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SEQR-m

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Matthew Stanley

FROM: Sara Smithson
Edward Applebome

RE: East River Plaza
Stage IB Archaeological Examination

DATE: January 13, 1999

SEQR-m

Enclosed for your submission to the New York State Historic Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Places (OPRHP), please find a copy of the Stage IB Archaeological Examination for the 527 and 529 East 118th Street site. This investigation identified no artifacts of interest and concludes that no further testing for the East 118th Street site is necessary. The fieldwork for the East 119th Street site will be undertaken at a later date.

Please let us know whether you have any questions.

RECEIVED
ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

MAR 10 1999

LANDMARKS PRESERVATION
COMMISSION

cc: David Blumenfeld
Jesse Masyr
Howard Goldman
Rosemary Ginty
Aaron Greenberg

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Stage 1B Archaeological Examination

527 and 529 East 118th Street

East River Plaza Site

Manhattan



Stage 1B Archaeological Examination
527 and 529 East 118th Street
East River Plaza Site
Manhattan

Prepared For:
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December 1998

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INTRODUCTION

The East River Plaza Project site is located on a 4.7 acre parcel east of Pleasant Avenue and west of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) Drive between East 116th and 119th Streets in Manhattan (Figure 1). The proposed development of the project site would entail the demolition of standing buildings and the construction of a retail complex. At present, there are several empty industrial/commercial structures as well as open lots. The surface of the open lots is covered by a large amount of modern trash as well as architectural debris.

A preliminary archaeological assessment conducted by Historical Perspectives, Inc. during September 1998 found that two areas of the overall project site had potential for the presence of below-ground cultural material (Kearns and Saunders 1998; Figure 2). The report identified these portions of the proposed site as having the potential to contain archaeological resources specifically associated with the nineteenth century residential community and the native American occupation of this portion of Manhattan.

At this time only one of the locales identified as sensitive was tested. Two archaeologists conducted the field testing program at 527 and 529 East 118th Street over a period of one day. Preliminary research, as documented in the Stage 1A Report, found that the lots at 527 and 529 East 118th Street were potentially sensitive for below ground cultural material dating from the period between c.1870 and c.1935. Prior to the introduction of public utilities in the mid 1930s, the rear yards of these lots would have been the likely location for any residential shaft features (privies, wells, and cisterns) which have the potential to provide a wealth of information regarding the residents of the project site.

Because documentary evidence does not securely constitute "ground truth," Stage 1B archaeological testing is designed to verify or deny the conclusions of the initial assessment by establishing the actual presence or absence of cultural resources on the site. In order to accomplish this task, field investigations were undertaken during November 1998. Testing was not conducted in locations where known disturbance had occurred from construction activity. At this time, Historical Perspectives, Inc. was not asked to test the final lot determined to be sensitive in the Stage 1A report, located at 546 East 119th Street, adjacent to the FDR Drive.

HISTORICAL SETTING

The East River Plaza project site area is located a few blocks west of the East River between East 118th Street and East 119th Street (see Figure 1). Eighteenth and early nineteenth century maps indicate that the topography of the area consisted of irregular hills or ridges surrounded by waterlogged tracts. These maps depict the subject lots as being located on the shoreline of the East River with a ridge running along the western edge.

The topography of the project area has changed because of the intentional landfilling along the shoreline of the East River and the imposition of the City's street grid system on the landscape. The desire for new commercial/industrial waterfront real estate spurred this landfilling activity along the coastline of the East River. Many of the former hills dotting the landscape were cut down and the soils used as fill. In fact, the former ridge, located adjacent to the project site, was removed. By the middle of the nineteenth century a few structures had been built on the current study block (Block 1815) and the development of this area continued until a mixed neighborhood of residential and industrial buildings filled the landscape. To the east of the two-story residential structures built on 527 and 529 East 118th Street between 1851 and 1867, is the industrial complex. From c. 1870 to c. 1896 this portion of the project site was occupied by the Johnson Foundry & Machine Co. Iron Works. Sometime after 1911, it was purchased by the Washburn Wire Company, which also occupied the eastern ends of Blocks 1715 and 1716 to the south.

In 1935 the Mayor of New York applied to the Public Works Authority for funds to construct the East Side Drive (Buttenwieser 1987: 180). Instead of an aesthetic showpiece, plans were drawn up to build a road for continuous fast traffic. Construction began within a few months and the road was completed in sections after many years. Although the project site was formerly located on the shoreline, landfilling, and the construction of the now named FDR Drive, have effectively eliminated the traces of this early landscape.

A recent U.S.G.S. topographical map shows the project area as a well defined urban industrial/residential neighborhood at an elevation of approximately 10 feet above sea level (see Figure 1).

FIELD METHODOLOGY

The preliminary archaeological assessment of the East River Plaza site identified the lots at 527 and 529 East 118th Street as sensitive for historical resources (Kearns and Saunders 1998; Figure 2). The area to be tested, located on the East Side of Manhattan, is bounded by the structure and rear lot at 525 East 118th Street to the west, portions of the lots at 524 and 528 East 119th Street to the North, the standing structures on the East River Plaza Project Site to the east, and East 118th Street to the south (see Figure 1).

The results of soil boring tests conducted at the site were examined in order to more clearly understand the soil strata. This information was also used to aid in the determination of the depth of backhoe excavation that would allow for the recovery of possible intact features or the former yard surface. Cartographic research conducted during the initial assessment, indicated that the buildings formerly located at 527 and 529 East 118th Street had basements, which narrowed the focus of the below ground exploration.

The Stage 1B archaeological testing of the lots determined to be sensitive for buried cultural resources took place during November 1998. The site was divided into two areas of investigation corresponding to the street address of the residential Lots. This enabled the archaeologists to determine if there were any differences between the soil strata and/or materials recovered from within each lot.

