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Geismar

St. John's Parking Garage

Elmhurst, Queens

CEQR No. 89-167Q

Report on Field Testing

Prepared for

Catholic Medical Center of Brooklyn and Queens, Inc.

Prepared by

Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.

March, 1991

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

FIELD TESTING 3

 Test Trench 1 (TT1) 3

 Test Trench 2 (TT2) Pit A 7

 Test Trench 3 (TT3) 8

 Test Trench 4 (TT4) 8

 Test Trench 5 (TT5) 12

CONCLUSIONS 13

BIBLIOGRAPHY 16

APPENDIX A (TT1 Photographed in 5-ft. Segments) 17

EXHIBITS

 1. Project Site and Testing Plan 2

 2. Test Trench 1 (TT1), photo 5

 3. Boulder exposed in TT1, photo 5

 4. Test Trench 1 (TT1), East Wall Profile 6

 5. Boulder and rock scatter (F1), photo 9

 6. Stratigraphy of west wall in Pit A, photo 9

 7. Pit A, West Wall Profile 10

 8. Test Trench 4 (TT4), East Wall Profile 11

 9. Terra-cotta, stone, and brick floor (F2), photo ... 14

 10. Segment of Test Trench 4 (TT4), east wall, photo .. 14

 11. Southern end of Test Trench 5 (TT5), wood, photo .. 14

 12. Test Trench 5 (TT5), West Wall Profile 15

Graphics: Amy Geller

Photographs: Joan H. Geismar

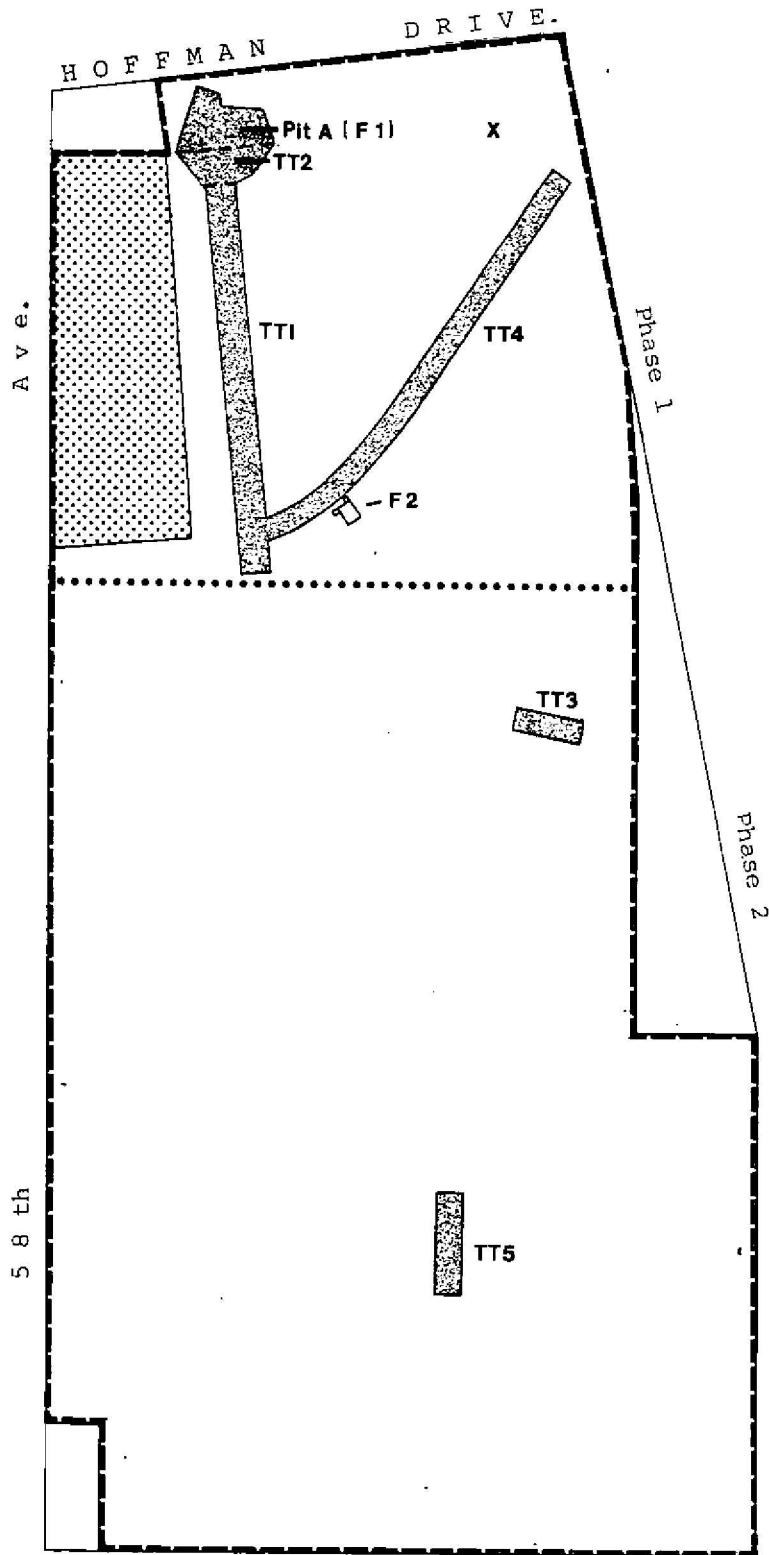
Participants: Principal Investigator--Joan H. Geismar, Ph.D.
Field Assistants--Barbara Davis, Shelly Spritzer
Construction Foreman and Backhoe Operator--Lori
Contracting Corporation

