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**HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES  
OF THE SEA BREEZE ESTATES SITE**

**CITY ISLAND, THE BRONX**

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February 1989

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# Historic and Cultural Resources of the Sea Breeze Estates Site on City Island in the Bronx

Prepared for Konheim and Ketcham, Inc.  
By Joan H. Geismar, PhD.

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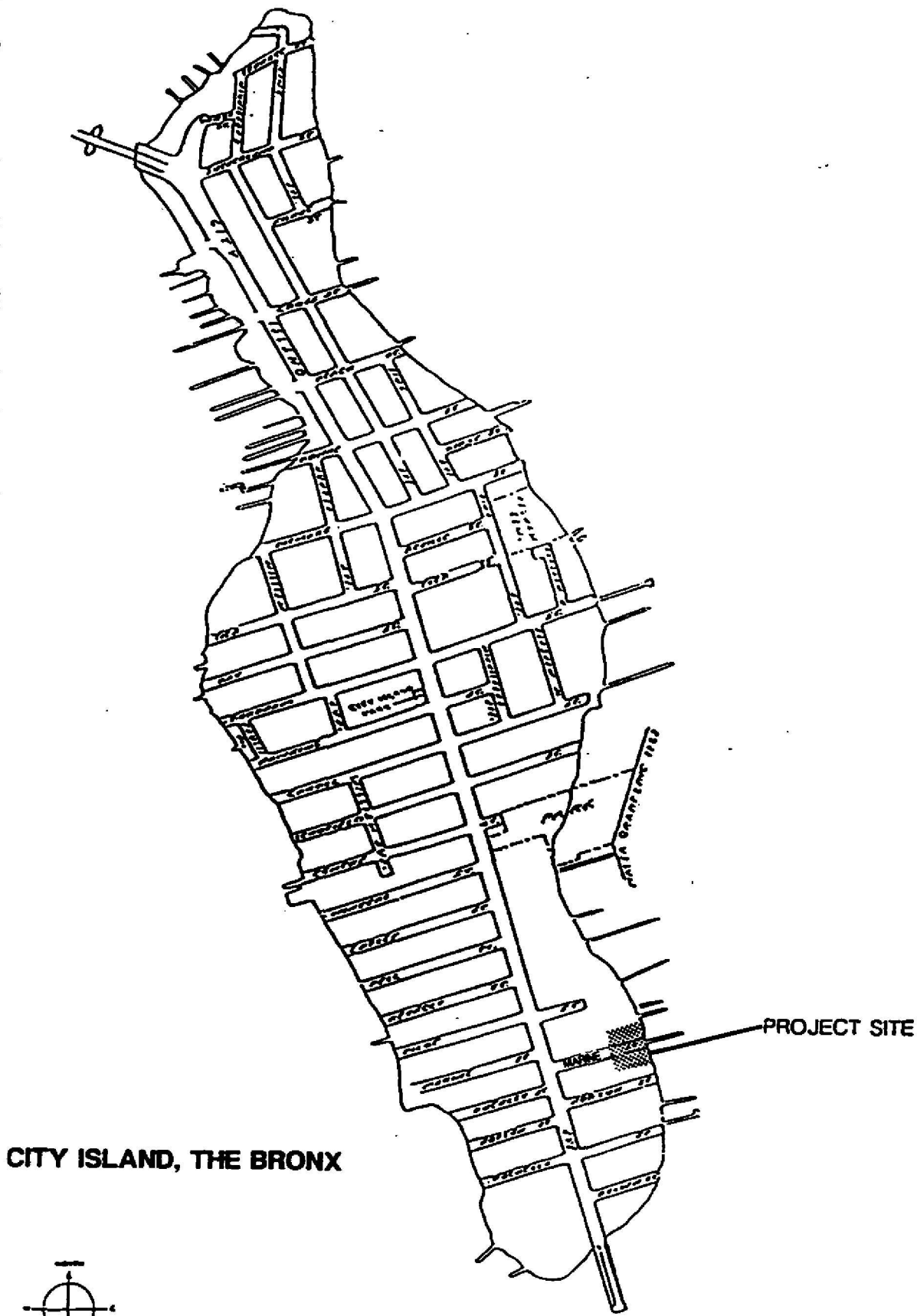
A preliminary documentary research was undertaken to assess historical significance and archaeological potential of the Sea Breeze Estates Site (see Figure 1, Location of Project Site). This assessment relied mainly on maps, printed sources, and, to a lesser degree, informal interviews with residents. In addition, the archaeological office of the New York State Museum was contacted to determine the number and whereabouts of any relevant prehistoric sites. And finally, the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission was consulted regarding the island's landmarked properties.