The primary objective of Phase 1B testing was to ascertain the presence, or absence, and nature of any buried cultural resources on the site. In order to achieve this goal, a number of field procedures were undertaken at the site that are briefly described as follows: 1) the excavation trench within the site was outlined and mapped out (field investigations were restricted to those areas identified in the earlier assessment); 2) the gravel and surface trash was taken off; and 3) a large amount of fill (overburden) was removed.

In order to facilitate the examination of the site, a backhoe was used to remove the surface gravel and trash as well as the overburden (fill) and architectural debris that was present within each lot. The goal was to expose any intact historical yard surfaces and/or features within the sensitive location. Based on the information from soil borings, the depth of fill and/or historical materials extended approximately 4 to 8 feet below the surface. This information allowed field archaeologists to direct the backhoe operator to remove only shallow increments of soil when nearing the location of a possible buried yard surface.

During testing, field archaeologists directed the backhoe operator to remove only shallow increments of soil when nearing the location of a possible buried yard surface. When distinct soil changes were encountered, subsurface archaeological testing confirmed these changes by shovel shaving a portion of the stratum in order to record an accurate description. In areas where twentieth century features were encountered, subsurface archaeological testing concentrated on identifying and exposing them by shovel shaving. These identified features were assessed in order to determine if further archaeological examination was warranted. No

features or evidence of an intact nineteenth century yard surface were encountered in either back lot. All identifiable artifacts found in the fill, including bottles, ceramic fragments, plastics, architectural materials (brick, mortar, window glass, and unidentified nails), and other formless metal objects) were noted in the field. The appropriate drawings and photographs were made of each of the test areas and soil strata during the course of fieldwork.

RESULTS OF INVESTIGATIONS

On Monday November 2, 1998 field testing at the East River Plaza site in Manhattan commenced. A crew of two archaeologists completed the fieldwork phase of the project over a period of one day. In order to expedite the examination of the site a backhoe was used to remove the surface gravel, large concrete road dividers, and the fill layers that were present and expose any features within the portion of the site considered archaeologically sensitive. The testing area was divided in half allowing for the examination of each rear lot separately.

Trench A (527 East 118th Street)

The first area examined was the northern or rear portion of a residential lot that was formerly the backlot of 527 East 118th Street. At the start of the examination, the lot was covered with gravel, architectural debris, and modern trash. At one point in the lot's history it was utilized as a parking facility and signs indicating the parking space numbers were partially visible along the boundary. In addition, several large concrete road dividers were found along the western edge of the lot adjacent to a wire fence. The northernmost portion of the lot was found to be bounded by a cement wall outlining the below ground entry into the building located at 524 East 119th Street. In addition, a modern monitoring well and large metal trash barrels are located in the northern section of this lot (Photograph 1).

Initial plans called for the excavation of approximately 50 feet of the northernmost section of this lot identified as Trench A. The presence of the concrete dividers along the west boundary and the cement retaining wall at the northern edge of the lot necessitated limiting the excavation area by leaving a four to five foot border on the north and west property lines.

After the removal of the surface gravel and deposits, a thick fill level was encountered (Figure 3). Continued excavation revealed a significant fill layer that contained a large amount of building debris and twentieth century artifacts (bottles and jars with modern plastic twist tops, Perrier Water bottles, plastic pipe fragments, plastic game pieces, electrical wire, brick fragments, a variety of plastic containers and bottles, and modern whiteware). Only a few nineteenth century ceramic fragments were noted from this mixed context. The soil was a very dark grayish brown silty sand that was very compact. Following the removal of approximately 30-40 centimeters of fill, Level 2 was encountered. A dark yellowish brown silty sand, this stratum contained fewer artifacts. The majority noted, however, also dated to the twentieth century. Modern glass bottles, PVC pipe fragments, a large fragment of a plastic bag, flower pot fragments, and a modern plastic fork were identified.

At a depth of approximately two feet below the surface, a series of connecting flagstones were encountered. Near the northern end of the lot, only a few flagstones were still in place. They belonged to a former pathway termination, or possible patio at the end of the backlot. In the eastern portion of the lot, a large section of these dressed stones was exposed via shovel-shaving (Photograph 2). The stones were identified as being a section of a longer

pathway running north-south through the eastern portion of the lot from the former residence to the rear patio location. The pathway, a little over one-half of a meter wide (1 3/4 feet), was comprised of a line of stones bordered on both sides by upended dressed stones. The remains of a former iron water pipe, also running north-south, was discovered on top of part of the flagstones. A portion of the path was disturbed by the installation of the monitoring well, and is no longer present.

A section of the path was dismantled in order to adequately examine the soils below this feature. After the removal of the flagstones, a small layer of fill, less than four centimeters deep, was encountered. This fill level was identical to Level 2. Only a few brick chips and one spall of clear glass was noted in this layer. Excavation continued and encountered a new stratum, identified as Level 3, a strong brown very fine silty sand subsoil (Figure 3; Photograph 3). No artifacts were recovered from this level. It appears as though the individual(s) responsible for the installation of the pathways may have cleared the back lot down to subsoil prior to their construction.

Excavation by backhoe continued in the lot and the archaeologists found no evidence of the presence of a former intact yard surface or any historic features relating to the pre- 1930s residential occupation of the project site. Excavation was halted at a depth of c. 110 centimeters below the surface, just above the current water table.

Trench B (529 East 118th Street)

The second area examined was the northern or rear portion of a residential lot that was formerly the backlot of 529 East 118th Street. At the start of the examination, the lot was covered with gravel, architectural debris, a large pile of mixed debris, soils, and gravel, as well as modern trash. This lot had also once been utilized as a parking facility and painted parking space numbers were partially visible on the brick structure located on the east side of the project lot (Photograph 4).

