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RAILROAD PLACE SITE MASPETH, QUEENS

CEQR No. 89-290Q

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PRELIMINARY
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
REVIEW

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HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVES INC.



P.O. Box 331 Riverside, Connecticut 06878

NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
PROPOSED BUREAU OF WATER SUPPLY AND SEWERS FACILITY:

RAILROAD PLACE, MASPETH, QUEENS
CEQR No. 89 - 290Q

PRELIMINARY ARCHAEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Historical Perspectives, Inc.

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NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION
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INTRODUCTION

The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) has requested an archaeological survey consisting of documentary research of the parcel located at 57-15 49th Street in Queens which was selected by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) for possible development. This particular parcel has been flagged because of its topographical features and geographical location which indicated, according to known settlement pattern data, that it may possess prehistoric- and/or historic-archaeological potential. A full Phase IA archaeological sensitivity assessment could address this concern. However, an expensive and time-consuming Phase IA study might not be necessary if a preliminary review of the parcel's deep construction history indicates that the proposed building's footprint does not encroach on those areas of the site that might still possess subsurface integrity and, therefore, prehistoric and historic resources. Also, a review of the documented disturbance on a site might limit the perimeters of a subsequent Phase IA study.

As defined by the scope of the preliminary review, the following analysis of the 49th Street site in Maspeth, Queens, has been, primarily, a comparative study - both horizontally and vertically - of past, present and proposed building footprints. Due to the nature of the record-keeping and permit requirements prior to the twentieth century, there are noticeable gaps in the data available for this review.

RAILROAD PLACE, MASPETH, QUEENS

Block 2575, Lot 26: Lot 26 lies approximately 570 feet from the intersection of Maspeth Avenue and 49th Street (Figures 1 and 2).

Bounded: on the north by Lot 36, on the east by Lot 225, on the south by Lot 18, and on the west by 49th Street. The surrounding lots are occupied by a variety of industrial buildings.

Current Condition: Lot 26, the Project Area, is an open lot covered by mounds of garbage along 49th Street (Photographs 1, 2 and 3). Railroad tracks run approximately north to south near the western end of the property (Photograph 4).

Proposed Construction: As of October 12, 1990, the DEP is still considering the architectural plans for the project site. Therefore, this footprint study of the Project Area assumes, in the worst case scenario, that the construction activities could have an adverse impact on any part of Lot 26.

Land-Use History: This footprint study arbitrarily divides the land-use history section into prehistoric and historic periods.

Prehistoric Period. Native Americans are known to have been in what is now coastal New York State for the last 13,000 years, ever since the retreat of the Wisconsin glacier. Archaeologists divide this time span into three periods.

The Paleo period, from 13,000 to 10,000 years ago, was characterized by nomadic big-game hunters who used high ridges to spot their prey. They also used terraces and low-lying land near swamps and rivers. Sites on low ground may well have been used more than is documented, but a subsequent rise in the sea level has covered them.

The Archaic period, subdivided into Early, Middle, and Late phases, lasted from 10,000 to 3,000 years ago. Sea level had stabilized and the climate and environment were much as they are today by the Late Archaic. These people followed seasonal rounds of hunting, fishing, and gathering, with a growing preference for shellfish in the Late phase. The end of this period is marked by the use of bowls carved from steatite.

The Woodland period, again divided into Early, Middle, and Late phases, lasted from 3,000 to 300 years ago. Woodland people began to produce clay vessels and settled more and more into village life with the introduction and spread of agriculture. The Contact period began with the arrival of the first Europeans, who brought various trade goods and liquor, and introduced new diseases to the local population.

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There are no recorded prehistoric sites located within the Project Area block although there are reports of a prehistoric village site within close proximity. New York State Education Department/New York State Museum and Anthropological records from the 1930s place a prehistoric site just south of the Project Area (Site Number 4543). The site has not, however, been verified by the Services and is derived from Arthur C. Parker's The Archaeological History of New York.¹ A review of the inventoried sites filed with the State Historic Preservation Officer did not reveal a prehistoric site within close proximity to the Project Area. One nineteenth century historian reports that the Mispat chieftaincy resided in the region around the inlet of Newtown Creek although this has not been documented by twentieth century historians.²

Several archaeologists have actively conducted research in the Project Area during the past fifty years. Ralph Solecki, Columbia University professor, mapped many sites in the Borough of Queens prior to the 1940s. Solecki and the Committee on American Anthropology of the Flushing Historical Society identified a concentration of prehistoric activity fronting on the confluence of the Newtown and Maspeth Creeks (Figure 3). Solecki states that "a large site was situated near the Furman burial plot on Maspeth Creek, an arm of Newtown Creek."³ This area, located southwest of the Project Area, was a locus of prehistoric exploitation.

In 1935, on a site located 30 feet south of Maspeth Avenue between Maspeth Creek and the now extinct Shanty Creek, Dr. Solecki and Stan Wisniewski found a seventeenth century fireplace.⁴ This site dated from the period of initial contact between Europeans and Indians.

Although all of the sites described above are outside but within a half mile of the Railroad Place Project Area, their presence

¹Historical Perspectives, Phase IA Archaeological Sensitivity Report on the Resource Recovery Project: Maspeth, Queens. Unpublished manuscript on file with Parsons Brinckerhoff, Quade & Douglas. 1986, p. 17.

²Reginald Bolton, Indian Paths in the Great Metropolis, Volume I and II. Notes and Monographs Misc. 23. F. W. Hodge, editor. New York: Museum of the American Indian. 1922, p. 275. Robert Grumet, Native American Place Names in New York City. New York: Museum of the City of New York. 1981, p. 27.

³Ralph Solecki, "The Indians Lived Here," in So This is Flushing (newsletter). New York: Flushing Historical Society. 1941, no page.

⁴Ralph Solecki, "A Seventeenth-century Fireplace at Maspeth, Long Island," in Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences. Volume 38, number 10, October 15, 1948.

demonstrates the potential for the existence of undiscovered prehistoric cultural resources in the Project Area.