INTRODUCTION

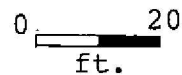
Based on historical research (Geismar 1990a; Key Perspectives 1989) and soil borings (Howard F. Greenspan & Assoc. 1990), a scope of work was prepared prior to archaeological field testing of the St. John's Parking Garage Site in Elmhurst, Queens (CEQR No. 89-167Q; Geismar 1990b). The site is currently an active parking lot for St. John's Hospital.

In accordance with the proposed scope, dated December 21, 1990, approved by the New York City Landmark's Preservation Commission's archaeologist, field work was undertaken on Saturday, February 23, 1991 (a Saturday was chosen since the parking lot is less active on weekends than during the week, although it was still necessary to provide parking to doctors and other hospital personnel). Its purpose was to test for evidence of a 19th-century dwelling and its yard features and to determine if any Revolutionary War activities may have occurred on the site. This report presents the methods and findings of the field testing program. The site testing plan is presented in Exhibit 1.

The scope of work suggested that testing might be undertaken in two phases: Phase 1 in the northern and more sensitive area according to the findings of the documentary research; and Phase 2 in the southern part of the site. As it turned out, the entire site was tested in one day. Five 2-ft. wide backhoe-dug test trenches (TT1-TT5) of varying lengths and a test pit (Pit A) were excavated under the supervision of the writer and two field assistants. A construction foreman worked with the archaeologists and the backhoe operator.



- project site
- Phase 1/Phase 2 dividing line
- 58-02 Hoffman Drive (standing structure)
- excavated areas
- X aborted trench, unnumbered



Testing exposed two features--a scatter of rocks and boulders (F1) in TT1, TT2, and Pit A, and a relatively modern terra-cotta tile, brick, and stone "floor" (F2) in and next to TT4. The rock-and-boulder feature may be the remnants of a house foundation, but the degree of disturbance makes this somewhat speculative. The tile, brick, and stone feature seems related to 20th-century development that occurred along 58th Avenue, the site's western boundary. In addition, extensive wood debris was found in the northern half of TT5, one of two small trenches excavated in the site's Phase 2 test area. This proved to be modern construction debris. Excavation did not reveal any features or deposits of archaeological significance.

