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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE AT THE PIETER CLAESEN WYCKOFF HOUSE,
KINGS COUNTY, NEW YORK

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The Pieter Claesen Wyckoff house, at the intersection of Clarendon Road and Ralph Avenue in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York, may have been built as early as 1639-41 (Bailey 1936:88), although a recent architectural study suggests a construction date in the 1650's (Trousdale, personal communication). In any case, it has often been cited as the oldest house in the state. At present, the structure is in a condition of extreme disrepair, and its environs have undergone considerable recent modification--particularly the deposition of large amounts of fill for road construction over much of the original ground surface. In 1972, the architectural firm of Oppenheimer, Brady and Associates began a study of the building and its surroundings as a preliminary step towards its eventual restoration and, possibly, the creation of a surrounding park covering approximately two acres.

On December 26th and 27th, 1972, a short archaeological reconnaissance was made in connection with the architectural study. This test, limited as it was by lack of funds and a tight time schedule, was designed to accomplish a limited set of objectives; 1) to test the cultural stratigraphy immediately adjacent to the structure in an effort to expose one or more 17th century strata, at the same time locating the original 17th century ground surface, and 2) by testing for a north-south footing ditch, to determine if the present cellar of the house had been constructed in stages or as a single unit.

During the two-day field session, four test cuts were dug and 518 artifactual and other specimens were collected. The excavations are described below and their locations are shown in Figure 1. The specimens are briefly described in Appendix A.