Initial plans also called for the excavation of approximately 50 feet of the northernmost section of this lot identified as Trench B. The presence of the brick building along the eastern boundary and a portion of the cement retaining wall at the northern edge of the lot necessitated limiting the excavation area by leaving a four to five foot border on the north and east property lines.

After the removal of the surface gravel and deposits, a thick fill level was encountered (Figure 3, Photograph 5). Continued excavation revealed that the fill layer contained a large amount of building debris and twentieth century artifacts. Only a few nineteenth century ceramic fragments were noted from this mixed context. Although this level was similar to Level 1 in Trench A, there was a significant ash content that had not been present in the adjacent trench. In fact, several ash lenses were found throughout this fill layer. The artifacts noted in the fill included plastic bottles, glass bottles with modern plastic twist tops, PVC pipe fragments, electrical wire, bricks and brick fragments, and large unidentified iron fragments. The soil was a very dark gray coarse sand mottled with ash and very compact. The ash

content decreased in the southern part of Trench B.

Following the removal of approximately 35 centimeters of fill in the northern section of the trench a thin soil layer was encountered under Level 1 (Figure 3). This stratum, identified in Trench B as Level 2, was a pale brown sand layer that contained no artifacts. It was only present in the northern eight meters of the trench. Near the northern edge of the trench, approximately two feet below the surface, another series of connecting flagstones was encountered. As in Trench A, a patio, or path terminus was found at the northern end of the lot. Many of these flagstones were no longer in place. Level 3 was encountered at a depth of 40 centimeters below the surface. This level was identical to Level 2 found in Trench A. In the eastern portion of the lot, another path, running north-south was discovered, approximately one meter east of the path discovered in Trench A. Again a large section of these dressed stones was exposed via shovel-shaving (Photograph 6). This pathway, also a little over one-half of a meter wide (1 3/4 feet), was constructed in the same manner as the one in Trench A.

The backhoe was used to expose as much of the flagstone path as possible. It was discovered that another patio was present at the southern end of the path adjacent to the former residence. A large stone, which may have been the bottom step of a rear entry was still in place (Figure 4; Photograph 7). A section of the path discovered in Trench B was also dismantled in order to examine the soils below and compare them with Trench A. After the removal of the flagstones, a small layer of fill, less than three centimeters deep, was encountered. This fill level was identical to Level 3 except that no artifacts were recovered. A portion of a third flagstone pathway, running north-south, was also discovered near the eastern edge of the lot. This path was constructed slightly different, as it only had a single line of flagstones with no border stones. Because of the proximity to the brick building only a small section of this path was exposed. As with the other paths, the stones were found to be placed almost directly on top of the subsoil, identified in this trench as Level 4, a strong brown fine silty sand. No artifacts were recovered from this layer.

Excavation revealed no evidence of the presence of a former pre-1930s intact yard surface or any historic features relating to the residential occupation of the house during the late nineteenth century. Excavation was halted at a depth of c. 115 centimeters below the surface, just above the current water table.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there was potential for the survival of material dating to the late nineteenth century residential occupation of the site, only the remains of mid-twentieth century features were found to be present at 527 and 529 East 118th Street in the East River Plaza site . Because the two residential structures were built prior to the introduction of public utilities, the presence of back yard features, including privies, wells, and trash pits was expected. If any of these remains were at one time present at the site, they were obliterated by subsequent rear yard construction or the grading of the yard for the installation of the flagstone pathways.

When the two residences were standing, it appears that a significant amount of grading took place in order to create a level surface for the flagstone paving. The absence of a clear defined layer of soils containing nineteenth or early twentieth century materials indicates that this grading likely took place during the second quarter of the twentieth century. The residents may have connected the two homes to a patio at the northern edge of the property and were perhaps the ornamental borders to a back yard garden. The stones were dressed and their placement in the yard was likely a labor intensive activity (see Photographs 2, 6, and 7). It is clear that they were constructed in a single episode when both buildings were occupied or owned jointly (Figure 4).

The artifacts recovered in the fill represent a variety of domestic, commercial, and industrial activities. A large amount of twentieth century trash was noted including bottles with twist tops, aluminum cans, modern wire nails, window glass, plastic, and architectural fragments (brick, mortar). The assemblage reflects a date range from the nineteenth century (ironstone whiteware) to the late twentieth century (modern water bottles) within the same stratum. Because there is no record of how much fill originated within the site and how much was brought in, no accurate conclusions regarding the site residents can be made. Similar characteristics of the fill were observed in both of the trenches examined indicating that these soils with associated rubble may have been deposited at the time of the demolition of the buildings during the twentieth century. The upper layers of fill may have been introduced when the site was graded for use as a parking lot.

No traces of the nineteenth century yard surface were present in the rear lots at 527 and 529 East 118th Street. Therefore, no further archaeological consideration is necessary for this portion of the East River Plaza site.