FIELD TESTING

February 23, 1991, was a clear but bitterly cold day. Testing began with excavation of TT1, a north south trench 65-70 ft. long (Exhibit 2 and Appendix A) that was placed in the vicinity of a 19th-century house site found on several maps. The map data are not detailed, but this house, belonging to Francis Plain by 1852, was built by 1845 and was demolished prior to 1902 (Geismar 1990a:10-13, 22). While there is the remote possibility that an earlier, 17th-century structure was also located on the site (Geismar 1990a:18-20; Key Perspectives 1987:25), the Plain house is the only pre-20th century building actually known to have been situated there.

Test Trench 1 (TT1)

TT1 documented the soil sequence later noted throughout the site: under a layer of macadam (excavation of five test trenches

indicated one to four layers of this parking-lot surface) was a debris-laden fill that contained fragments of ceramics (whiteware), bricks, and clam shells as well as some bottle glass. In the uppermost parts of the fill layer, bottle fragments were quite modern (a Gallo wine bottle fragment was noted as was a piece of glass decorated with a color-applied process developed in the 1930s [Munsey 1970: 250]) and a plastic 6-pack holder was uncovered; this modern debris may relate to relatively recent parking lot resurfacing. A porcelain doll's arm and a 4-hole button were recovered from a deeper portion of the fill in the north end of the trench near where a large boulder was exposed approximately 34 in. below the parking lot surface (Exhibits 3 and 4). These artifacts, which were collected, suggest a late-19th to 20th-century deposit. One brick fragment, somewhat roughly made with rounded corners, was stamped "TIDEWATER," but nothing has been learned about its origins except it does not appear to have been manufactured locally (it is not in Daniel de Noyelle's well researched 1982 brick-makers book). There was a noticeable lack of window glass in the fill. A natural orange/brown silty sand was found beneath the fill layer (see Exhibit 4).

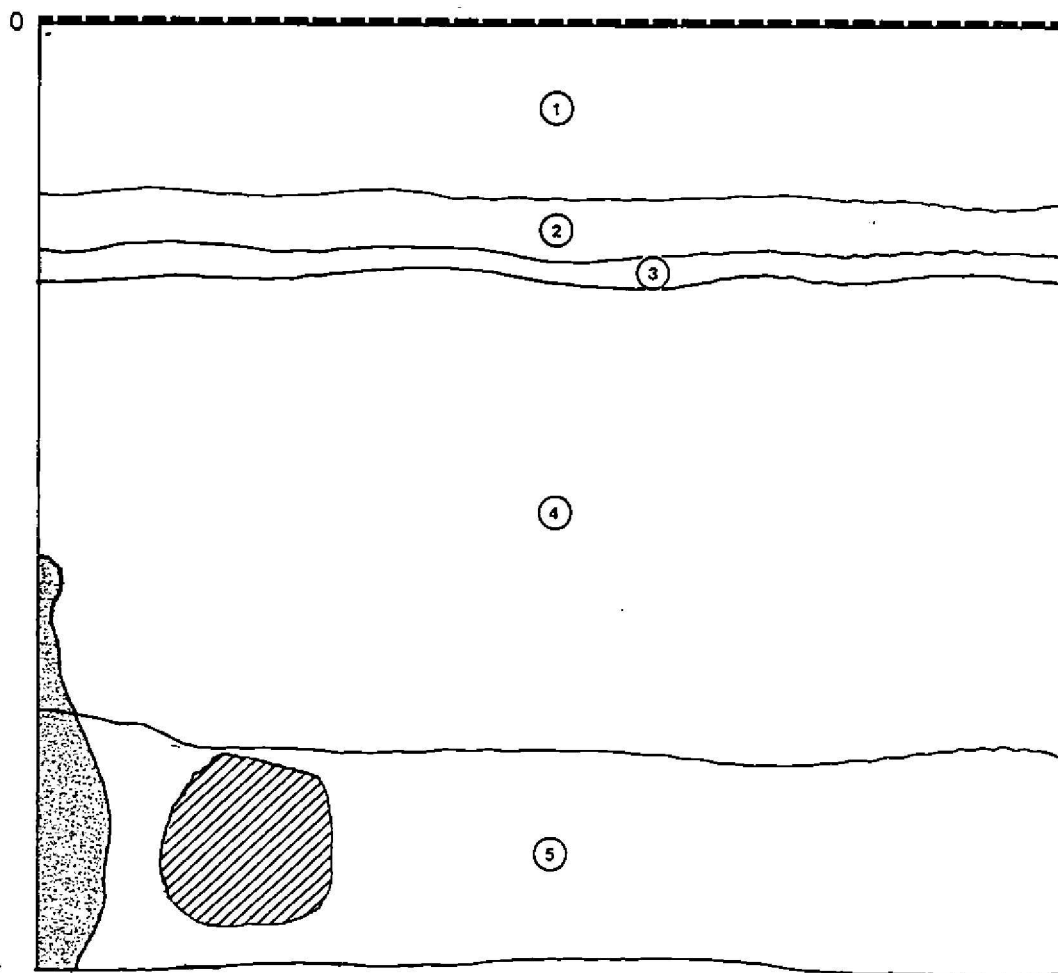
The excavation did not reveal evidence of any intact yard features or out buildings associated with the 19th century Plain house or any other structure. As mentioned above, the top of the large boulder found in the northern end of the trench was approximately 34 in. below the surface and extended into the east and west trench walls. As noted in the introduction, this may have been part of the Plain house foundation, perhaps a boulder in its southern