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WYCKOFF HOUSE SITE MAP

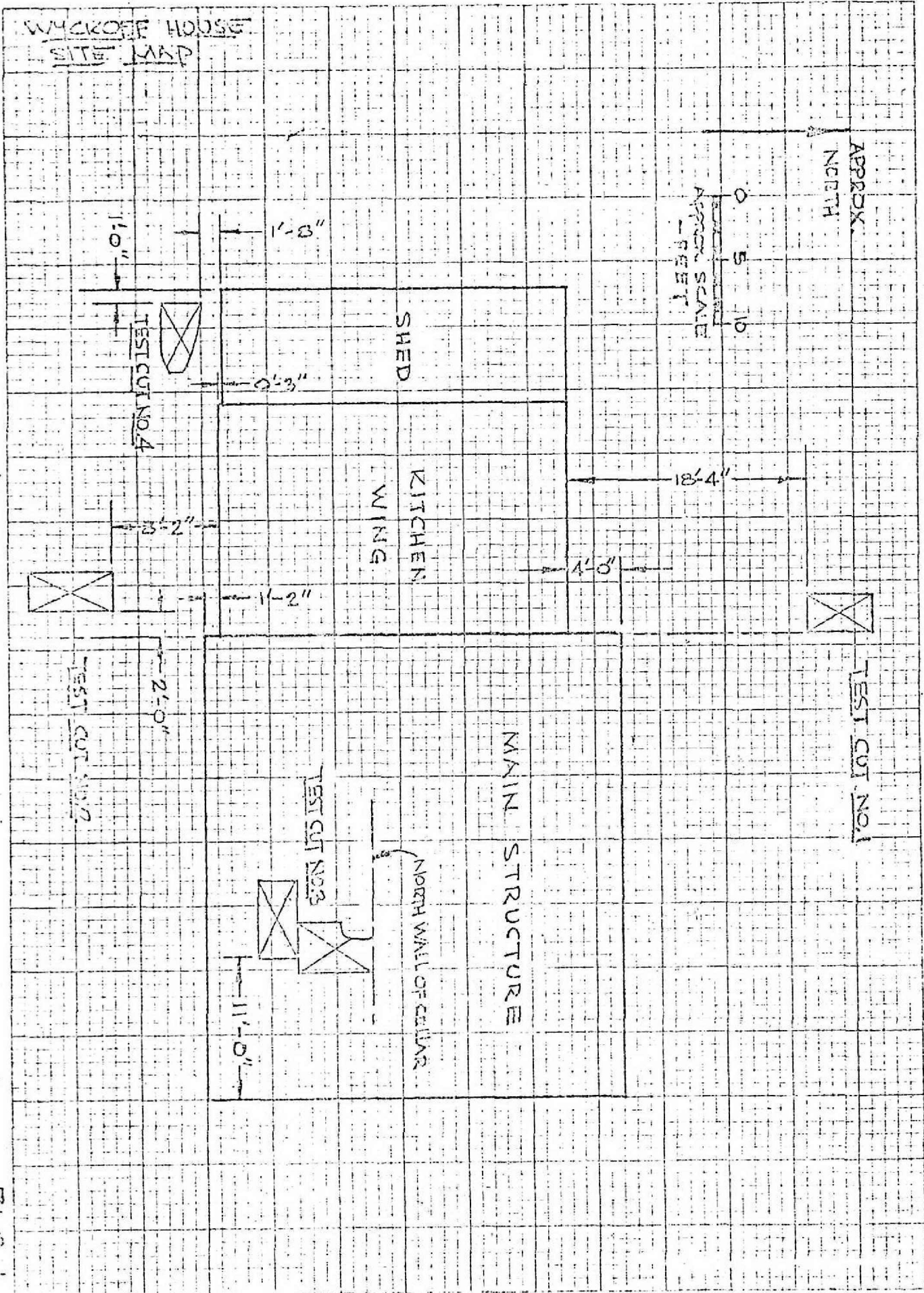


FIG. 1.

Test Excavation No. 1.

Test cut No. 1 was excavated in the field to the north of the house (see Fig. 1) in an area which appeared to contain little or no recent overburden. It was designed to provide information about the use of this area through time and to expose, if possible, the 17th century ground level.

The stratigraphy is shown in Figure 2. A 3- to 4-inch-thick sod layer covered an 8-inch-thick layer of brown loam which, in turn, overlaid a 6-inch-thick layer of orange sand. Below the sand was a glacial till (?) layer of unknown depth.

As shown in Appendix A, very little cultural material was encountered in this excavation unit, almost all of it (7 pieces) in the sod and brown loam. Some plaster fragments were found near the base of the sand zone. The till was completely sterile. The single dateable specimen was a fragment of 18th century Japanese porcelain. The paucity of artifactual material suggests that the area on the north side of the house was never intensively used, even though this was the side that faced the road after the realignment of Canarsie Lane in 1867 (Bailey 1936:91). The nature of the stratigraphic column indicates that the present ground surface in this area is probably within a few inches of the 17th century surface.

Test Excavation No. 2.

Test cut No. 2 was placed a short distance south of the kitchen wing (see Fig. 1). As with the first test cut, this excavation was designed to investigate the uses to which this area had been put and to expose the 17th century ground level.

The stratigraphy encountered in this cut was much more complex than that on the north side of the building (see Fig. 3). Under a thick heap of very