Historic Period. The first white men to inhabit present-day Queens were fur traders associated with the Dutch West India Company in the early seventeenth century. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the lands were opened to settlement by both Dutch and English. The Project Area would have been included in the 14,000 acres of land patented to Reverend Francis Doughty in 1642.⁵

Maspeth is the current name of the area in which both the original village settlement of Mespat and the Project Area are located. Mespat village was situated at the end of a tributary - called Maspeth Creek - of Newtown Creek. The Project Area was located slightly north of the Maspeth Creek in a low, marshy area. The Maspeth area was also part of what was once known as English Kills.⁶ On Figure 4, a copy of James Riker's 1852 map, these places are located: Bushwick, English Kills, Newtown Creek, Maspeth, and Furman's Island are named and Maspeth Creek, while not named, is a little finger of Newtown Creek pointing toward Maspeth.

From the mid-seventeenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century the block containing the Project Area was used very little if at all. The primary reason for this was its uneven and marshy topography. Figure 5 shows the edge of Maspeth Creek located just south of the Project Area and indicates that the highest point of elevation, approximately 7.725 feet above U.S. Coast and Geodetic datum, was located at the northern corner of the area. The topography probably sloped downward toward the Creek, creating the low marshy areas. Figures 6 and 7 indicate that Maspeth Creek continued to infringe on the southwestern corner of the Project Area well into the twentieth century.

The first owner of the property to have a direct impact on the Project Area was Garritt Furman who purchased approximately 119 acres in 1815.⁷ Judge Furman laid out and opened Maspeth Avenue in 1836 as an overland route to his country home.⁸ The new road ran from the junction of 58th Street and Maurice Avenue westward to the marshy ground at Newtown Creek shore. Judge Furman died in

⁵Historical Perspectives, p. 23.

⁶Barbara Stankowski, Maspeth: Our Town. New York: Maspeth Savings and Loan. 1977, p. 9.

⁷Historical Perspectives, p.66.

⁸Historical Perspectives, p. 31.

1848 and left the property to his son, William H. Furman.⁹ William maintained the property until his death in 1893.¹⁰

Although Maspeth Avenue existed as a toll road as early as 1836, it fell into disrepair after the Maspeth Avenue and Toll Bridge Company's charter expired in 1866.¹¹ By 1876 Grand Avenue was extended through Brooklyn into Queens County.¹² Because it paralleled Maspeth Avenue and travellers preferred the new and better road, Maspeth Avenue quickly reverted to little more than a dirt path. As late as 1955, Maspeth Avenue was incomplete since the southern end of the New York Naval Shipyard Annex, shown in Figure 8, actually lay in the path of the street.

Development in the neighborhood of the Project Area began in 1836 with the opening of Maspeth Avenue. These included Peter Cooper's glue factory in 1849, Lawrence and Cooper's ropewalk, Cord Meyer's fertilizer works, Covert and Sons' lumber and coal yard.¹³ None of these firms operated on the Project Area block.

In 1899 the Furman heirs sold their land holdings to Lowell M. Palmer.¹⁴ Although development continued in the Maspeth area, the blocks from 55th Street to Newtown Creek remained essentially undeveloped through the 1920s and 1930s. Figure 7, dating from 1941, indicates that there was no development on the Project Area at that date. In fact, 49th Street was planned and laid out but not improved in 1941. Although Figure 7 indicates that a bulkhead had been constructed at the base of 49th Street, it still shows Maspeth Creek present up into the block.

There is no record of a planned effort to fill and level the marshy areas in the Project Area neighborhood. It is apparent, however, that some dumping and filling must have occurred in the past eighty years allowing the marshy areas to be developed. For a neighboring site, Historical Perspectives documented the use of general construction debris as the main source of fill used during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁵ By 1929, the original date of Figure 7, elevations in the Project Area had been raised approximately 10

⁹Historical Perspectives, p. 32.

¹⁰Historical Perspectives, p. 33.

¹¹Historical Perspectives, p. 34.

¹²Historical Perspectives, p. 35.

¹³Historical Perspectives, pp. 36-38.

¹⁴Historical Perspectives, p. 38.

¹⁵Historical Perspectives, pp. 40-41.

feet. In 1971, the U.S.G.S. Brooklyn Quadrangle indicates that the elevation had remained approximately the same.

Figure 8 indicates that Maspeth Creek had been contained and the marshy areas filled in so that development could occur just south of the Project Area. Railroad tracks, still extant on the site, had been laid by this date. These tracks probably provided the Naval Annex access to the Long Island Railroad lines located to the north. Forty-ninth Street was still incomplete, however, as indicated by the dotted lines.

The only development identified for the Project Area was the presence of a large brick/stone building located on the western two-thirds of the lot (Figure 9). Its construction date, demolition date and function could not be identified at this level of documentation.

Although there are a number of identified historic archaeological sites located not far from the Project Area, including the Contact Indian site discussed earlier and the Vander Ende-Onderdonk House on Flushing and Onderdonk Avenues, there are no sites reported for the Project Area or its surrounding block.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Below Ground Resources. There is strong evidence that Native Americans exploited the natural resources of western Long Island for thousands of years before the Europeans arrived. Specifically there is evidence that they exploited the natural resources located in the Maspeth Creek area.

Settlement pattern data of the prehistoric culture periods does indicate a strong association between habitation and processing sites and 1) the confluence of two watercourses; 2) the proximity to a major watercourse; 3) the proximity to a marsh resource; and/or 4) well-drained, elevated land. As detailed above, the marsh areas located in the Project Area block would probably have been exploited by Native Americans for resources such as tubrous grasses and water fowl. However, there is currently no evidence, ethnographical, historical, or archaeological, that suggests either the Project Area or the surrounding block ever functioned as a food-processing station, a temporary camp site, or as a habitation or burial locus. The documented and inventoried habitation and processing sites on Long Island occur on raised, well-drained land. Currently, the water table on this block is approximately

six feet below grade.¹⁶ The fact that the current water table is within the deposited fill/debris level substantiates the theory that the area had an estuarine environment during earlier time periods. Field testing within and beneath this level would entail extensive and constant water pumping.

The 1980 soil borings, taken along 49th Street, indicate the occurrence of a peat lens underneath an extensive fill overburden on this block. The presence of a peat lens indicates a marsh margin zone that was slowly inundated, signaling the occurrence of a possible eco-niche attractive to Native Americans.¹⁷ The peat lens, however, is located below 10 to 23 feet of introduced fill. The various depths of fill over peat and the various widths of the peat lens (3' to 5') are reflective of the natural process of marsh margin zone evolution. It is HPI's opinion that the combination of the high water table and the depth of the introduced fill overlying the peat lens make realistic field testing for prehistoric resources impossible.