2 Test Trench 1 (TT1) looking southwest from near Hoffman Dr. 58-02 Hoffman Dr., located at the corner of 58th Ave., is to the right. The parking lot for St. John's Hospital extends beyond the test area. The backhoe used to dig the trench can be seen in the background (arrow).




3 Boulder exposed at north end of TT1 approximately 34 in. below the parking lot surface. A smaller rock can be seen in the east wall to the right (arrow).

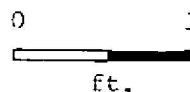


----- macadam surface

- ① fill under macadam (parking lot)
- ② pebbly fill layer
- ③ sandy soil with shells (fill)
- ④ brown sandy/silty soil with shell and pebbles (fill)
- ⑤ orange/brown silty sand (natural soil)

 boulder

 rock



wall, but if so, it turned out to be completely disturbed (see TT2 and Pit A).

A section of the trench's east wall was profiled (see Exhibit 4) and it was photographed in its entirety at 5 ft. intervals (see Appendix A).

In general, the soil sequence in this trench corresponds to what was found in the soil borings, both in composition and density (approximately 2 to 4 ft. of fill were documented). The fragmentary nature of the fill debris here and throughout the site indicates it was redeposited (trash from elsewhere deposited on the site) rather than a primary deposition such as a trash midden. After being drawn and photographed, TT1 was backfilled.

Test Trench 2 (TT2) PIT A

In an attempt to expose other boulders that might have been part of the former Plain house foundation, TT2 was opened running east to west across the northern end of TT1. This excavation did uncover additional boulders and rocks, but their pattern was undefined. Expanding TT2 to create Pit A exposed other boulders and rocks, but their placement, too, was completely haphazard (Exhibit 5). If this feature was once a foundation, it had been destroyed, possibly when 58-02 Hoffman Drive was constructed between 1891 and 1902 (Geismar 1990a:13).

Because of backhoe and site logistics, Pit A was irregularly shaped (see Exhibit 1). Again, a sequence of macadam/debris-laden

