added to the cemetery.

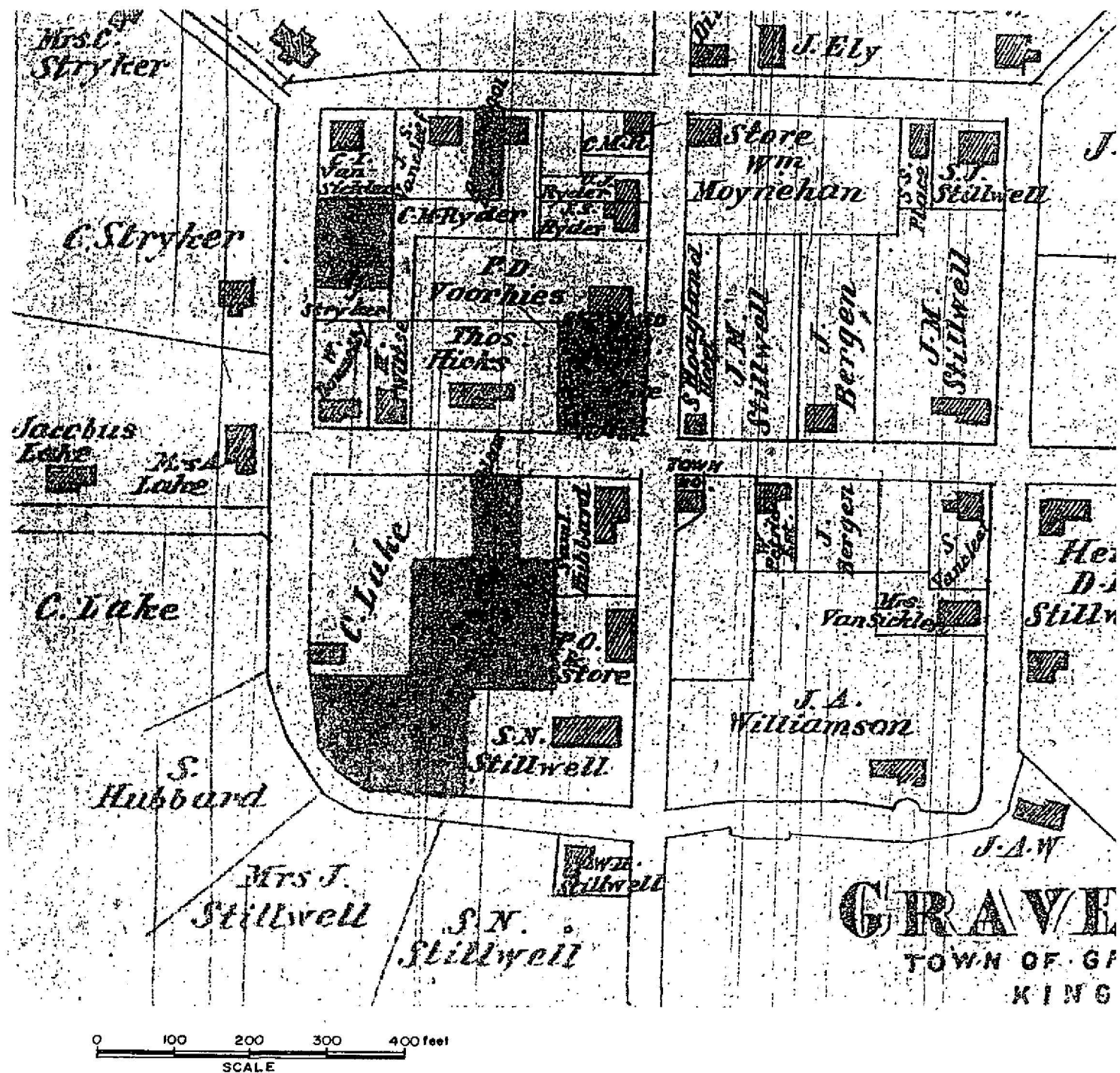


Figure 6

From the 1873 Beers Atlas.