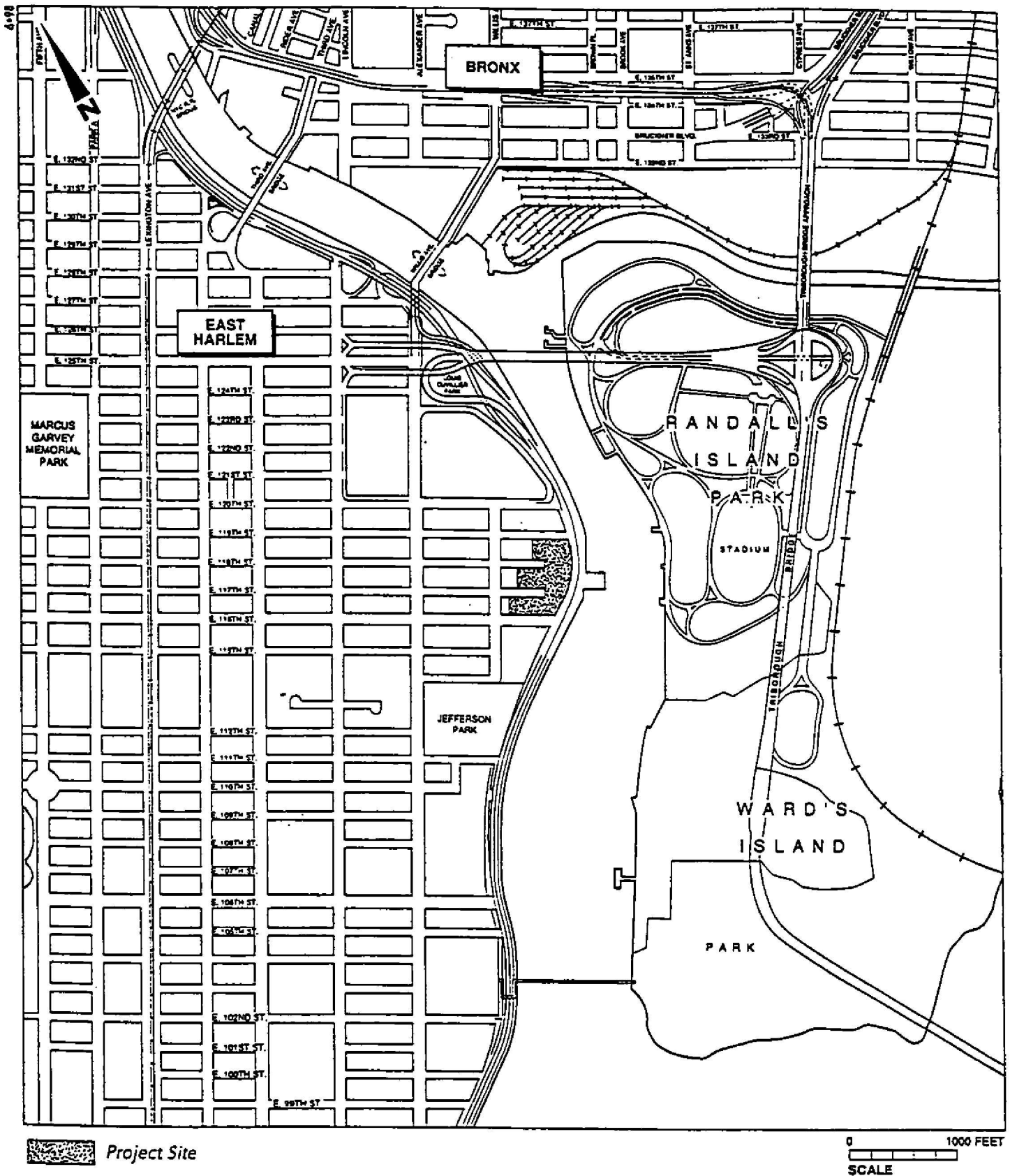
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1987 *Manhattan Waterbound*. New York University Press, New York.