City Island comprises about 230 acres, is just over a mile and a half long and about one-half mile wide at its widest point, and is situated just off the Bronx shore, about 12 miles from Manhattan. Research indicated that although its settlement may have been contemporaneous with that of Dutch Nieuw Amsterdam in Manhattan, no development occurred on the project site until at least the third quarter of the nineteenth century. However, shell middens (discarded shells mixed with debris) recorded near, or conceivably on, the site document prehistoric use of the area and suggest that additional buried middens could be preserved within the site's boundaries. It should also be noted that the Grace Episcopal Church, located nearby on the southeast corner of the Pilot and City Island Avenue intersection, has been proposed as a city landmark although no action has been taken by the Landmarks Commission.

## A. Prehistory

Both the shore of the Bronx mainland and the offshore islands would have been attractive to Native American hunters and gatherers, and their presence is documented by known camp and shell midden sites and perhaps a nearby mainland Indian trail (Baer 1946: 83). Payne, in her book on City Island called "Tales of the Clam Diggers," tells us it was originally settled by the Siwanoy Indians, a branch of the Mohicans of the Algonquin tribe (Payne 1968:6). However, these tribal affiliations do not encompass the millennia of possible Native American use that predate these associations.

Even though extensive burial areas and shell heaps are documented in the northern part of Manhattan (Skinner 1915) and the southern part of Staten Island (Jacobson 1980), there is no archaeological evidence for the permanent structures in the



**FIGURE 1**  
**LOCATION OF PROJECT SITE**



prehistoric period that characterize the Native American "villages" known in the historic period, after European contact. Aboriginal settlement prior to this in the New York metropolitan area is problematic (Ceci 1977; 1988: personal communication). In this area, the most commonly found evidence of the prehistoric Native American presence are shell middens and seasonally revisited camps, as well as isolated artifacts lost in hunting or the debris from their manufacture (e.g. Bolton 1934).

According to the records of the New York State Museum, two shell midden sites are documented on or just north of the project site (Wellman 1989:personal communication). Based on this information and the site's setting, the New York State Museum considers the project area to have a higher than average probability of producing prehistoric data. Given past development, which includes a large, now-demolished commercial structure on the north side of Marine Street, it appears that the site's southern portion may have the greatest archaeological potential. However, this structure did not have a basement, and a site visit in February 1989 revealed the presence of 10 to 12 feet of rock rubble introduced along the shore. Therefore, buried evidence for prehistoric use may be found where it is preserved under building rubble or rock deposits throughout the site. Soil borings would help determine the likelihood of finding this kind of buried material.

#### B. Historical Considerations

It is possible that settlement by Scandinavian and German fisherman may have occurred as early as 1624 (Waite 1987:6), but this is questionable. One of the first references to what was then called Minnewits or Manuring Island dates to 1654. At that time the Dutch in New Amsterdam considered it a good place to intercept the English pirates who were plaguing the area, and taxes were levied on all the Dutch towns to finance ships to guard the island (Stokes IV 1922:145). In fact, this may have been a political move to hamper infiltration by the English: in this same year an Englishman, Thomas Pell, received an Indian deed for 9,160 acres that included land now in Pelham Bay Park as well as the adjacent off-shore islands (Baer 1946:13). Through this deed, Pell acquired a strategic stronghold in Dutch territory (although he built a house on the mainland, his primary residence was in English-held Connecticut). The Dutch did not look kindly upon this English presence which included several New England families, and there are those who feel Pell's purchase was instrumental to the English takeover that occurred in 1664 (Baer 1946:12-28).

Whatever his motives, Pell retained his property despite a 1655 writ of rejection issued by the Dutch (Payne 1969:6), and it was officially granted by English treaty in 1664. Although a Pell relative may have sold the island in 1688 (Payne 1969:6),

the Pells were the grantees when it finally was sold out of the family in 1749. After this, it repeatedly changed hands (and its name) until 1761 when it was purchased by Benjamin Palmer who envisioned its development into a port to rival New York City (just about a century later, August Belmont and his cronies supposedly considered another grandiose but unrealized plan to create a retreat for the rich that was to include a race track over most of the island [Baer 1946: 86]). Palmer named it City Island, reflecting his dream, and subdivided it into thirty equal parts, keeping four for himself but selling the rest to several fellow proprietors. Each part comprised 25 by 100 ft. house lots for a total of 4,500 possible subdivisions plus areas reserved for public and religious use (Baer 1946:82). In 1763, he acquired the water lot rights to all but the northern end of the island that the city has since sought unsuccessfully to regain.

At least in part because of the Revolutionary War, Palmer's vision was never realized. During the War, the island was controlled by the British (Baer 1946:82) but was considered a "no-man's land" because of constant raiding by both the British and the Americans (McNamara 1965). Following the War, the island was populated by farmers, oystermen, and ship's pilots, and properties continued to change hands. In 1819, a long-standing ownership was established in the project area when the island's southern 42 acres, including the project site, were purchased by Captain George Washington Horton. Horton built a home south of the project site, and many of the island's streets, including Marine and Pilot Streets in the project area, are supposedly named for his children or their occupations (Payne 1969:11).