Although the Maspeth area has a long and significant history in the historical evolution of Long Island, the Project Area remained uninvolved in these events. It remained open, undeveloped land until well into the twentieth century. The earliest documented development on the property was the laying of the train track sometime in the 1940s or early 1950s. Because there appears to be no significant activities associated with the Project Area for the past 350 years, it is HPI's opinion that there is not sufficient evidence to warrant further research, field investigation or monitoring of this site for historic resources.

¹⁶Based on information from the 1980 Department of General Services Soil Boring Survey.

¹⁷Historical Perspectives, Phase IA Archaeological Assessment Report for the West Queens Housing Site and the West Queens High School Site Astoria, New York. Unpublished manuscript on file with Allee King Rosen & Fleming, Inc. 1988, p. 15.

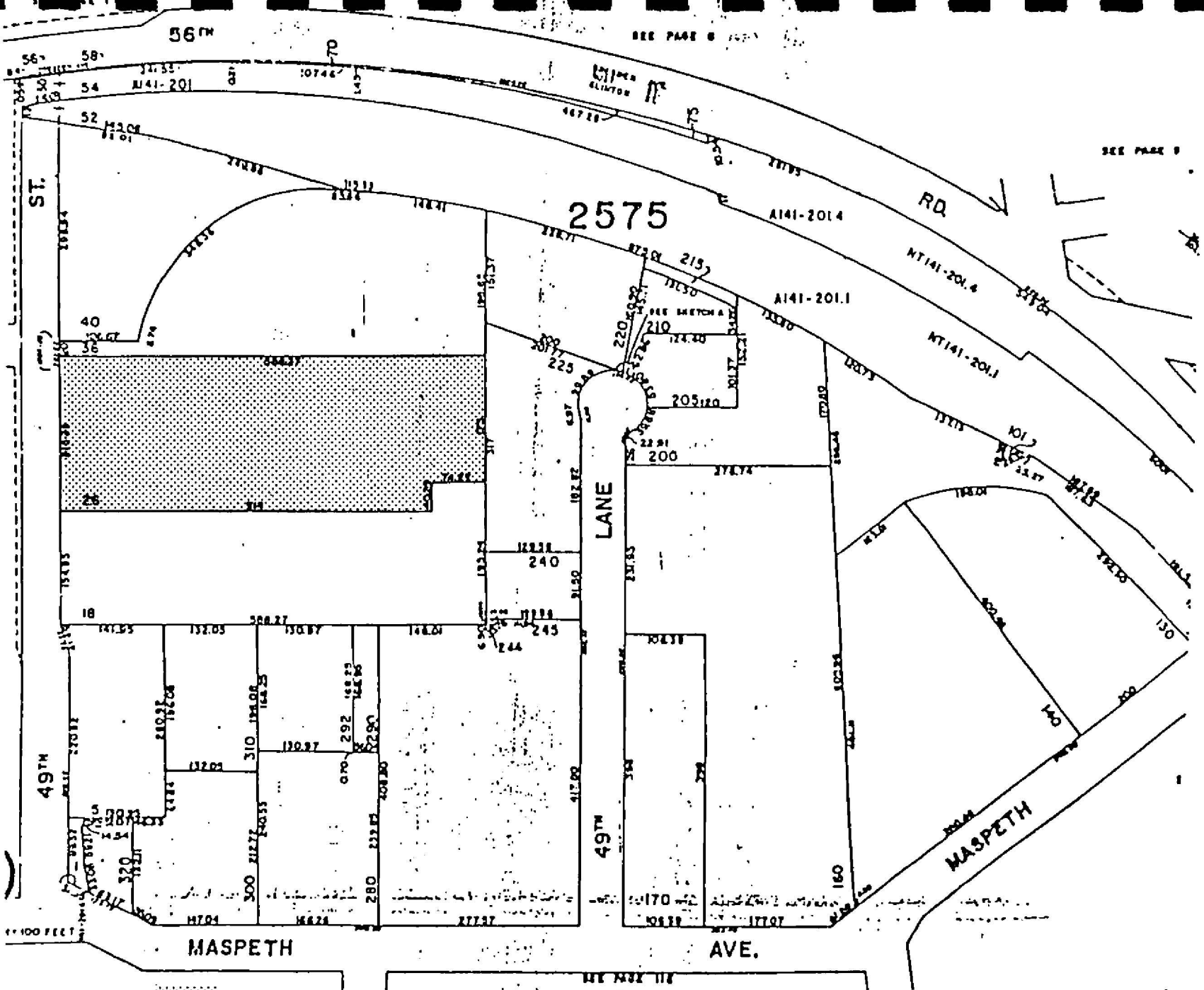
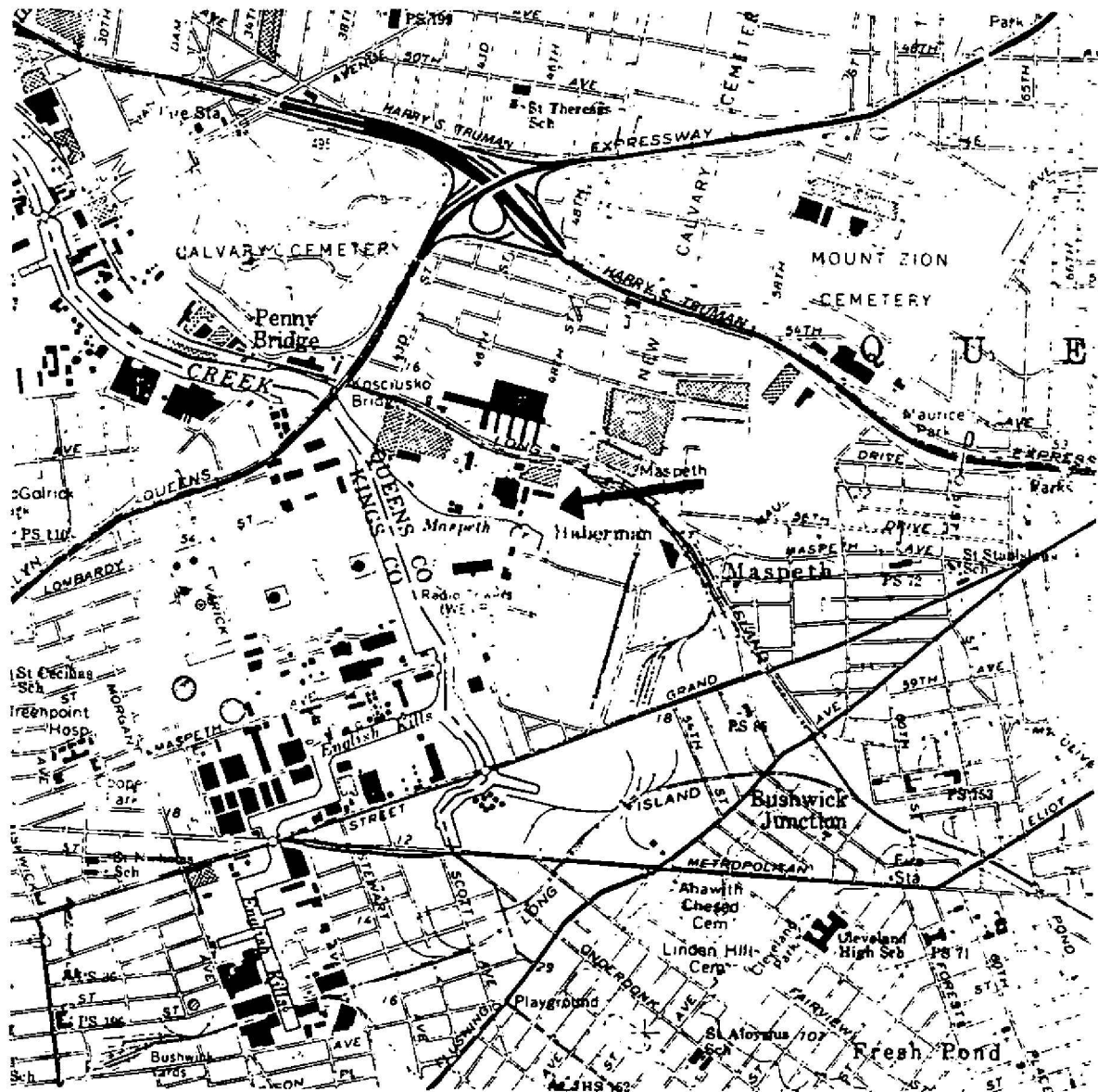