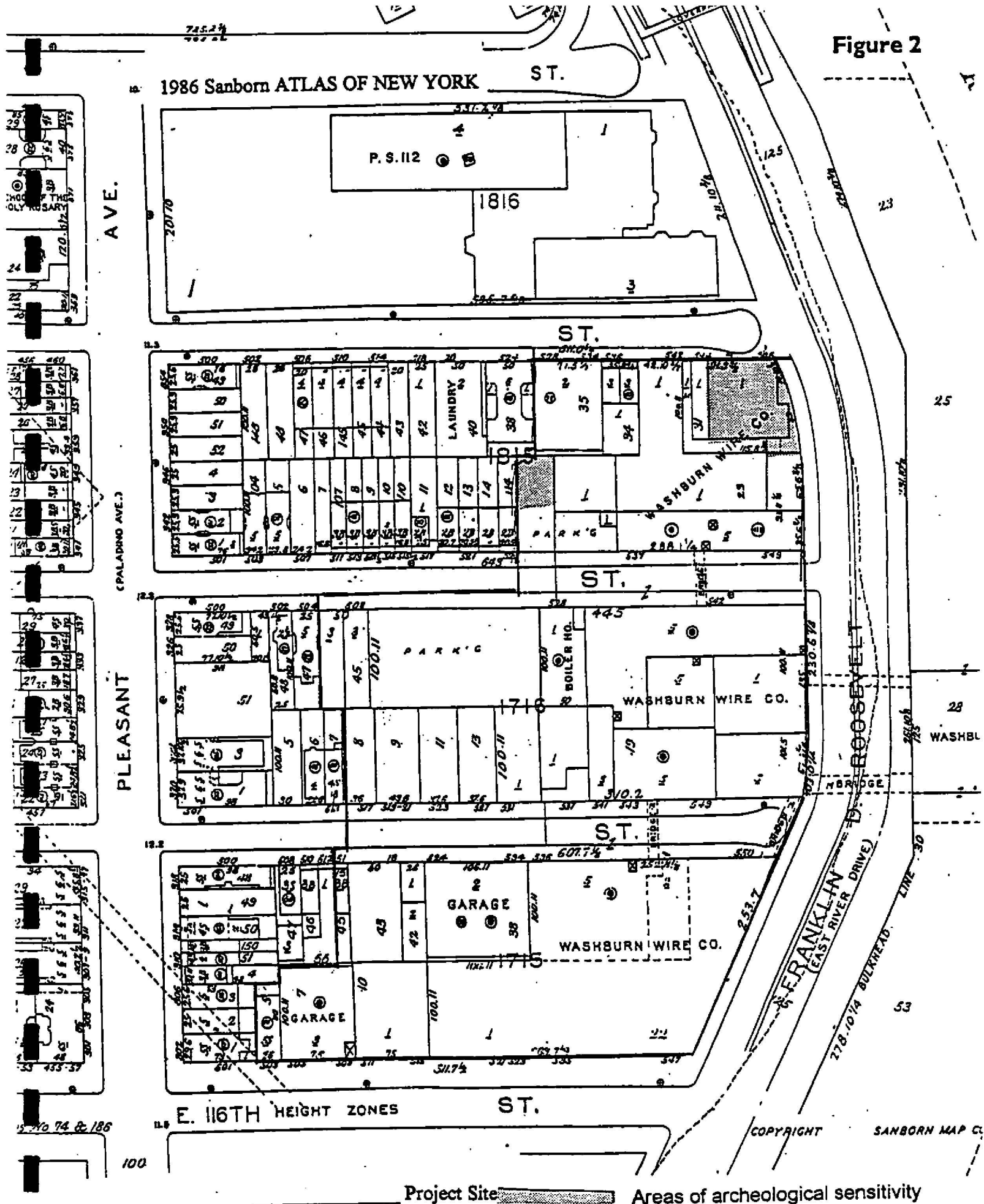
Kearns, Betsy and Cece Saunders

1998 East River Plaza Stage 1 Archaeological Assessment. Prepared for Allee King Rosen & Fleming, Inc.

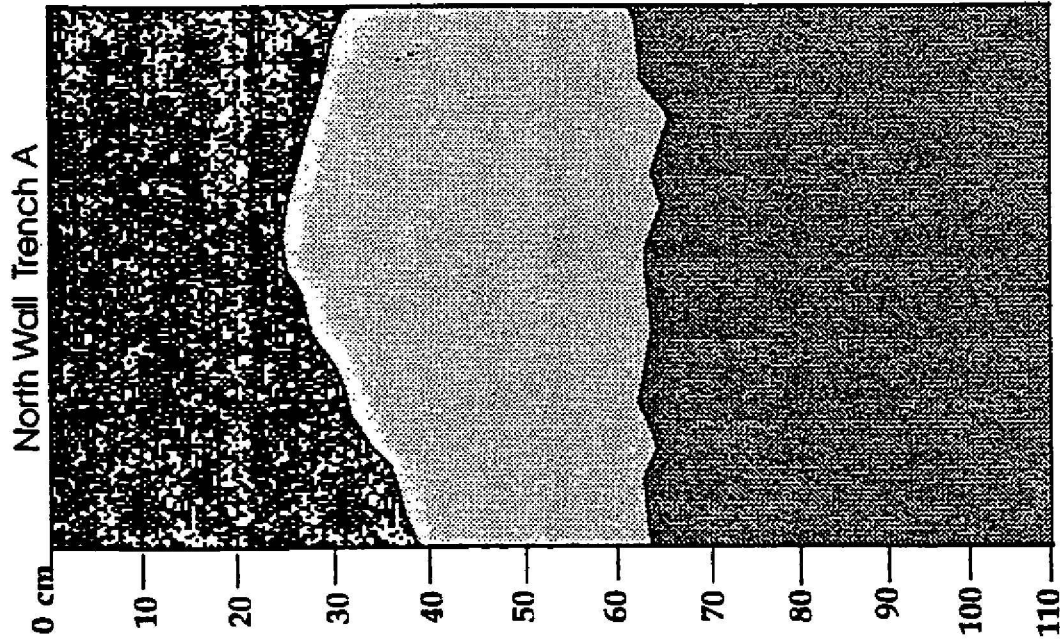





Project Location
Figure 1

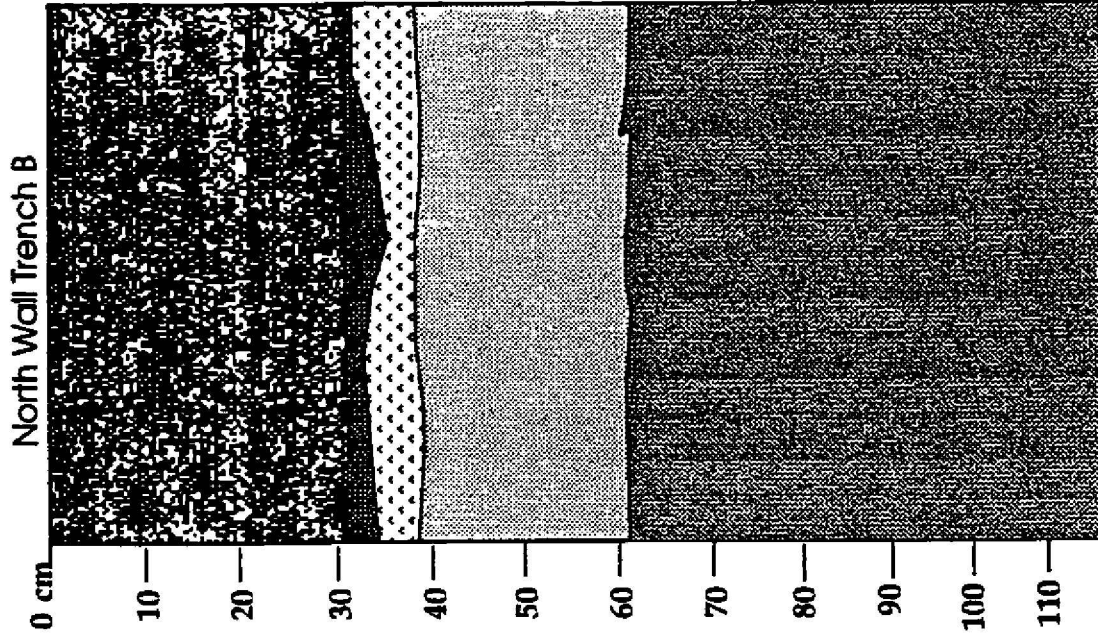
Figure 2



Project Site  **Areas of archeological sensitivity**



-  Level 1 10YR 3/2 very dark grayish brown fine silty sand w/20th century artifacts
-  Level 2 10YR 4/6 Dark yellowish brown silty coarse sand
-  Level 3 7.5 YR 5/8 strong brown very fine silty sand subsoil