In 1763, a ferry linked the island with the Westchester County mainland (now the Bronx), and three years later another went to Hempstead, Long Island. In 1804, a plan was proposed but never implemented to build a bridge, and it was not until 1873 that a toll bridge was finally erected (Jenkins 1912:428-429). Supposedly built from timbers taken from the U.S. frigate North Carolina dismantled in David Carll's ship yard, the bridge was made free either when the Bronx, and with it City Island, was annexed to New York in 1895 (Jenkins 1912:429) or perhaps before this, when it was taken over by Westchester County in 1876 (Baer 1946:84). The City Island Avenue bridge is now the island's only land connection.

Jenkins, in his Story of the Bronx, notes that until the creation of Pelham Bay Park in 1888, and the advent of the bicycle, City Island remained remote with its inhabitants mainly engaged in fishing, piloting, and oyster culture (Jenkins 1912:430). However, pleasure ship and boat building and many attendant trades had appeared after the Revolutionary War (Baer 1946:86-87), and by 1835, the above-mentioned David Carll had taken over a successful yard just north of the project site that he continued to operate until 1870.

In addition to the ship yards, several non-related industries developed in the nineteenth century. Among them were a short-lived solar salt manufacturing plant built in the 1830s on the eastern shore, north of the project site (Baer 1946:85), and an oyster industry that is said to have instituted oyster culturing (the planting of beds) in America (Payne 1968:11). The island's oyster industry endured until it was destroyed by pollution and politics in this century. Sail making developed in the mid-nineteenth century, but the island's major industry, and a justifiable claim to fame, was the ship building that persisted until fairly recently. Pleasure yachts of the rich and several nineteenth and twentieth century America's Cup winners were constructed on the island; during both the First and Second World Wars, the yards built minor war vessels and other craft for the navy (Baer 1946:87). Now those few that remain, including the Triboro Industries Marine Service Boat Yard currently on the project site, mainly do repairs.

While Marine Street immediately west of the site contains a fine group of large residences, some of them dating to the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Stuttig 1989: personal communication), development of the project site has been almost exclusively industrial. Based on map data, sometime between 1872 (Figure 2, Beers 1872) and 1893 (Figure 3, Sanborn 1893), a ship yard developed on the north side of the site. These data also indicate that the project area was owned by G. W. Horton and then D. Carll (at least on the north side of what was formerly Franklyn Avenue, now Marine Street) in the 1870s. By 1893, the boat yard of Augustus B. Wood & Son was located on the northern side of the street (then still Franklyn Avenue) and the eastern part of its south side. Both the 1893 and 1918 Sanborns indicate a two-story dwelling where the Triboro Industries building now stands.

Over the past century, the site has been built upon, but the most intrusive construction was the City Island Yacht Basin storage and repair building documented on the north side of Marine Street sometime after 1935 (Figure 4, Sanborn 1935). This large, earthen-floored boat shed entirely covered this part of the site (its location is clearly identified by the remaining ground depression). On the southern side of the street, construction was less extensive, particularly in the eastern portion where the only map-documented structure was a now-defunct, two-story (and attic) boat shop indicated on the 1893 Sanborn and, in a reduced form, on the 1905 Topographical Survey of the Eastern Bronx (Plate 43) (Figure 5). Depending on the depth to natural soil, these data suggest the chance of sub-surface disturbance on the south side of Marine Street is less than on the north side.

In 1763, apparently as part of his development plan, Benjamin Palmer commissioned a survey that plotted the extent of