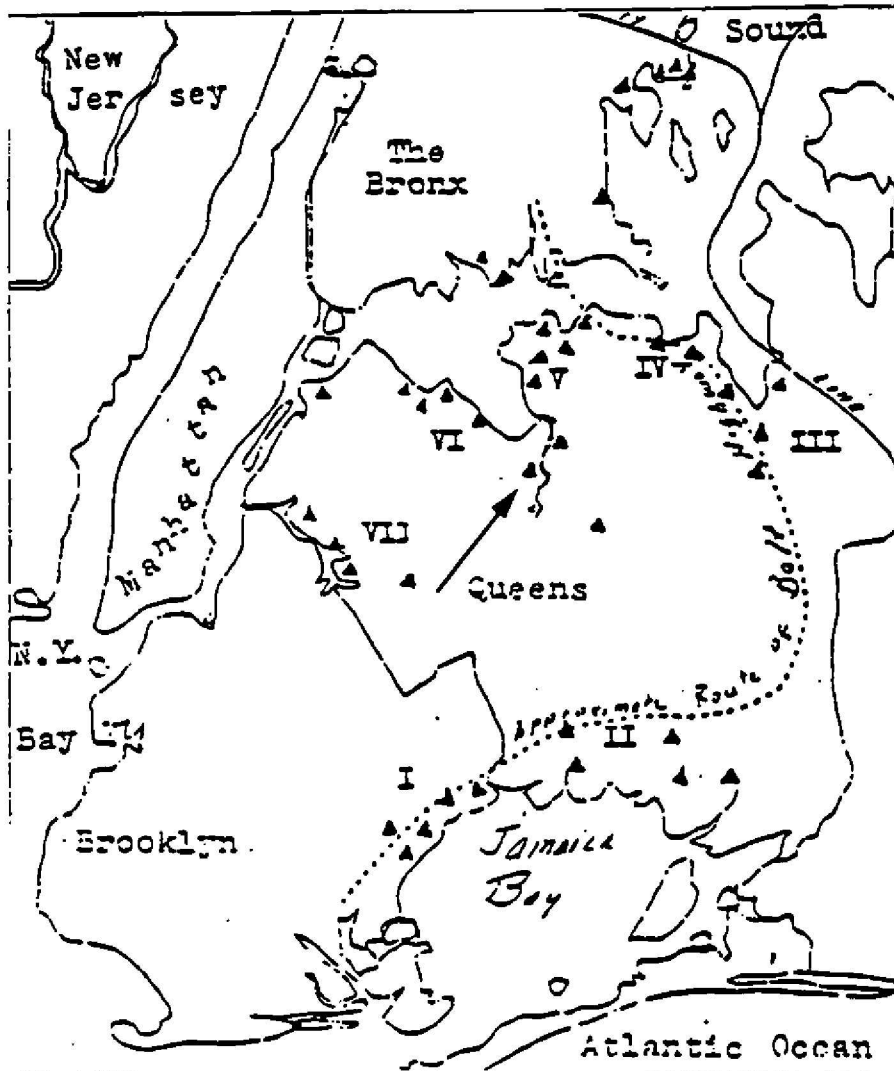
Figure 1

Figure 2

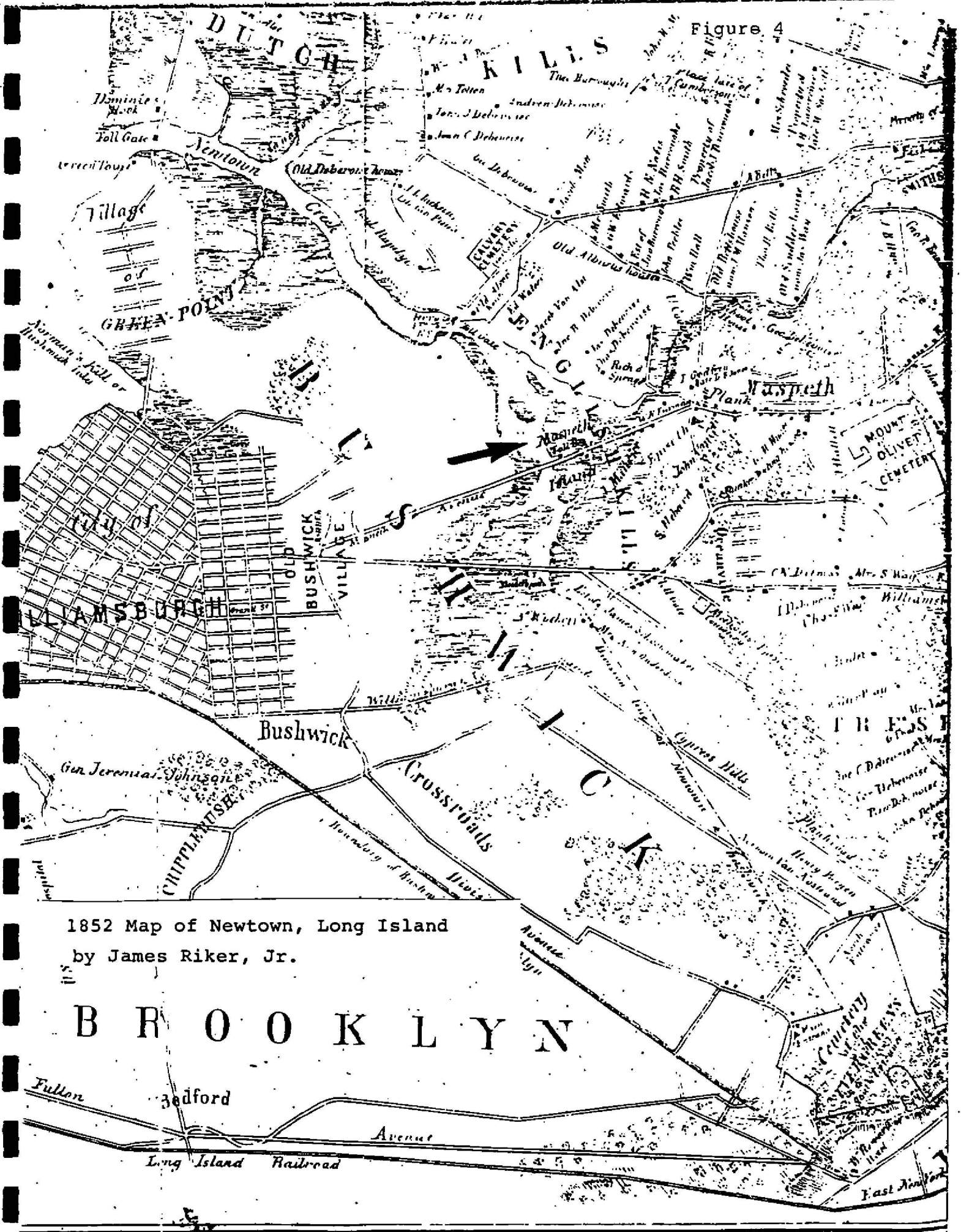


Project Area Location

U.S.G.S. Brooklyn Quadrangle