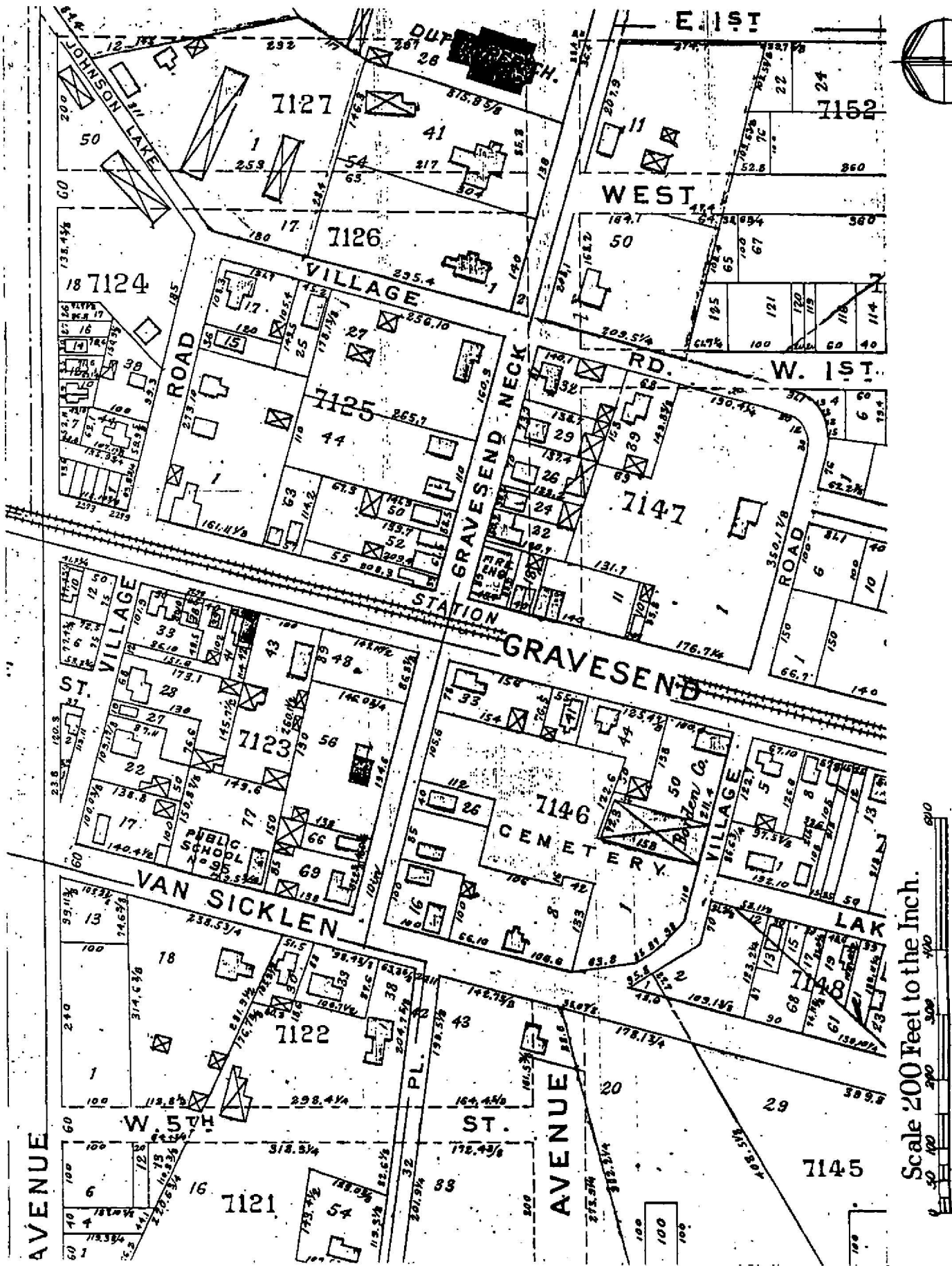


Figure 8 From the 1907 Bromley Atlas.