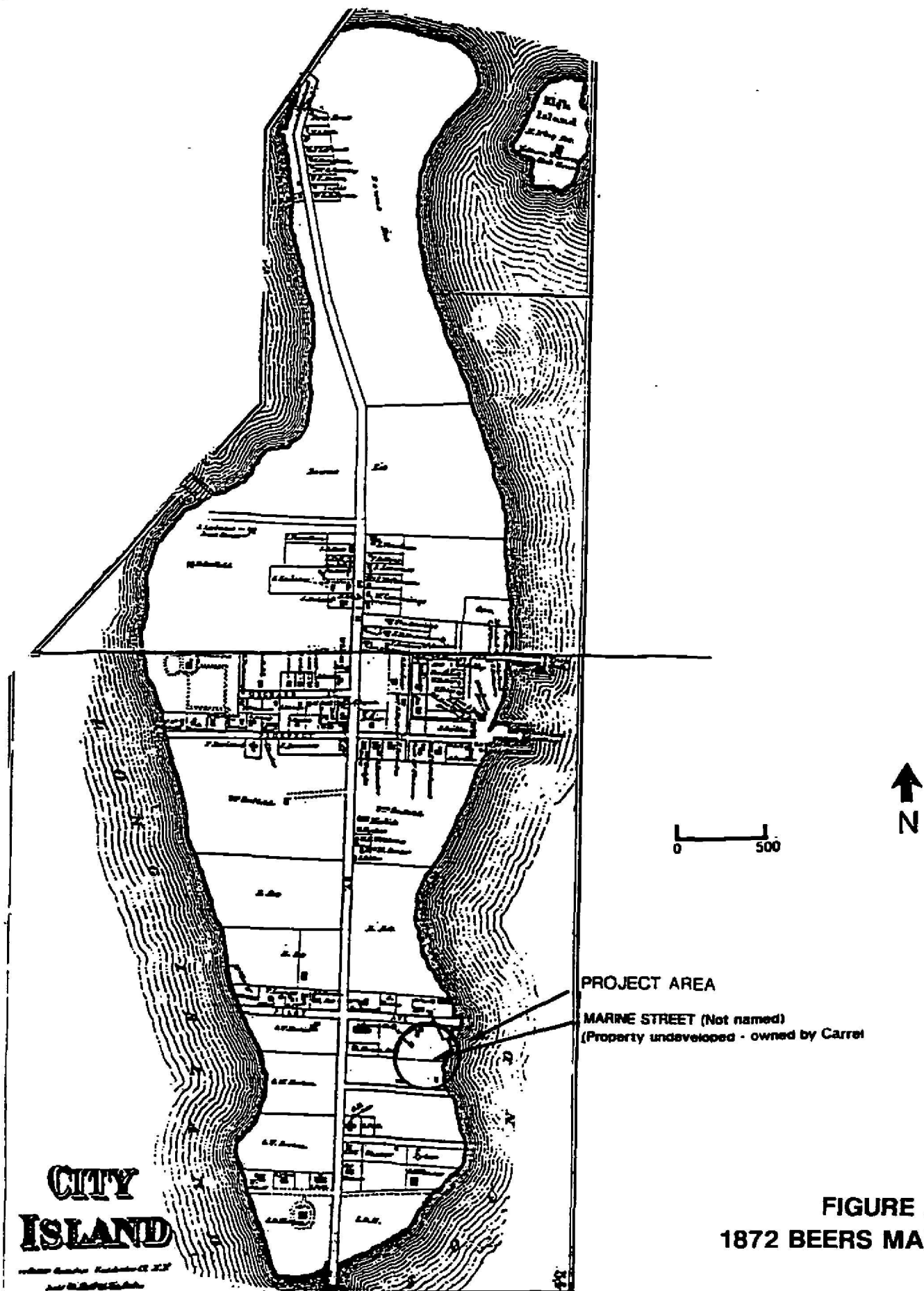


FIGURE 2  
1872 BEERS MAP

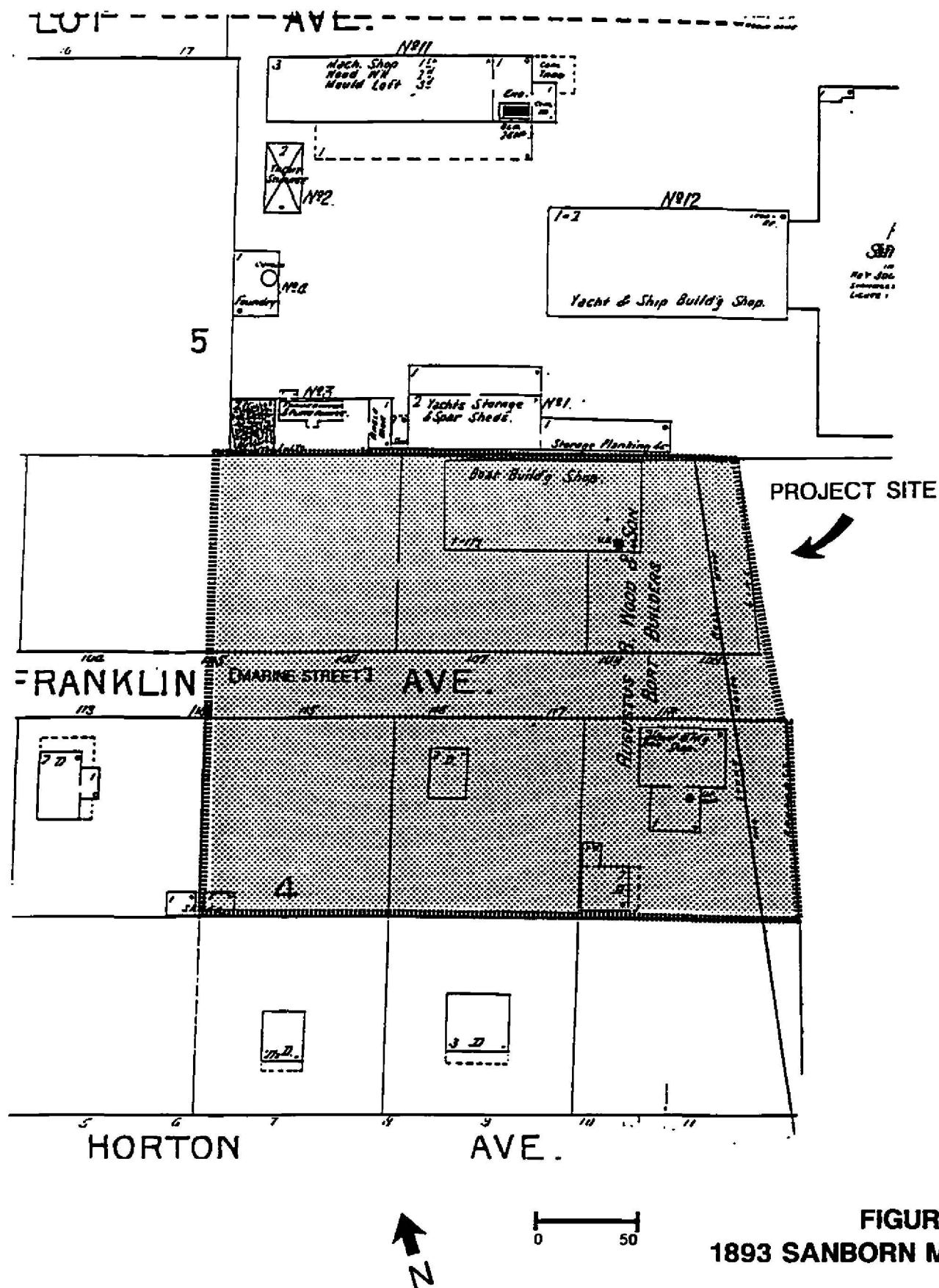


FIGURE 3  
1893 SANBORN MAP



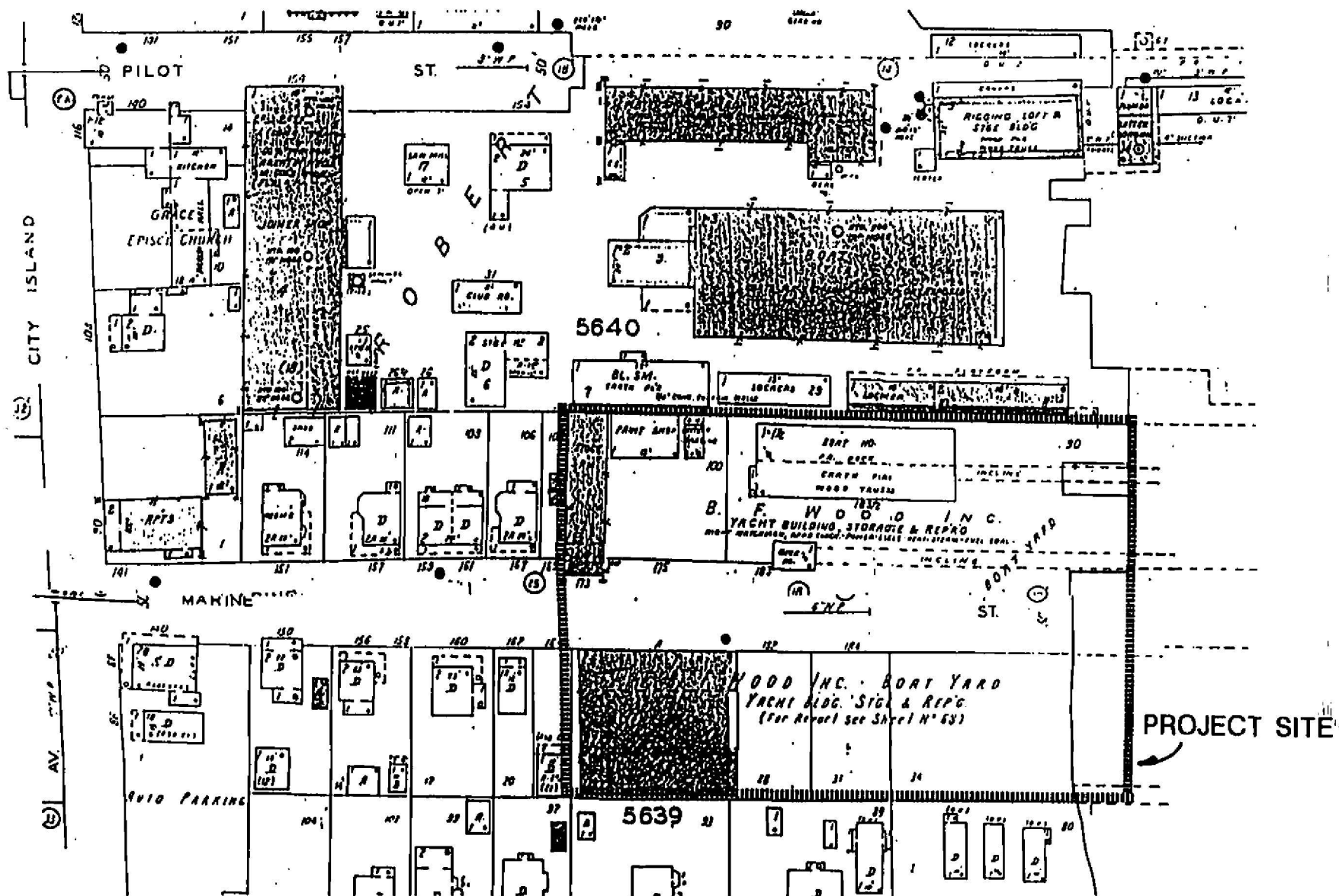
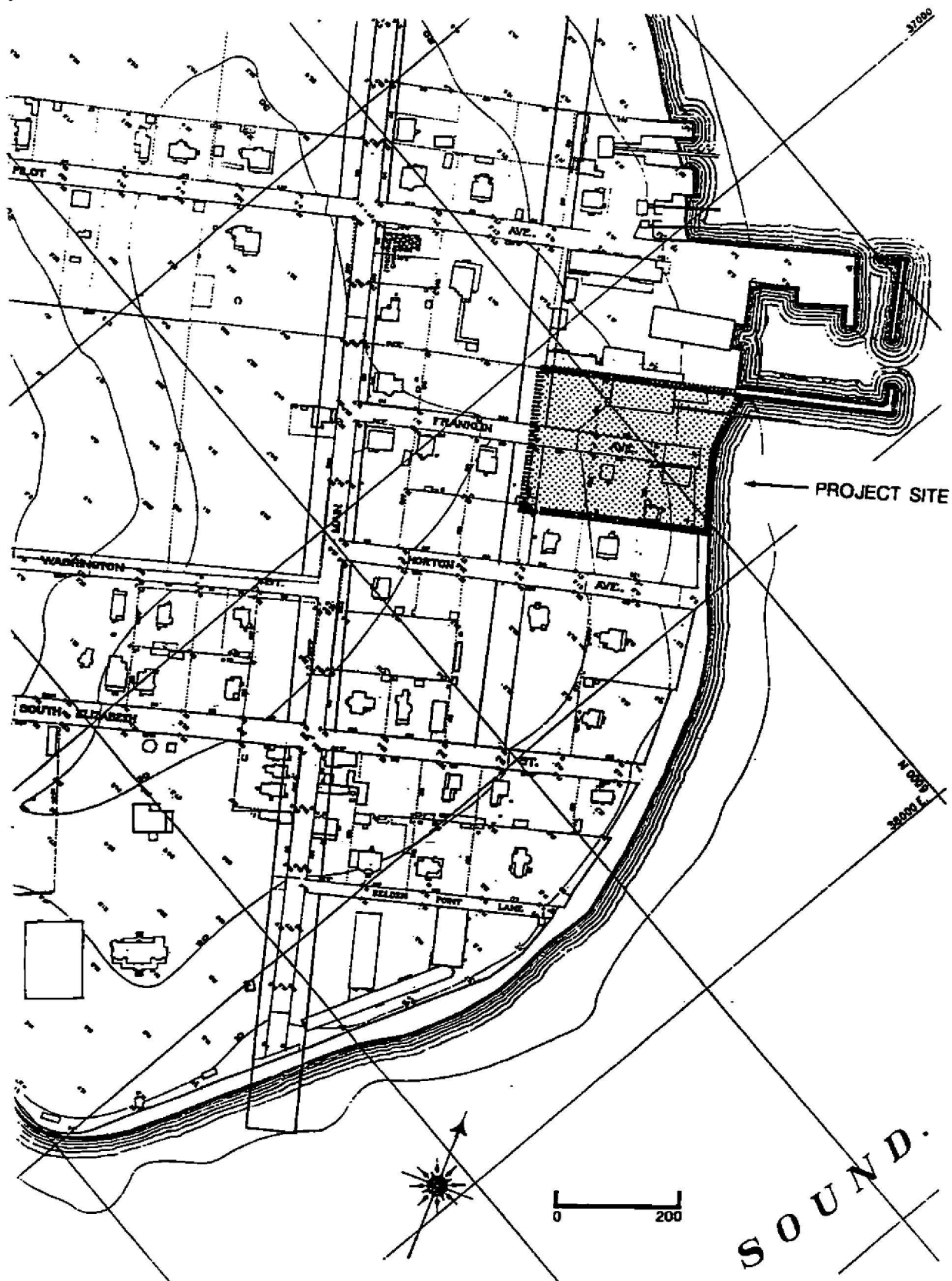


FIGURE 4  
1935 SANBORN MAP



**FIGURE 5**  
**1905 TOPOGRAPHICAL SURVEY OF THE BRONX**

his water lot grant as well as the island (Figure 6, A. Colden 1763). Based on this and subsequent map data (Figure 7, 1987 Tax Map), the island's configuration has apparently undergone some change on the project site (compare Colden 1763; Topographical Survey of the Bronx 1905; Tax Map 1987). Its original shoreline terrain has also been graded up as evidenced by approximately 10 to 12 feet of rock debris currently rising above the beach.