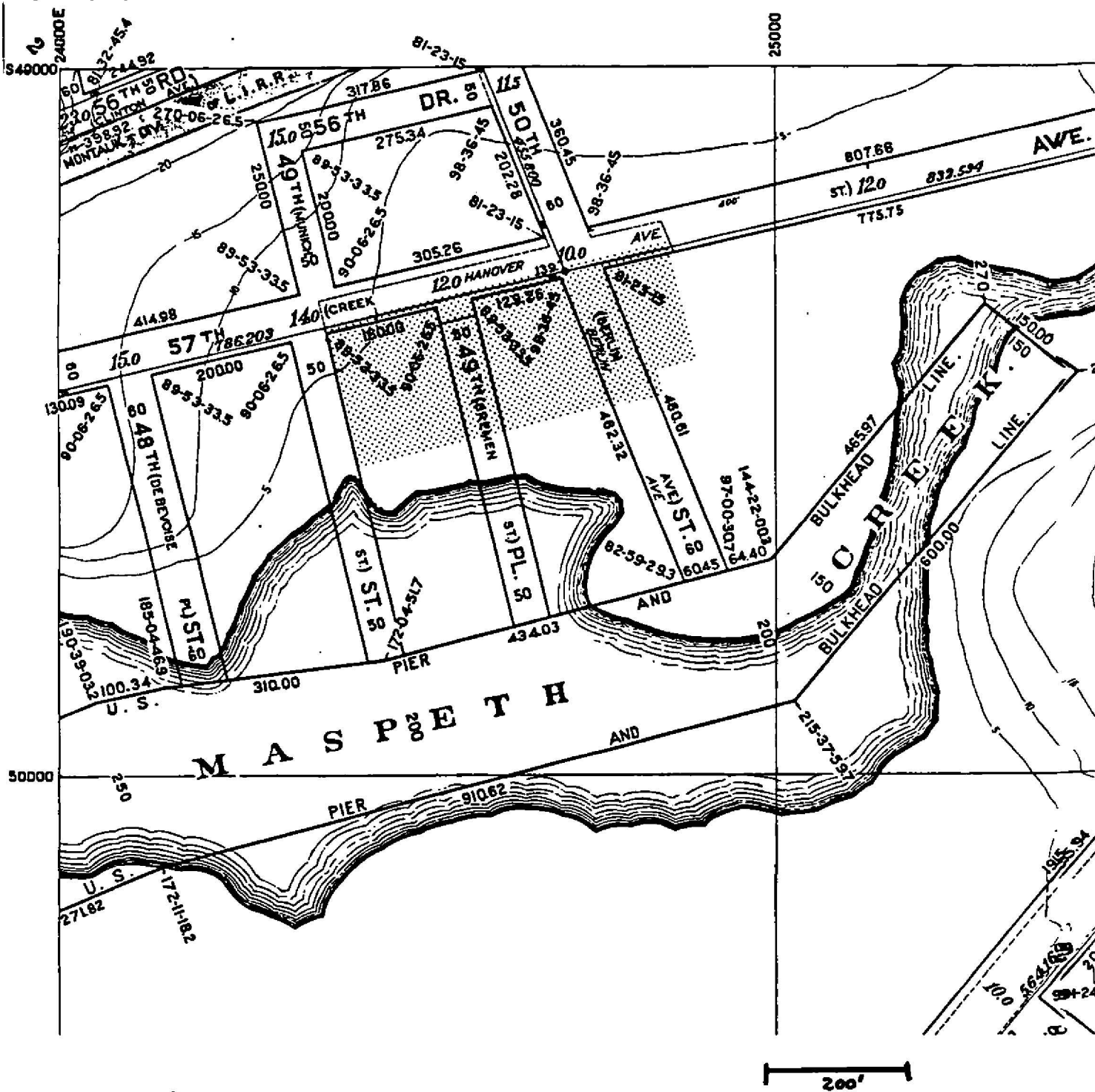
INDIAN VILLAGE SITES: Triangles on diagram indicate sites explored by Committee on American Anthropology of the Flushing Historical Society (Solecki 1941).