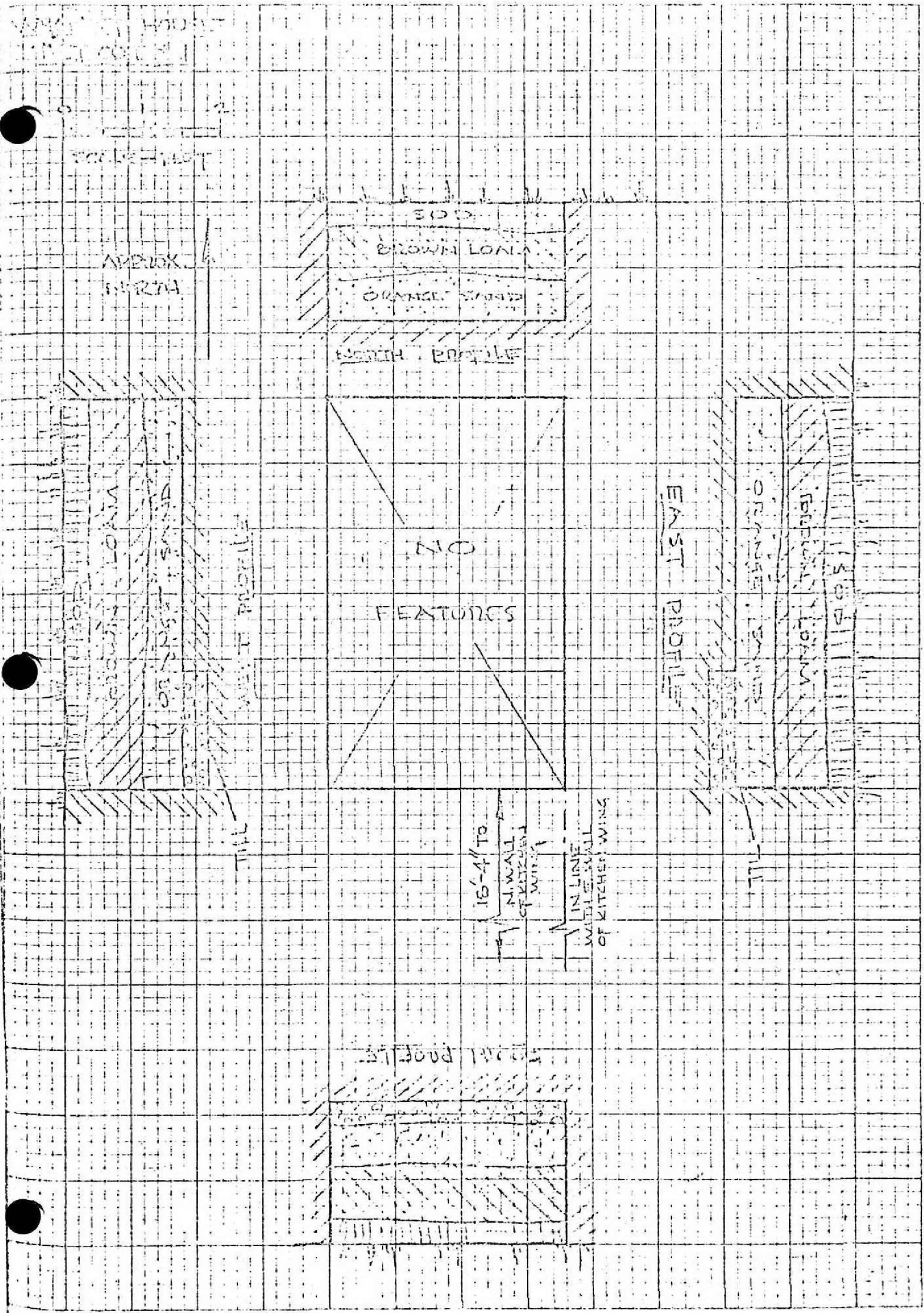


FIG. 2

recent overburden was an uneven zone of brown earth containing a great deal of cinder and artifactual fragments that dated mainly from the 20th century. Below this was a broken "blacktop" surface--evidently a portion of a driveway--which had been laid over a badly disturbed pavement of red bricks. The bricks had been set, without mortar, in a bed of yellow clayey sand which contained artifactual material dating mainly from the 19th and earlier part of the 20th centuries. This overlaid a thin, hard-packed layer of dark, sandy earth containing 18th and 19th century materials, which, in turn, rested on a thin, very dark layer consisting of coal dust and small fragments of coal mixed with earth, and containing artifactual specimens dating from the late 18th century or earlier.