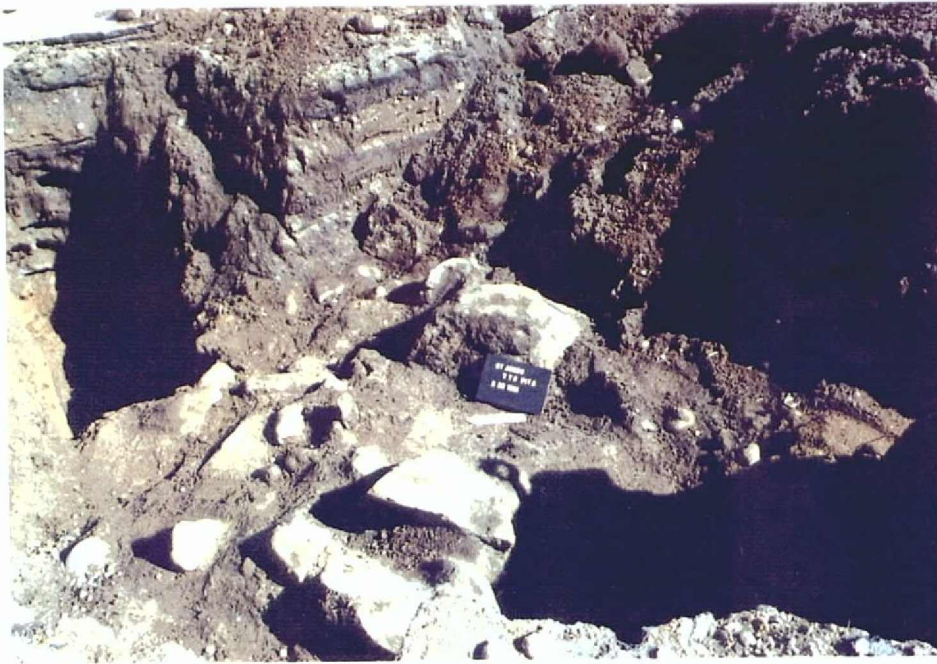
fill/natural soil was exposed and photographed (Exhibit 6) and the west wall was profiled (Exhibit 7). Concentrations of clam shells were exposed in the trash-laced fill found in the western portion of the pit. Screening through 1/4-in. mesh indicated a sandy natural soil with pebbles at approximately 4 1/2 ft. below the parking lot surface. At about 7 ft., a green-grey clay was encountered that was very wet, apparently because of its proximity to the water table. Excavation halted when this clay was reached.

Test Trench 3 (TT3)

While Pit A was being profiled, a 12-ft. trench was opened in the southern part of the site, approximately 120 ft. south of Hoffman Drive, in the area designated Phase 2. This small, shallow trench was taken to natural soil at about 4 to 5 ft. below the parking lot surface. Excavation terminated and the trench was backfilled when it was determined that the fill was relatively sterile and shallow in this part of the parking lot.

Test Trench 4 (TT4)

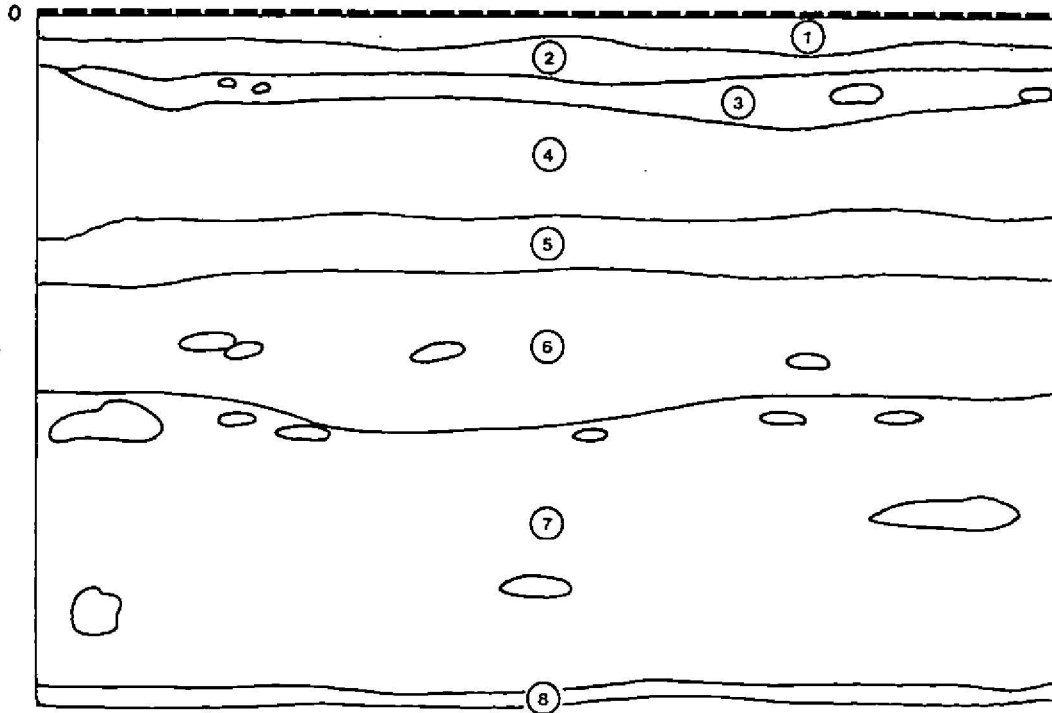
Excavation of a trench (unnumbered but indicated by an "x" on Test Plan, Exhibit 1) was initiated but aborted to open Test Trench 4 (TT4). This latter trench appeared better positioned to test the northern part of the site and avoided some site obstacles. TT4 ran approximately 80 ft. and was positioned to meet the southern part of TT1; its depth was approximately 6.7 ft. (see east wall profile, Exhibit 8).