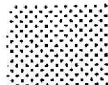


1852 Map of Newtown, Long Island
by James Riker, Jr.

B R O O K L Y N

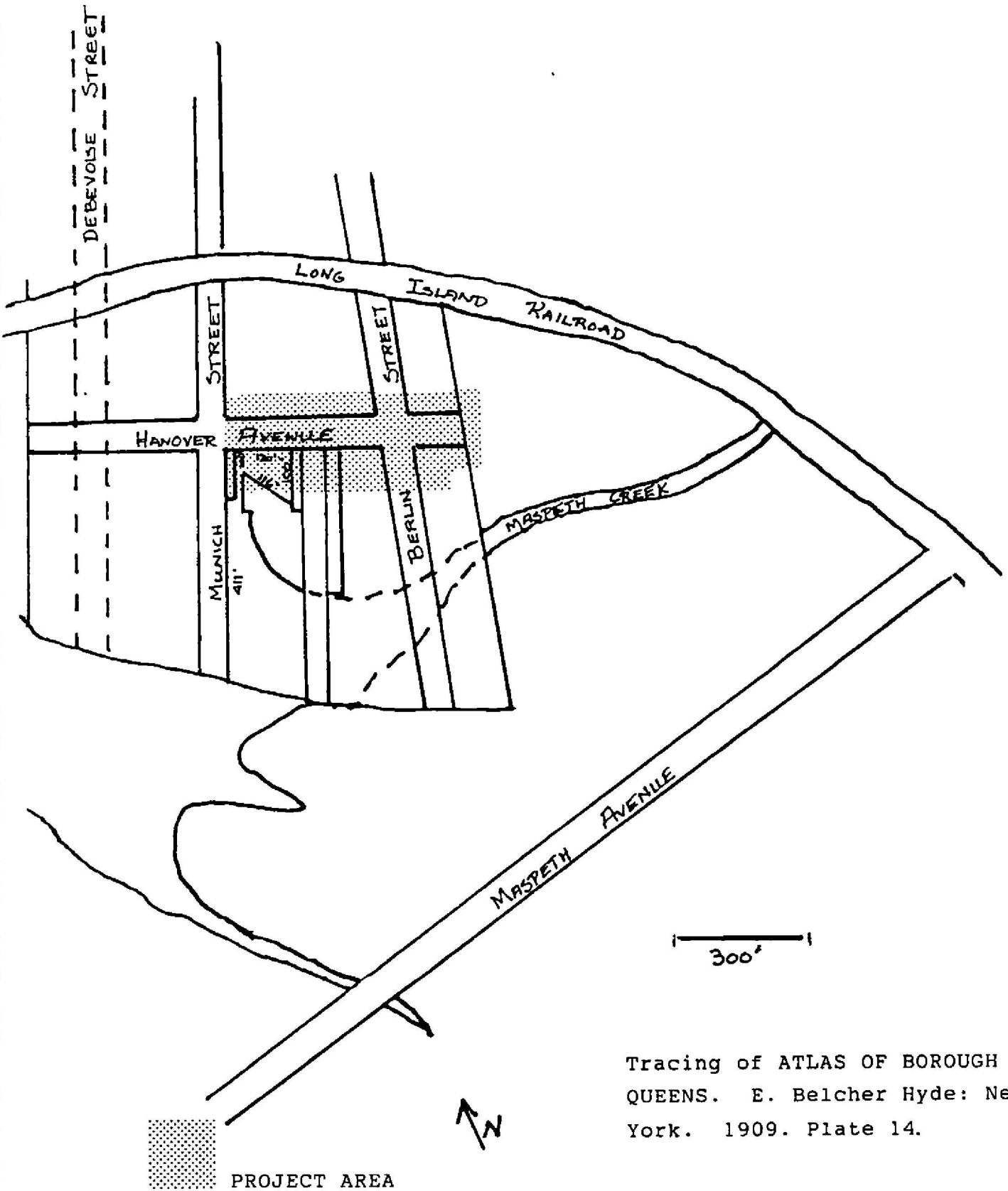
Figure 5



 PROJECT AREA

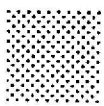
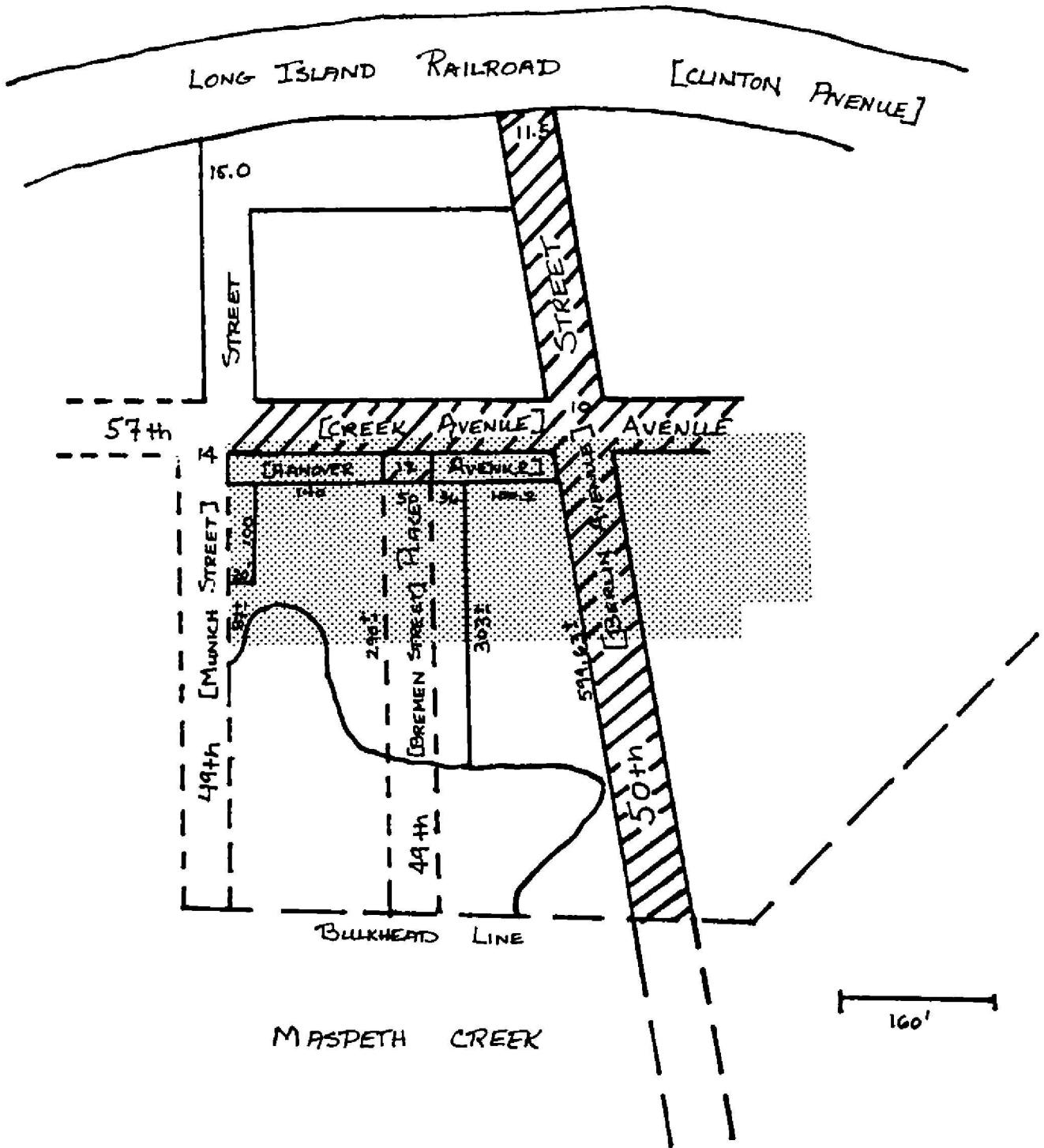
City of New York, Borough of
Queens. Department of Engi-