The coal/earth stratum appeared to lie on a surface which had been occupied from the late 17th century until late in the 18th century (see Appendix A). The upper part of this zone was dark brown in color and contained a great deal of cinder. With increasing depth the color became lighter and the soil became cleaner, until, at about 6 inches below its top, it had become a clean tan loam. Two inches farther down, a culturally sterile zone of orange sandy subsoil was reached. Two parallel ruts, 5 feet apart and approximately 2 inches deep, 6 inches wide at their tops, and "U" shaped in crosssection were visible in the top of this layer, running approximately east to west (see Fig. 3, plan view). These may be wagon tracks, or (less likely?) plow furrows. Further excavation would be required to determine their true nature.

In any case, it is evident that the area immediately to the south of the house was used quite intensively from the late 17th century until the structure was abandoned in the late 20th century. The positions of outbuildings in early 20th century photographs show that this side of the house served as the farmyard at that time. The archaeological data suggest that it was used in a

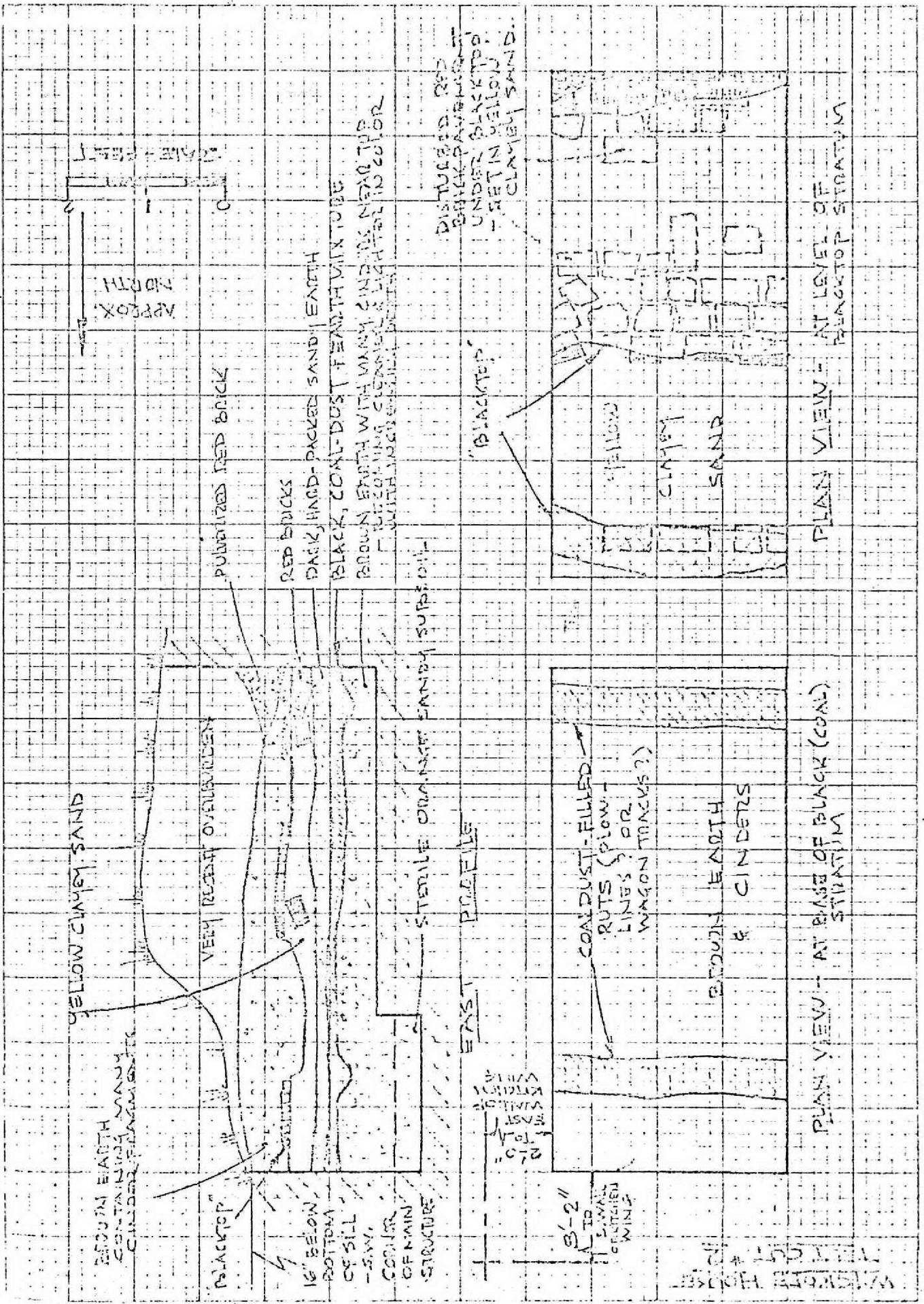


FIG. 3.

similar manner from a much earlier time.

It should be pointed out that the earliest materials found in Test Excavation No. 2 date from about 1660-1680. None of the strata encountered in this cut can be clearly assigned to the 1639-41 time period when, according to at least some authorities, the first part of the house was built, but this is not particularly surprising. Three possible reasons can be suggested. First, a cultural one--European-made objects were relatively scarce and presumably quite precious in the early colonial period, and one would not expect to find them casually discarded. Second, a procedural explanation--because of the condition of the site, it was necessary to place this excavation before the kitchen wing, which may be a somewhat later addition (see for example, Van Wyck 1924), rather than in front of the original 17th century structure. Further excavation somewhat to the east of Test Excavation No. 2 might yield at least some earlier 17th century material in this same stratum. Finally, it is quite possible that, as Trousdale suggests on architectural grounds (personal communication), the first construction took place in about 1652, somewhat later than was previously believed. If this is true, the agreement between structural and artifactual dating methods becomes quite satisfactory.