#### C. Landmark Considerations

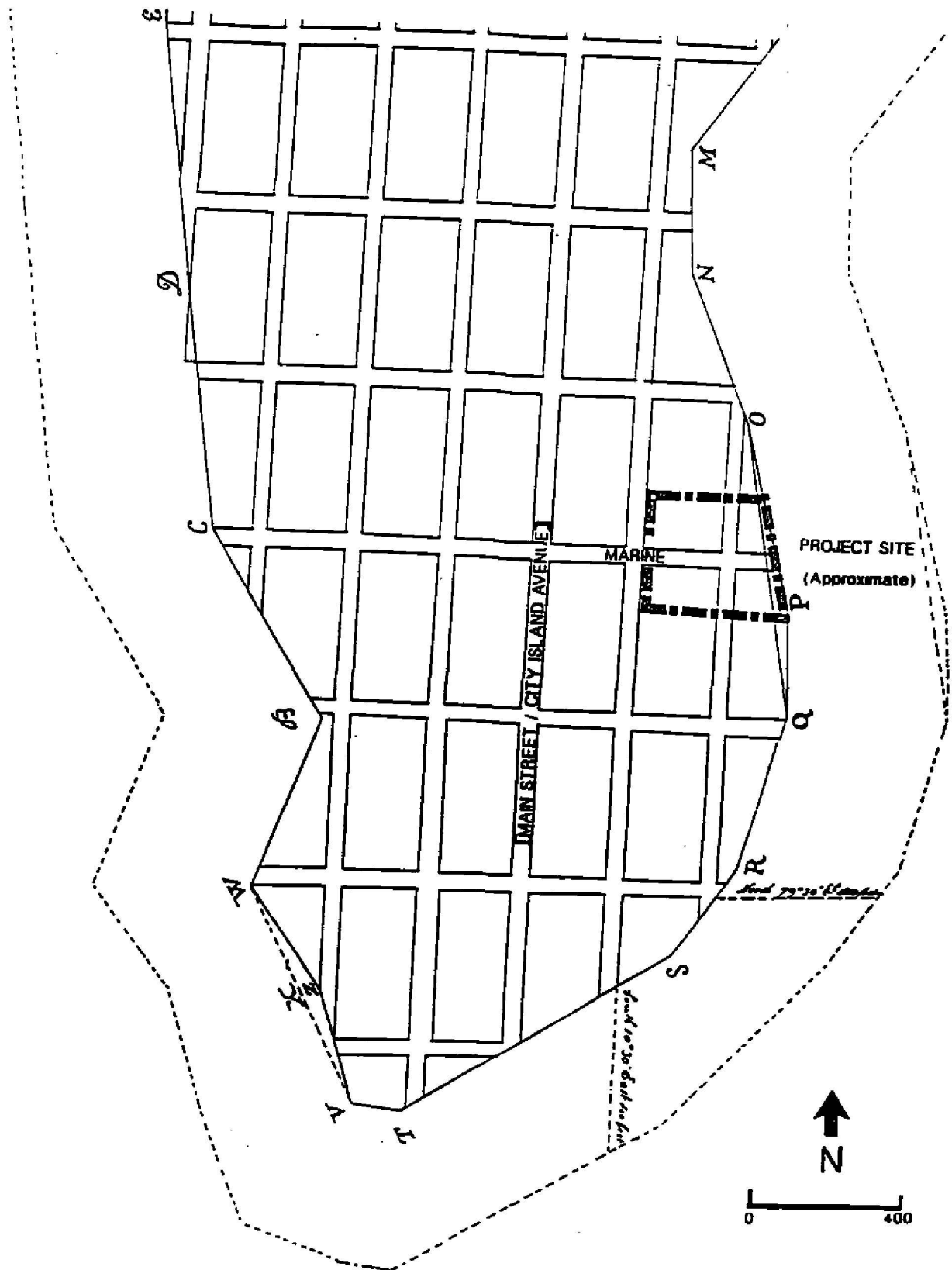
The only City Island structure designated a New York City Landmark is located south of the project site at 175 Belden Street. Designated in July 1981, this Victorian cottage is believed to date from about 1880 and is considered one of the most noteworthy structures on the island (from the designation report as quoted by Kurshan 1989:personal communication). One of New York City's few surviving cottages, it appears to have been inspired by the many architectural pattern books printed in the last half of the nineteenth century, and it is felt that a prototype appears in Bicknell's Victorian Architecture published in 1878 (cited in Diamonstein 1988:172).