5 Boulder and rock scatter (F1) exposed in TT2 and Pit A, possibly the highly disturbed remnants of a former house foundation. View is looking northeast.



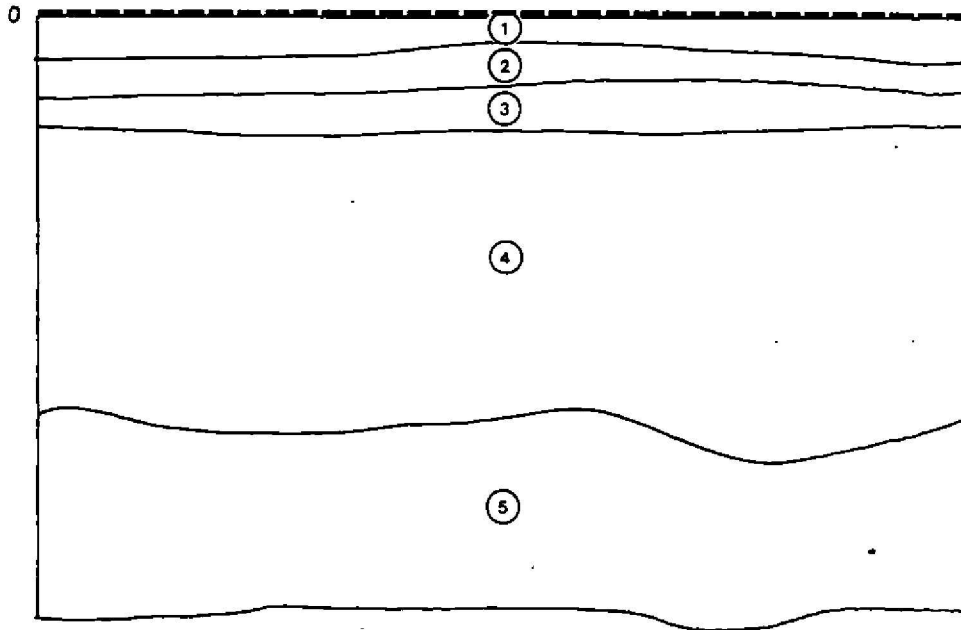
6 Stratigraphy in west wall of Pit A at deepest point of excavation (7 ft.). View is looking north west toward Hoffman Dr. St. John's Hospital can be seen in background across Hoffman Dr.