neering, Topographical Bureau.
1910. Section 13.

Figure 6



Tracing of ATLAS OF BOROUGH QUEENS. E. Belcher Hyde: New York. 1909. Plate 14.

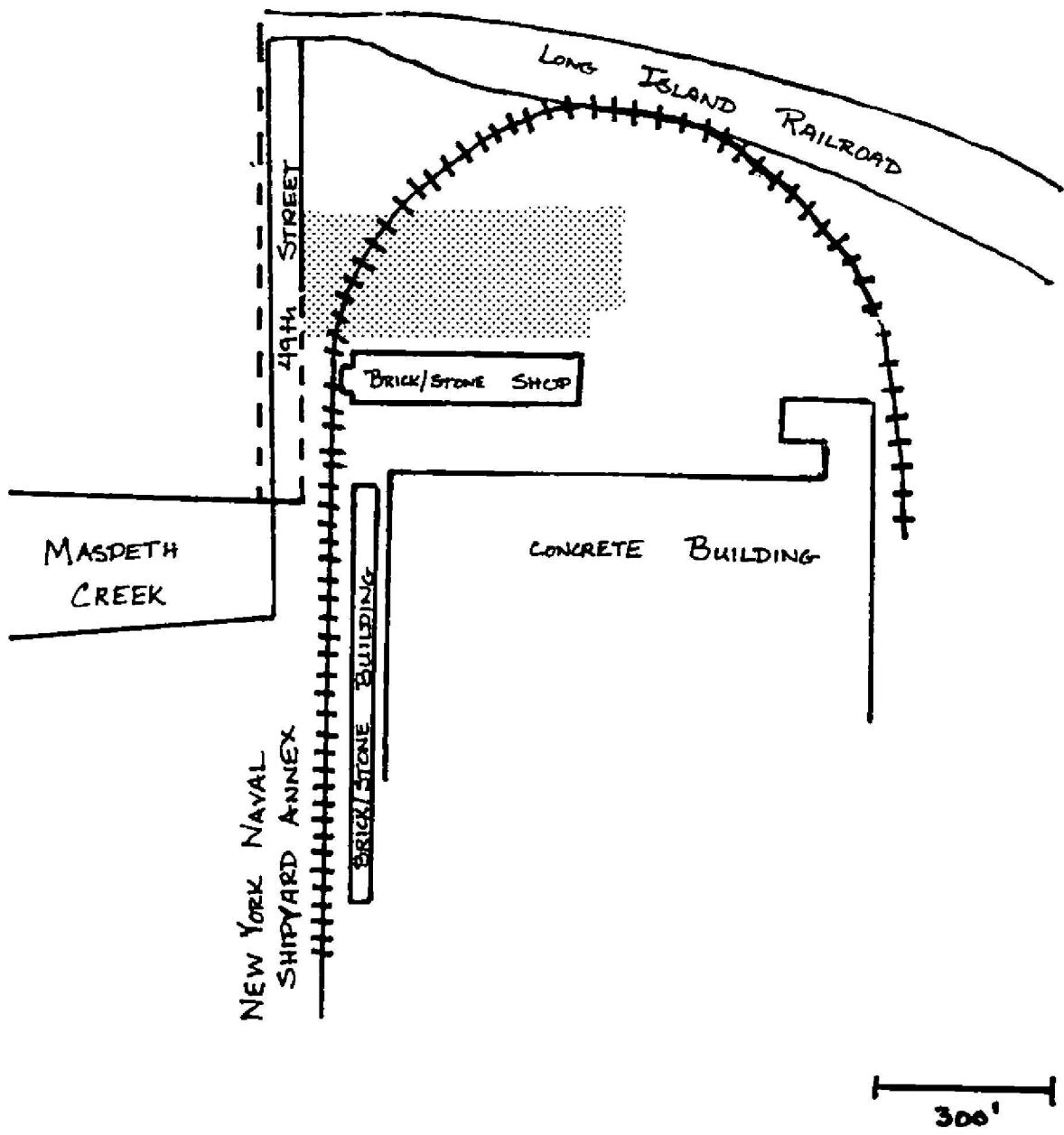
Figure 7



PROJECT AREA

Tracing of ATLAS OF BOROUGH OF QUEENS. E. Belcher Hyde: New York. 1929, corrected to 1941. Plate 14.