In 1976, the New York City Department of City Planning produced a report entitled, "City Island: Proposals for an Island Community" that indicated the Landmark's Commission was considering four properties for designation (interestingly, the 175 Belden Street building was not one of them). These were the Pell Mansion on Kilroe Street, Trinity Methodist Church on Bay Street and City Island Avenue, and the Pelham Cemetery east of King Avenue near Reville Street--all well north of the site. Just to the northwest, on the southeast corner of the Pilot Street and City Island Avenue intersection, is the Grace Episcopal Church, the fourth recommended property. The church was built on land donated by George Washington Horton in 1863; nine years later, his son, Stephen, donated the land for the rectory next door (Baer 1946:85). But, as noted above, at this writing, none of these properties has been considered for Landmark status.

#### D. Conclusions

Since it is possible that prehistoric materials such as shell middens may be buried on the site, particularly on the south side of Marine Street, measures will have to be taken to determine the archaeological potential of the project area. This would initially entail a soil boring program to determine the depth to natural soil and other sub-surface conditions. Based on this information, archaeological testing might be recommended, as well as more detailed documentation that would refine the initial research.





**FIGURE 6**  
**1763 A. COLDEN SURVEY**

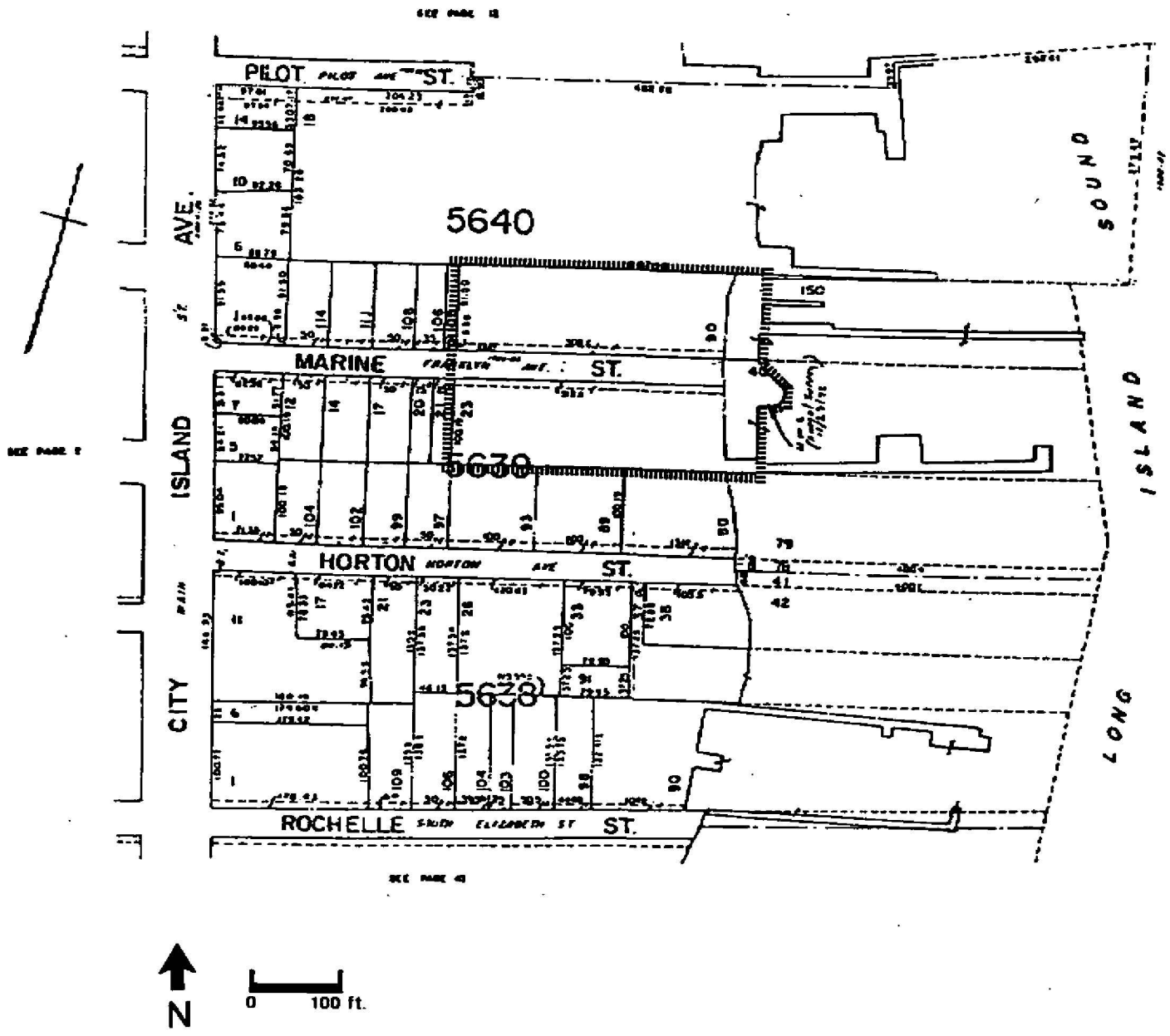


FIGURE 7  
 1987 TAX MAP

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