----- macadam surface

- ① brown sandy silty soil
- ② macadam surface
- ③ brown/orange sandy silt
- ④ very dark brown silt
- ⑤ dark brown silt, shell concentration
- ⑥ brown silty sand with cobbles and pebbles
- ⑦ orange/brown sandy silt with cobbles and pebbles
- ⑧ wet gray/green clay
- cobbles





----- macadam surface

- ① macadam surface and fill
- ② yellow/brown sandy soil
- ③ macadam surface and fill
- ④ rubble and cobbles, brown silty sand
- ⑤ orange/red/brown silty sand, fine-grained with cobbles

0 2
ft.

The trench contained construction debris--wood, a stone lintel, brick fragments--and terra-cotta tiles, approximately 8 in. square, with one bullnosed (curved) end. These were stamped DENNIS RUABOM/MADE IN WALES and were obviously relatively modern. What appeared to be a tile scatter was traced beyond the trench to the south and was revealed to be part of a stone, brick, and tile floor (Feature 2 [F2]; Exhibit 9) laid directly on the fill approximately 1 ft. below the parking lot surface (some of this "floor" was mortared, while parts of it were dry laid). The terra-cotta tiles were placed with the stamped name up and the curved end face down. Their position in relation to a stone slab and bricks indicated this seemingly upside down placement was not accidental and that this feature may represent some kind of improvised yard paving. A clear glass inkwell with somewhat enigmatic mold marks and a well-made but heat fashioned rim was found under F2. Its manufacture techniques suggest a late-19th or early-20th century date. No other features or artifacts of note were exposed. A photograph was taken of a portion of the trench's east wall (Exhibit 10) and it was profiled (see Exhibit 8). No further testing was undertaken in the southern part of the site.

Test Trench 5 (TT5)

TT5 was a 15-ft. long north/south trench opened in the Phase 2 test area. Its placement was to a degree contingent on accessibility since this part of the parking lot was being used on February 23. The trench was located in what appeared to be an undeveloped lot according to 20th-century atlases. Yet the fill in the northern portion of this small trench was found to contain a great deal of

wood construction debris (Exhibits 11 and 12), more than in any other test trench. The "2 by 4s" exposed in over 3 ft. of extensive debris were modern (that is, less than 2 in. by 4 in.), and the nails found in them and in other wood fragments, identified this material as being relatively modern. The trench was photographed (see Exhibit 11) and profiled (see Exhibit 12). No artifacts were collected. This trench as well as TT4, TT2, and Pit A were all backfilled. No further testing was deemed necessary.

CONCLUSIONS

No evidence was found of Revolutionary War activities, and the only clearly defined site activities were the fill episodes documented in every test excavation, at least three of them related to parking lot resurfacing. While modern debris found in the fill seems associated with these relatively recent parking lot repairs, the deeper fill is somewhat puzzling: it is surprising that an undated topographical survey, which is thought to date from about 1904 (Geismar 1990a:20), did not appreciably vary from modern elevations. This suggests that the older fill found in all the test excavations relates to the construction of houses on the block between 1891 and 1904.

Neither of the site's two exposed features--a highly disturbed, extensive rock and boulder scatter at a depth of about 3 ft. and an area paved with terra-cotta tiles, bricks, and stone at a depth of 1 ft.--are archaeologically significant. Consequently, no further testing or excavation is recommended.