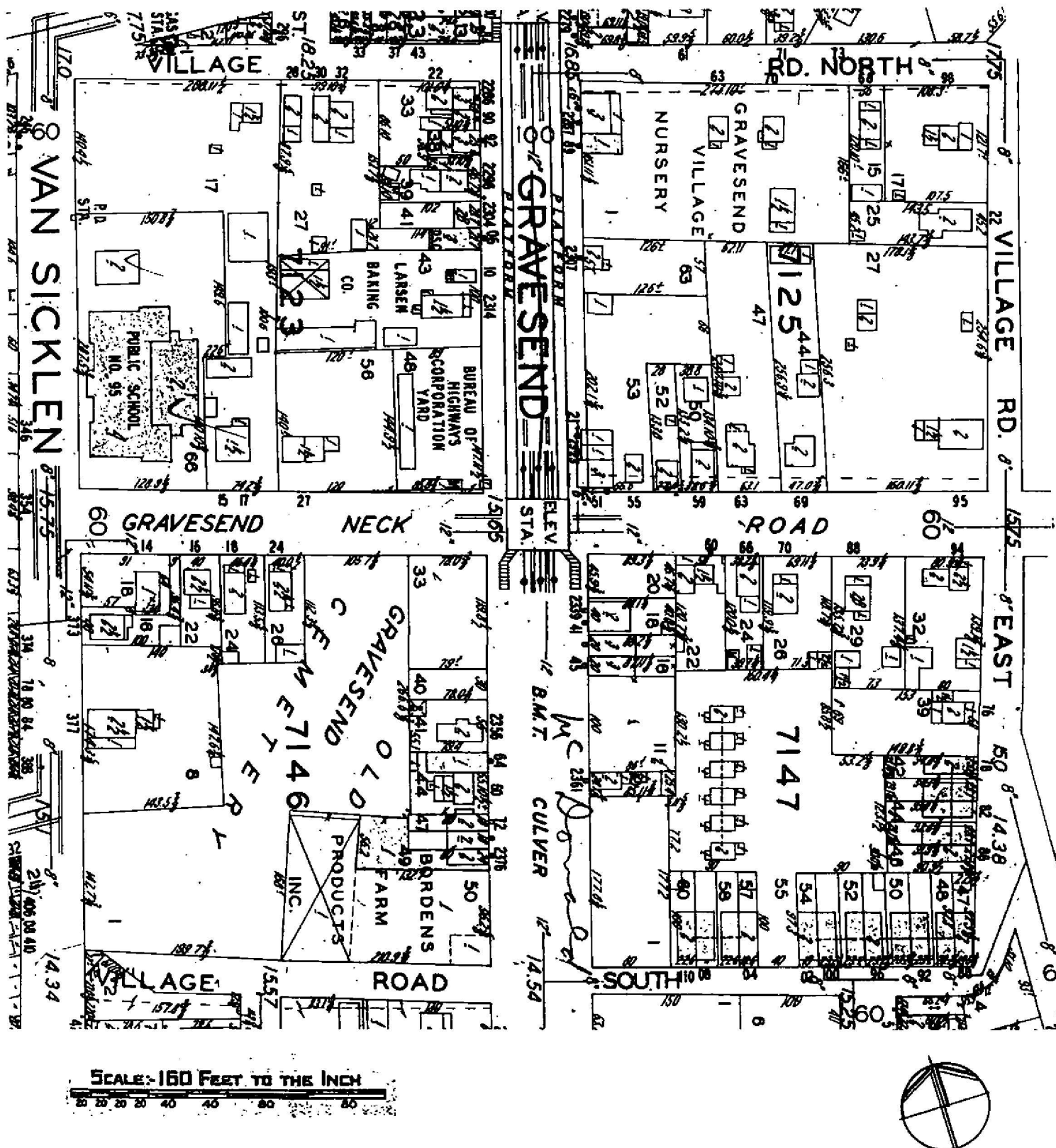


Figure 9

From the 1929 Hyde Atlas.