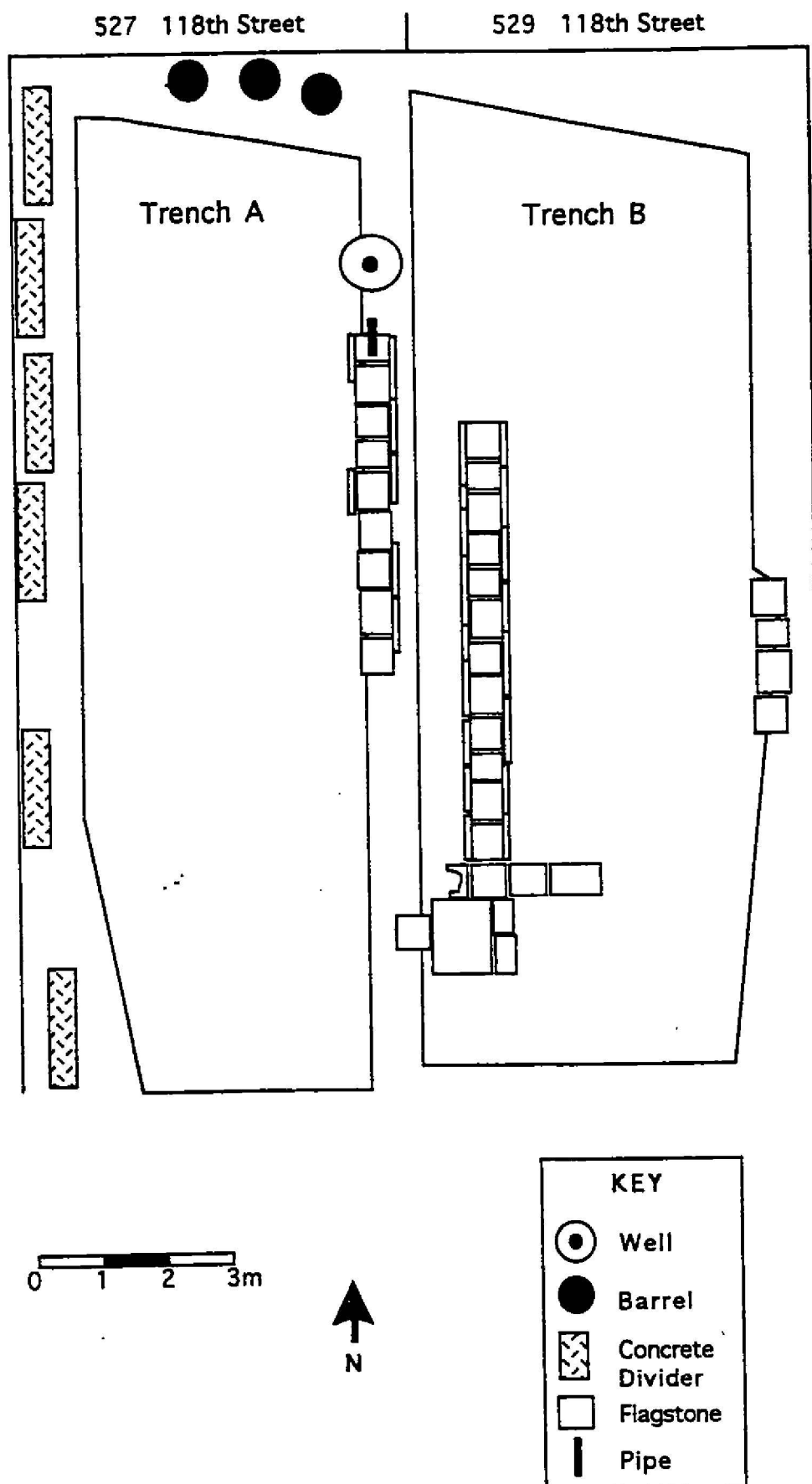
-  Level 1 Mixed ash/sand bedding layer
-  Ash lens at base of Level 1
-  Level 2 10YR 6/3 Pale brown coarse sand
-  Level 3 10YR 4/6 Dark yellowish brown fine silty sand
-  Level 4 7.5 YR 5/8 strong brown very fine silty sand subsoil