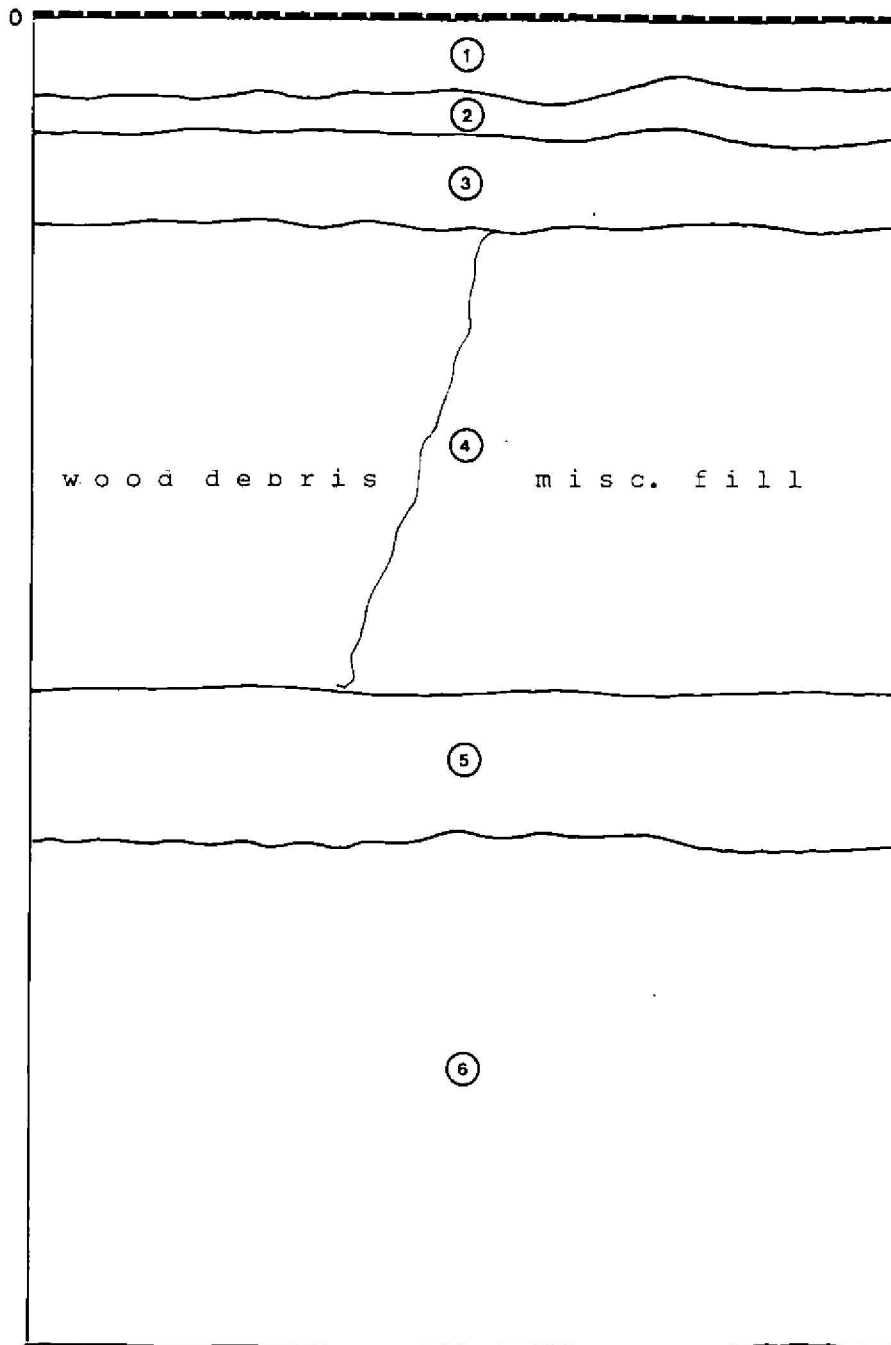
9 Terra-cotta tile, stone, and brick "floor" (F2) exposed just west of TT4. This feature, which was approximately 1 ft. below the surface, may represent a yard floor. The tiles were made in Wales.



10 Segment of east wall of TT4. Note shell and other fill debris just below surface (arrow).

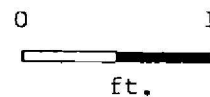


11 Southern end of TT5. Note dense concentration of wood building debris in the fill (arrow).



----- macadam surface

- ① macadam surface and fill
- ② macadam surface and fill
- ③ macadam surface and fill
- ④ construction material (wood) in S portion, fill in N part
- ⑤ orange/yellow/brown sand, dense cobbles
- ⑥ orange/red/brown silty sand



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ST. JOHN'S PROJECT FIELD TESTING APPENDIX Test Trench 1 (TT1), Eastern
Wall, Photographed in 5 ft. Segments (1-14) from North to South.

A