RESULTS

The project area is within two miles of two known prehistoric sites. In addition there is documentary evidence of the use of two other locations within two miles of the project area. There is no evidence of any fresh water sources on or adjacent to the project area, the nearest being 0.3 miles to the southwest. The project area has a low to medium probability of having been used during prehistory. If a prehistoric settlement existed here, it would probably have been disturbed or destroyed by the 350 years of historic period development and use.

The documentary evidence shows that the Old Gravesend Cemetery must have existed by 1658 when Thomas Spicer left money to enclose it with a fence. At this time it must have consisted of the former common yard on Block 7146, a square approximately 194 feet on each side. The first evidence of expansion is the 1687 will of John Tilton. This must have been on the southern or western side of the original parcel. By 1873 the cemetery has probably expanded to the streets on the southern and western sides of the block. The Van Sicklen Family Cemetery has been established to the north of the Old Gravesend Cemetery. There is some doubt about expansion towards the southwest since the 1889 Robinson Atlas shows a triangular piece on the corner as outside the cemetery. The expansion into this corner is certainly complete by 1899. The 1889 map also fails to show the rectangular parcel east of the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery and west of the sixteen foot wide path leading to the former common yard. Deed evidence shows that this parcel was added to the Old Gravesend Cemetery during 1875. By 1907 it appears that the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery has been made a part of the Old Gravesend Cemetery. The southwestern corner of the cemetery has expanded into the former street to assume its present configuration by 1929. By 1929 the western boundary has also been straightened. Since 1929 the only change has been the straightening of the boundaries to the southeast.

This evidence shows that there is virtually no chance that any burials could extend west of the boundary along Van Sicklen Street or south of the western 89 feet of the boundary along Village Road to the south. The former boundaries were plotted from the dimensions in the 1903 deed (Liber 14:341) and superimposed on the 1988 tax map. This evidence shows that the Southern corner of the cemetery was formerly in the street. See Figure 11. This leaves the eastern 110 feet of the southern boundary along Village Road South and the 105.7 feet of the northern boundary along Gravesend Neck Road where burials could extend beyond the fence-line. Since part of this northern boundary was established during 1875, the records of the Topographical Bureau of the Brooklyn Borough President's Office were consulted. Records for Gravesend Neck Road begin in 1910, so it is impossible to say whether the line of Gravesend Neck Road has changed since 1875. It has remained constant since 1910.