Test Excavation No. 3.

This excavation unit, in the cellar of the house (see Fig. 1), was designed to test for the presence of a north-south footing trench at the point where features of the superstructure suggested the original east wall of the building had been located. The test proved negative. No trench was found, thus indicating that the present cellar had been excavated as a single unit, possibly at the time that the eastern addition was added to the house. How-

WALKOFF HOSE
TEST CUT #3

NORTH WALL OF CELLAR

WOOD PILE

PREVIOUSLY
EXCAVATED

BROWN SANDY
EARTH

YELLOW

SAND

BROWN

MOTTLED
EARTH
B-H

BROWN
MOTTLED EARTH

A

A

YELLOW

SAND

YELLOW

SAND

PLAN VIEW B-H

PLAN VIEWS

CA. 7" BELOW SURFACE

CA. 18" BEL. SURFACE

CA. 38" BEL. SURFACE

BROWN SANDY EARTH
DARK BROWN EARTH

YELLOW SAND

BROWN
MOTTLED
EARTH

BLACK
COAL-
EARTH
MIXTURE

SECTION A-A

SECT. B-B

FIG. 4.

ever, the test did reveal a large brown-earth-filled depression, about 48 inches in diameter and at least 32 inches deep (see Fig. 4). This may be evidence of a well, dug just to the east of the original structure before the addition was built, or of a cistern, dug within the cellar at a later date. More extensive excavation might provide a more conclusive answer.

Only 20th century artifactual specimens were recovered from this cut (see Appendix A).

Test Excavation No. 4.

Another test trench, designed to test subsurface stratigraphy, was begun just south of the leanto shed attached to the west wall of the kitchen wing (see Fig. 1). Under 4 to 7 inches of very recent overburden, a concrete slab pavement, sloping down towards the shed floor, was encountered. The slab was bordered on the south and west by multiple courses of dry laid red ceramic and concrete brick (see Fig. 5). Excavation was halted at this level because of lack of time. It is probable that this surface is a portion of the driveway first encountered in Test Excavation No. 2.

Recommendations.

The archaeological activities described above, as brief as they were, successfully uncovered the 17th century occupation surface in the farmyard of the Wyckoff house, as well as a number of later occupation levels. The ages of the specimens from the lowest stratum seem to correlate quite well with the estimated age of the original structure as determined by analysis of architectural features.