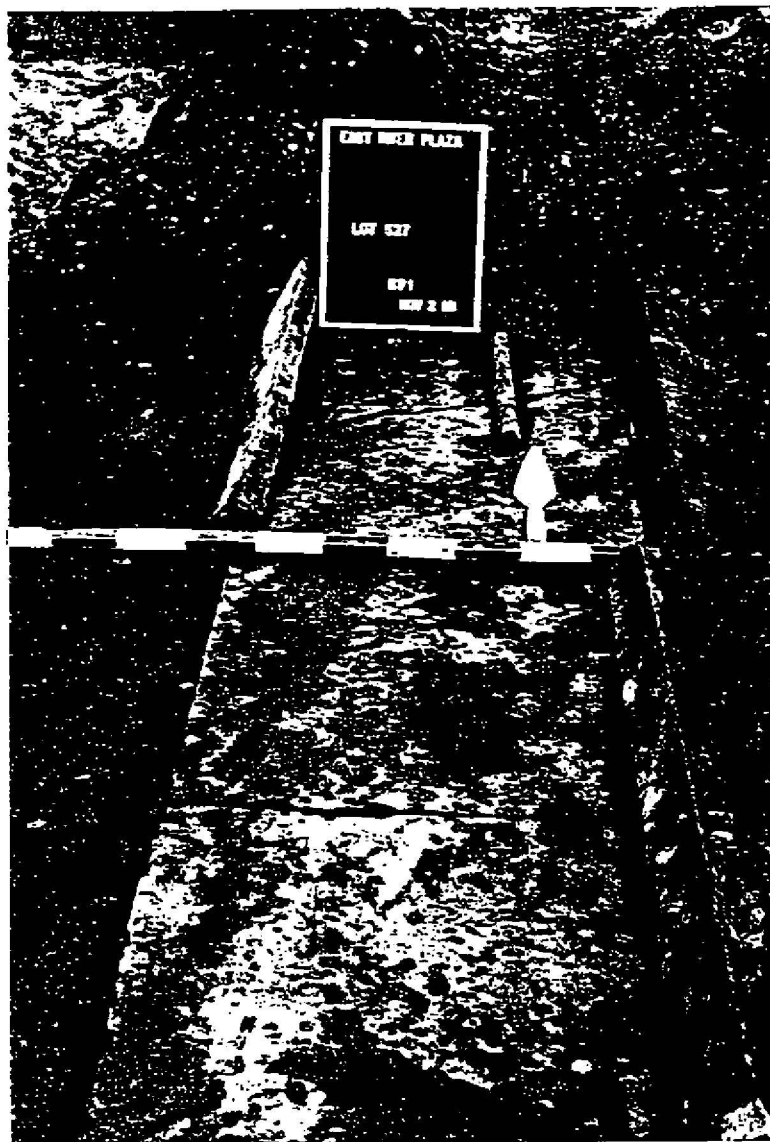
Figure 3. Stratigraphy. East River Plaza.

Figure 4

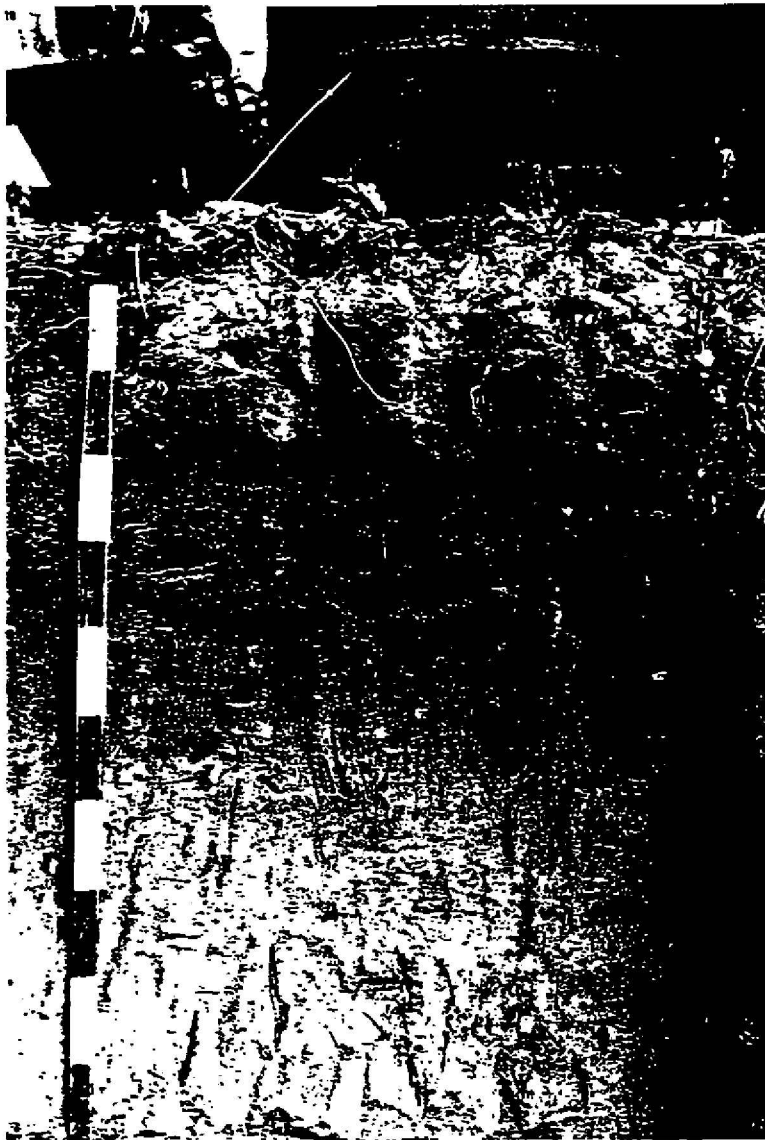




Photograph 1. 527 East 118th Street. Location of Trench A.