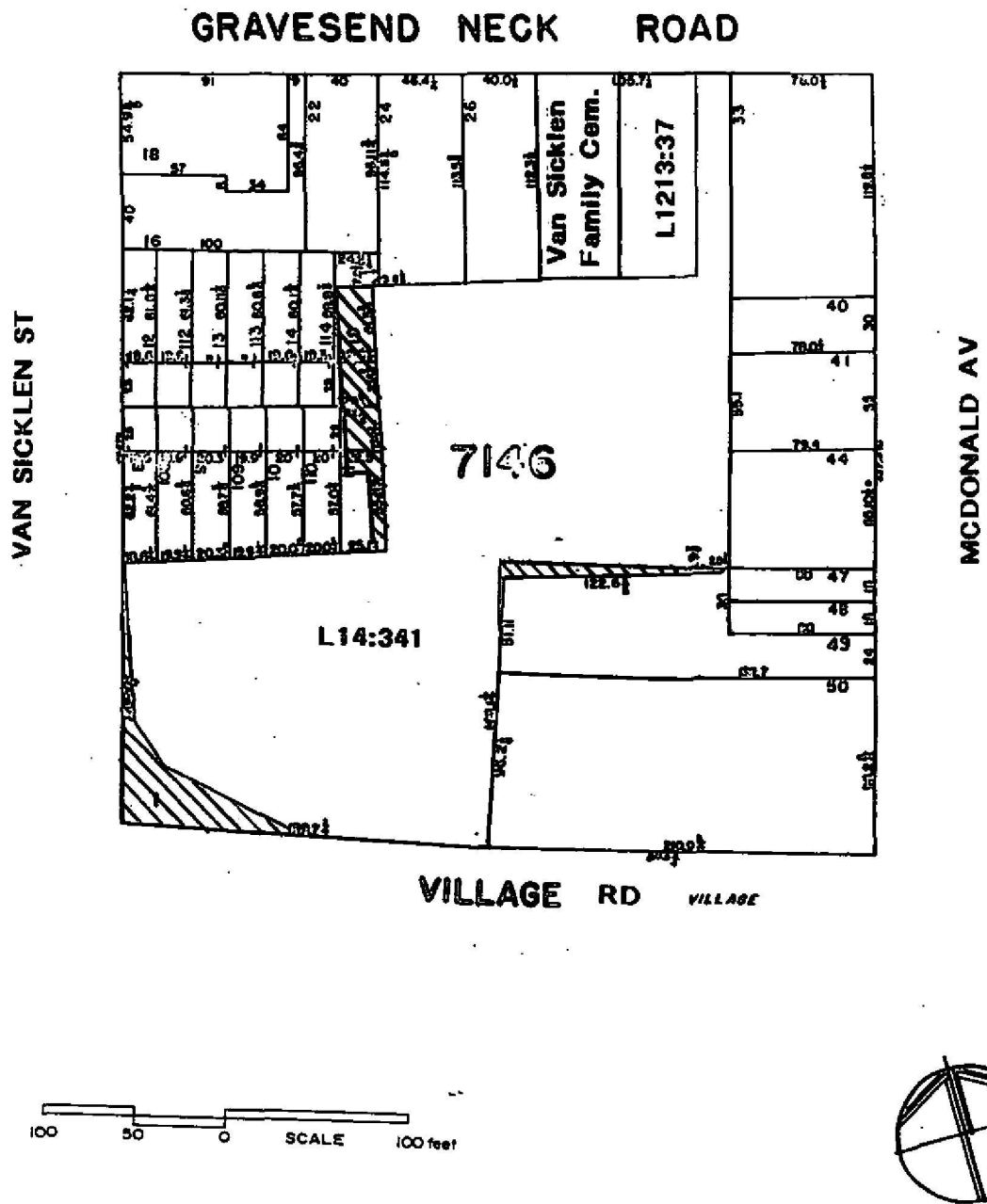


Figure 11 1903 Deed Plotted on 1988 Sanborn Tax Map.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is our conclusion that the Old Gravesend Cemetery is unlikely to preserve evidence of its use during prehistory. This is due primarily to the 350 years of development and use of this location during the historic period.

It is also our conclusion that part of the street frontage of the Old Gravesend Cemetery may preserve evidence of graves beyond the fence-line, and that the remainder has no such potential. The frontage of the cemetery along Van Sicklen Street has no potential for graves beyond the fence-line since it previously was part of the street. This also is true of the western 89 feet of the frontage along Village Road South. It is possible that graves may extend beyond the fence-line of the eastern 110 feet of the Village Road South frontage, and all of the frontage along Gravesend Neck Road. This is unlikely for the eastern sixteen feet of the Gravesend Neck Road frontage since this was originally a pathway.

We recommend that archaeological testing of the Gravesend Neck Road frontage and the eastern 110 feet of the Village Road South frontage take place prior to replacement of the fence. The purpose of the testing is to search for evidence of burials. This testing should be in the form of mechanically excavated trenches, augmented by manual investigations if evidence of graves is seen.



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