If additional archaeological investigation of the site is possible, we would suggest the following procedure.

We propose, first, the excavation of a series of additional test cuts,

W. C. BERRY HOUSE
TEST CUT #1

APPROX.
NORTH

1'-3"

RED CERAMIC
BRICKS

1'-0"

DRAIN
TILE

A

CONCRETE
SLAB

A

SHED

CONCRETE BRICKS 4" X 4" X 7 1/2"

0 1 2
SCALE - FEET

KITCHEN
WING

SECTION A-A

FIG. 5.

100
100
100

approximately 10 to 15 in number and similar in size to those described above, but located at regular intervals on a grid covering the entire extent of the Wyckoff property. These tests would establish the location of the earlier surfaces at enough points to permit the preparation of a subsurface contour map which could guide future grading operations. The early deposits could then be protected from harm by halting the removal of the overburden at elevations safely above them.

Once the archaeological and historical content of the Wyckoff site had been protected in this way, it would be possible to begin a long range archaeological project designed to expose and study large horizontal sections of the early surfaces. Such a project could be expected to provide unique information about the operation of a Dutch colonial farm; it would be possible to investigate the location and construction of outbuildings and to obtain large, statistically valid samples of artifactual materials and food remains which would provide insight into subsistence economy, trade patterns, and the like. Furthermore, the stratified nature of the deposits in Test Excavation No. 2 suggests that it might be possible to follow changes in these patterns through almost two hundred and fifty years of development.

Since the site would be under the protection of the City of New York, this latter phase of the work could be carried out over a long period of time. Since only relatively small sections of the property would have to be under excavation at any particular moment, the archaeological research would not interfere with other activities within the park. Work of this nature must, of course, be directed by trained specialists in historical archaeology, but work crews might well come from classes in history and anthropology at metropolitan area schools, making the site a valuable archaeological training ground as well as a uniquely important historical document.

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APPENDIX A

SUMMARY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SPECIMENS

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Cat.No.</u>	<u>Specimens</u>	<u>Prob. Date</u>	<u>Quantity *</u>
<u>TEST EXCAVATION NO. 1</u>				
Sod & brown loam	I-1	Ceramics:		
		Japanese "Imari" red and gold porcelain rim frag. - cup?	1700-1780	1
		Porcelain fragment - screened pink design		1
		Red brick fragments		2
		Glass:		
		Window glass fragments		2
		Faunal remains:		
		Mammal bone fragments - unidentifiable		1
				7
Orange sand	I-2,3	Plaster samples:		
		"Sand-coat" or "rough-coat" - no paint		3
				3
Till	I-4	No Specimens		0
				0
			<u>TOTAL - TEST EXCAVATION NO. 1</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>TEST EXCAVATION NO. 2</u>				
Brown earth & cinders	II-1	Metal:		
		Steel window screen bracket	ca. 1900-present	1
		Steel nails - machine cut - architectural	20th c.	5
		Lead bar - stamped "P" - function unknown		1
		Lead? fragment		1
		.22 calibre cartridges - stamped "HP" (2 pc.) & "P" (1 pc.)	20th c.	3
		Ceramics:		
		Creamware fragment	1785-1800	1
		Glass:		
		Beer bottle frags. - amber - (1 pc. molded "NO DEPOSIT")	Recent	3
		Bottle fragment - embossed decoration - amber		1
		Bottle frags. - clear - thick (1 base frag. molded "1955-A")	Recent	3

*NOTE: This test was designed to produce the maximum amount of chronological information with severely limited field time and personnel. Excavating and collecting techniques were planned accordingly and varied from cut to cut--sometimes from level to level. In general, only temporally diagnostic specimens were collected from the most recent levels, "representative" samples were retained from somewhat earlier levels, and an attempt was made to retrieve all materials from the earliest strata. Hence, quantitative comparisons among strata should be made with extreme caution.