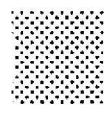
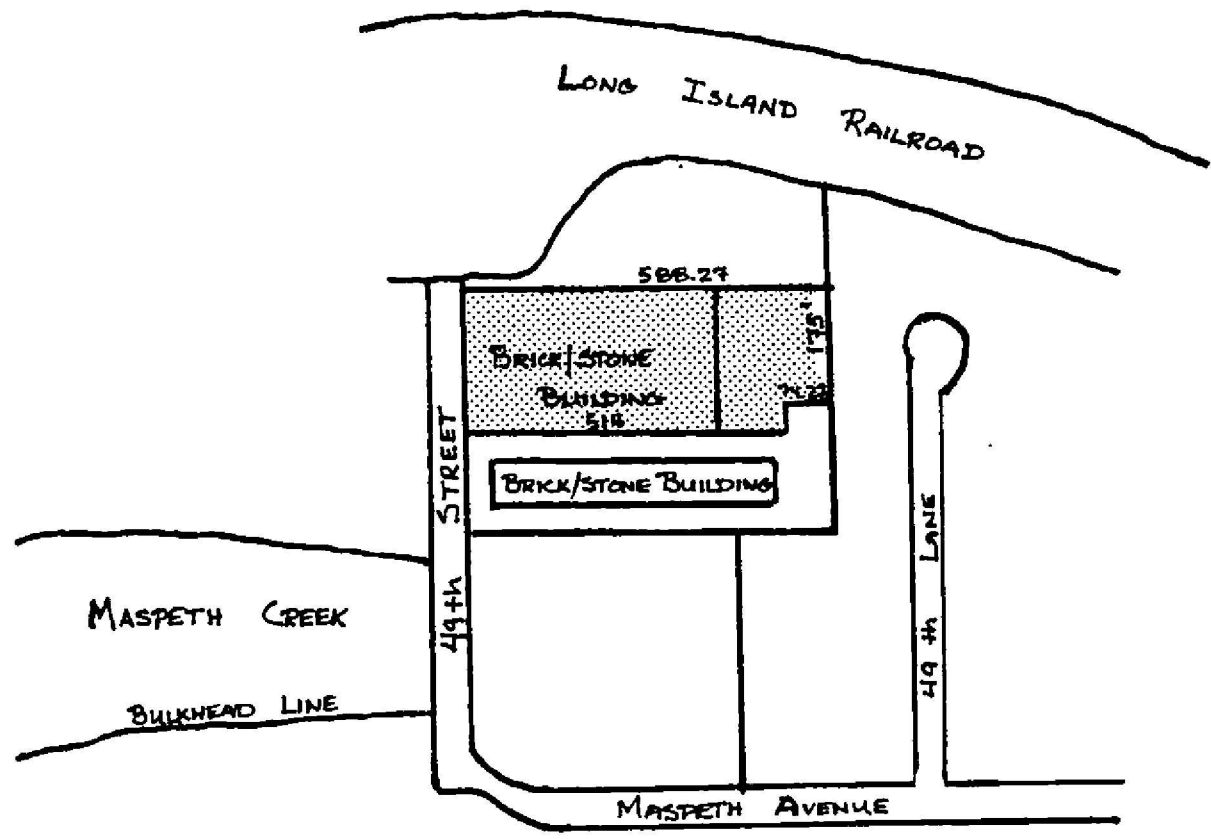
Figure 8



 PROJECT AREA

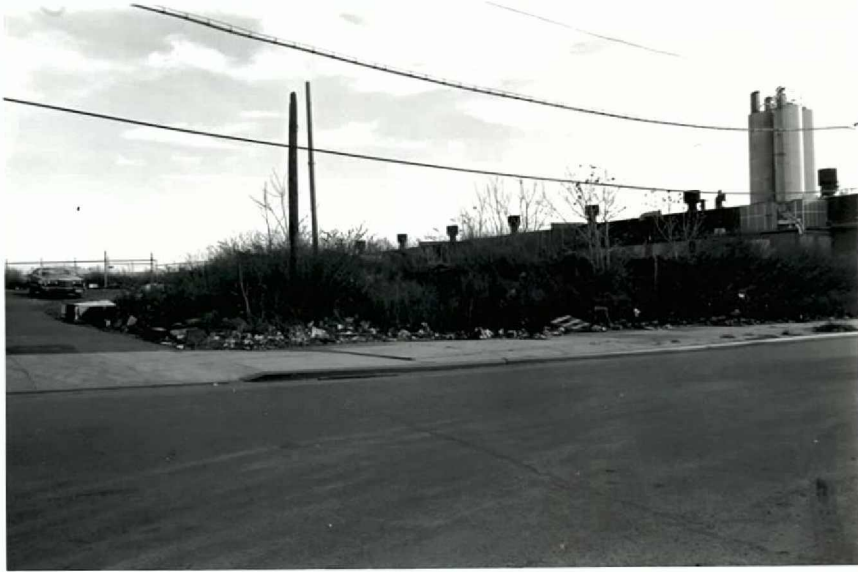
Tracing of ATLAS OF BOROUGH OF QUEENS. E. Belcher Hyde, New York. 1929, corrected to 1955. Plate 28.

Figure 9



PROJECT AREA

Tracing of ATLAS OF BOROUGH OF QUEENS. E. Belcher Hyde: New York. 1929, corrected to 1979. Subplan Plate 29.



Photograph 1 Project Area Looking
South Across 49th Street



Photograph 2 Project Area Looking
East Across 49th Street



Photograph 3 Project Area Looking
Southeast from Railroad Tracks Near 49th Street



Photograph 4 Project Area Looking
South