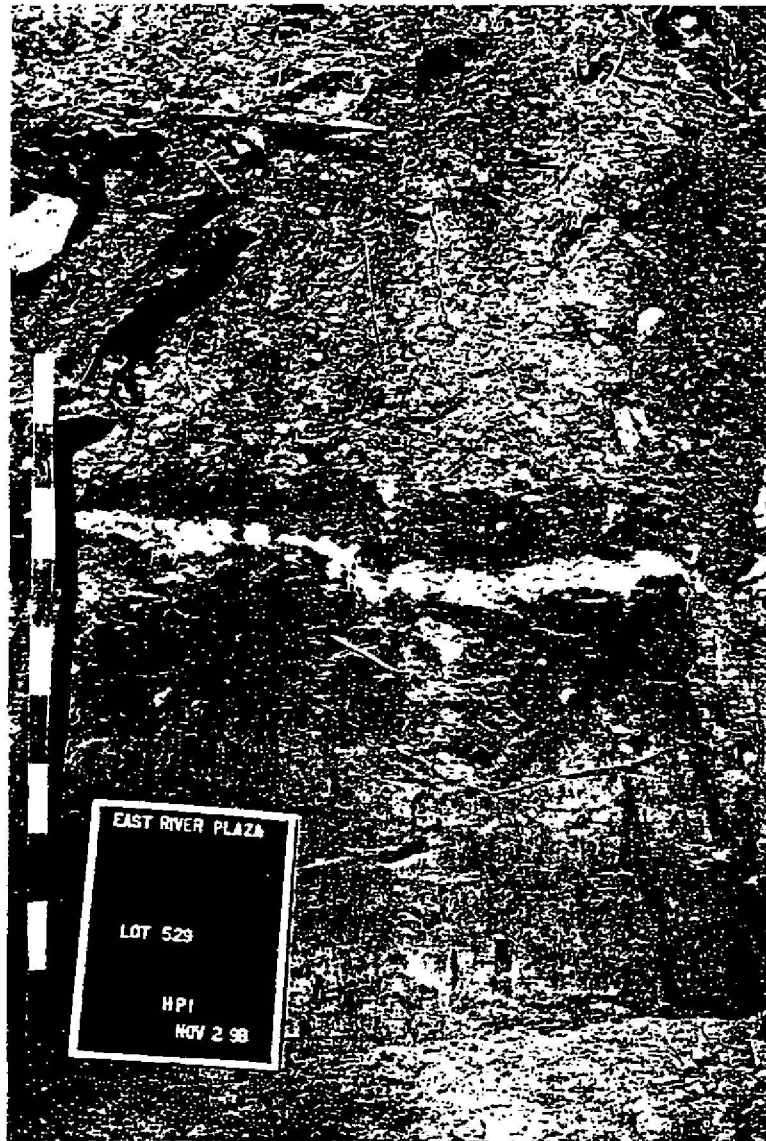
Photograph 2. 527 East 118th Street. Flagstone Path.



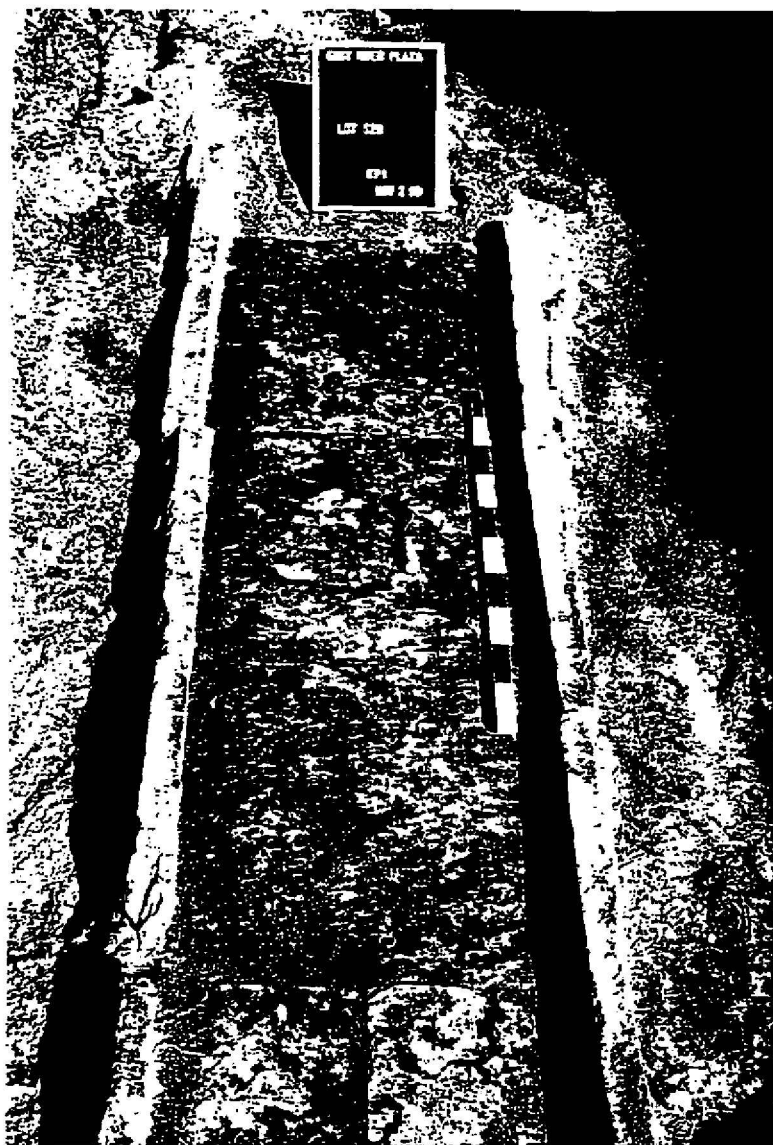
Photograph 3. 527 East 118th Street. North Wall, Trench A.



Photograph 4. 529 East 118th Street. Location of Trench B.



Photograph 5. 529 East 118th Street. North Wall, Trench B.



Photograph 6. 529 East 118th Street. Flagstone Path.



Photograph 7. 529 East 118th Street. South End of Flagstone Path at the Location of the Former Residence.