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Cat.No.</u>	<u>Specimens</u>	<u>Prob. Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
		Glass (continued):		
		? vessel - bright blue - thick - molded	Recent	1
		Windshield glass? - thick ($\frac{1}{2}$ ")	Early 20th c.	2
		Window glass fragment - blue-green - thin		1
		Window glass fragments - pale green - thin	Recent	4
		Miscellaneous:		
		Wood furniture? fragment - decorative carving - whitewashed? - containing modern nail	late 19th-20th c.	1
		Asphalt roofing shingle fragment	20th c.	1
		Rubber? - fragment		1
		Flint spall - European - ballast?		1
		Plaster samples:		
		Cream colored		1
		White		1
		Faunal remains:		
		Large mammal bone fragment - cut		1
		Mussel shell (one of very few of this species in excavation)		1
				<u>1</u> 35
Red brick pavement II-2		Metal:		
		Steel nails - wire cut	1920-present	3
		Glass:		
		Bottle fragment - amber - molded	Recent	1
		Wood:		
		Shingle fragment - creosote impregnated		1
		Plaster sample:		
		"Rough coat"		1
				<u>1</u> 6
Yellow clayey sand II-3		Metal:		
		Steel hinge fragment - "H" shaped	20th c.	1
		Roofing nails - square cut	1820-present	2
		Nails - machine-cut	1870-present	2
		Nail - wire-cut	1920-present	1
		Nail fragments?		8
		Copper wire fragment with fiber coating	20th c.	1
		Brass fragment - function unknown		1
		Ceramics:		
		Creamware - undecorated	1785-1800	1
		Creamware - embossed decoration	1790-1830	1
		Porcelain fragment - thick		1
		Tile fragments - red	pos. 19th c.	3

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Cat.No.</u>	<u>Specimens</u>	<u>Prob. Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
		Glass:		
		Lead glass fragment - pale blue - thick	19th c.	1
		Windshield glass fragment - thick	Early 20th c.	1
		Bottle fragment - clear - no decoration		1
		Bottle fragment - clear - geometric design		1
		Bottle fragment - clear - threaded for screw-top	1950-present	1
		Window glass fragments - pale green - thin		13
		Miscellaneous:		
		Coal fragment - sample		1
		Cinder fragments - sample		4
		Faunal remains:		
		Mammal? bone fragment		1 46
Dark, hard-packed sandy earth	II-4	Metal:		
		Brass wire spring - one iron? core		1
		Nail - hand-cut	1790-1810	1
		Nails - heavily oxidized		5
		Misc. iron fragments		2
		Ceramics:		
		Tortoise ware - brown - Whieldon ware - Staffordshire	ca. 1760	1
		Creamware fragment - early	1775-1800	1
		Creamware fragments - late	1790-1830	3
		Porcelain fragment - pale pink glaze		1
		Porcelain tile - hexagonal	Late 19th-20th c.	1
		Tile fragments - red - roofing tile? or drainpipe? frags.	Late 19th c.	17
		Glass:		
		Bottle or decanter frags - "Bristol blue" - molded	1750-on...	2
		Vessel (wine glass?) fragment - diamond embossed	1760-1780	1
		Bottle fragment - pale green - thick		1
		Lead glass fragments - molded - thick	1800-1850	9
		Bead - red - faceted	1800-1850	1
		Bead - red - globular	1850-1900	1
		Window glass fragments - pale green - thin		9
		Window glass fragment - pale green - thick		1
		Miscellaneous:		
		Coal fragment - sample		1
		Concrete block fragment - 2x4 inch crosssection		1
		Faunal remains:		
		Mammal bone - tibia fragment		1
		Mammal bone - epiphysial fragment		1
		Mammal bone - long bone? fragments		4
		Hard shell clam (quahog) fragments		3 74

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Cat.No.</u>	<u>Specimens</u>	<u>Prob. Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>		
Black earth/coal mixture	II-5	Metal:				
		Nail fragment - hand-cut	Before 1790	1		
		Nail fragments		6		
		Screw & fragment of lead glass embedded in rust		1		
		Misc. iron fragments		6		
		Shotgun cartridge fragment - brass and cardboard	Late 19th-20th c.	1		
		Ceramics:				
		Redware fragment - with clear glaze	1680-1800	1		
		Redware fragments - unglazed	18th c.	4		
		Yellowware fragments - Staffordshire	1670-1750	3		
		Combware fragment - Staffordshire	1680-1770	1		
		Delft fragments - English	1720-1780	2		
		Salt glaze stoneware fragment - tan (used in bottles and jars)	1720-1770	1		
		Pearlware fragments - hand painted	1790-1810	3		
		Creamware fragments - late	1790-1830	4		
		Brick fragment - red		1		
		Glass:				
		Bottle fragments - heavy flint glass	1775-19th c.	5		
		Bottle fragments - heavy lead glass		2		
		Window glass fragments - pale green - thin		17		
				59		
		Brown earth - many cinders II-6	II-6	Metal:		
				Nails - oxidized		2
				Misc. iron fragments		9
				Ceramics:		
				Yellowware fragments - undecorated	1670-1750	13
				Combware fragment	1670-1775	1
Creamware fragments - late	1790-1830			14		
Porcelain fragments				3		
Clay pipestem fragment - Dutch - marked "GOUDA"	18th c.			1		
Tile fragments - red - roofing tile? or drainpipe? frags.				4		
Brick fragments - red				7		
Glass:						
Vessel fragment - diamond embossed	1760-1780			1		
Window glass fragments - early?				5		
Window glass fragments - thick				7		
Misc. glass fragments - clear				3		
Misc. glass fragment - green				1		
Faunal remains:						
Bird? bone fragment				1		
Hard shell clam (quahog) fragment - sample				1		
				73		

<u>Stratum</u>	<u>Cat.No.</u>	<u>Specimens</u>	<u>Prob. Date</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
Brown earth -fewer cinders	II-7	Metal:		
		Nail fragments - oxidized		6
		Ceramics:		
		Yellowware fragments	1670-1750	6
		Redware- clear glaze	1680-1800	8
		Creamware fragments - late	1790-1830	18
		Pearlware fragments - undecorated		3
		Pearlware fragments - hand painted		5
		Earthenware fragments - buff - unglazed		2
		Clay pipe bowl fragment - rouletted rim - molded face on front of bowl		1
		Clay pipestem fragment - 6/64" I.D.		1
		Porcelain doll head fragment - painted	1860-1890	1
		Tile fragments - red - roofing tile? or drainpipe? frags.		2
		Brick fragments - light orange - ca. 1½ x 3½ inch cross section	18th c. ?	2
		Brick fragments - red		12
		Glass:		
		Dish lid frags. & other pieces - clear - pressed glass	19th c.	7
		Pharmacy glass fragment	1800-1825	1
		Bottle fragment - clear - lead glass	Early 19th c. ?	1
		Window glass fragments - thin		7
		Window glass fragments - thick		27
		Misc. glass fragments		4
		Faunal remains		
		Pig tooth - canine		1
		Pig tooth - premolar		1
		Mammal bone fragments		11
		Bird? bone fragment		1
			128	
Brown earth - few cinders	II-8	Metal:		
		Misc. iron fragments		8
		Ceramics:		
		Yellowware fragments - undecorated	1670-1750	2
		Yellowware fragments - comb and scallop decoration	1670-1775	2
		Redware fragments	1680-1800	2
		Delft fragment - English	1660-1750	1
		Pearlware fragments - hand painted	1785-1800	2
		Creamware fragments - late	1790-1830	3
		Stoneware fragment - gray - salt glaze with brown Albany slip	1790-1850	1