FLATBUSH DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH, EXPANDED LANDMARK SITE, 890 Flatbush Avenue
Borough of Brooklyn.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 5102, Lot 1.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has under consideration the proposal
to expand the Landmark Site of the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church, a designated
Landmark. The proposed site will enlarge the presently landmarked site (the
land on which the Church is situated) to include the property and improvements
within the entire Tax Map Lot 1.

The Landmark and the original Landmark Site were designated March 15, 1966
(LP-0170).

On September 12, 1978, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public
hearing on the proposed amendment of the Landmark Site of the Flatbush Dutch
Reformed Church (Item No. 13). The hearing was continued to November 14, 1978
(Item No. 6). Both hearings were duly advertised in accordance with the
provisions of law. Two witnesses spoke in favor of the expansion of the Landmark
Site. There were no speakers in opposition to the amendment.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

At the southwest corner of Church and Flatbush Avenues in the Borough of
Brooklyn is a site of great historical and architectural significance. This land,
the property of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of the Town of Flatbush in
Kings County, has been hallowed ground for over three centuries. The church itself
was designated a New York City Landmark in 1966, but the larger site around it
also contains features of historic and architectural importance.

The Dutch settlement of Flatbush, then known as Midwout, [1] was begun about 1651
or 1652, and the town was laid out according to a plan, in contrast to the earlier
settlements which had grown haphazardly. The most central and desirable lots, which
were set aside for the use of the church, consisted of strips of land on what is
now the south side of Church Avenue. In addition, the church was given a portion
of the Canarsie Salt Meadows and rights to other areas of meadow and woodland in
the Town of Flatbush. So, the Dutch Reformed Church was established with the town
and, from the beginning, adequate provisions were made for its support.

On December 17, 1654, Director General Peter Stuyvesant ordered that a church
should be built in the new settlement. It was to be in the form of a cross, 65
feet long, 28 feet broad and 14 feet high under the beams, with a portion of the
rear to be reserved for a dwelling for the minister. The site selected for this
church was that now occupied by the present building. Dominie Johannes Theodorus
Polhemus, who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654 from Brazil where he had served

the Dutch West India Company, took charge of the Flatbush Parish, and the first regular service was held on the first Sabbath of January in the year 1655.

As the settlement at Flatbush prospered, it was decided to build a more substantial and permanent church. In 1698, a subscription was taken up among the inhabitants of Flatbush and New Lots to erect the second church building which was completed in 1699. The new church was built of local stone on the site of the first church and was 65 feet by 50 feet with a hipped roof and a small steeple.

Upon completion of the second church, the practice was begun of burying the dead under the building. All ministers who died after 1701 were interred beneath the church as were most others whose families could afford to pay the extra expense. As late as 1776, some of the soldiers who died in the Battle of Long Island were buried under the church.

The victory of the Americans in the Revolutionary War and the formative years of the new nation brought changes to Flatbush. It was an era of optimism and expansion. In 1786, Erasmus Hall Academy, a designated New York City Landmark, the first secondary school to be chartered by the Regents of New York State, was built just across Flatbush Avenue from the church on land which had been provided by the church.

The Reverend Thomas M. Strong, in his History of the Town of Flatbush states, "On the 19th of August, 1793, the inhabitants of the town of Flatbush... unanimously resolved to erect a new house for public worship. Certain conditions and stipulations were agree (sic) upon, and a building committee, consisting of the Trustees of the church, then five in number, and five Commissioners were appointed to carry their design into execution.... They engaged Thomas Fardon as the architect and master builder, and Simeon Back, Frederick Cleaveland, Abijah Baldwin, Gideon Seaman, and other carpenters under him. The master mason was John Sanford, who was assisted by his two brothers and others under him. The painting of the church, when completed, was done by Matthew Hall, the father of George Hall, the first Mayor of the city of Brooklyn." [2] Work was started December 5, 1793, and completed in December of 1796. The dedication took place in January 1797, just 142 years after the establishment of the church.

This church is the third to occupy the site at the corner of Church and Flatbush Avenues. The stones of the second church were used in the foundations of the present building. Above the foundations are three courses of squared sandstone blocks, and the body of the building is of grey Manhattan schist. Originally, the window and door surrounds and reveals were faced with brick, a detail common to masonry construction in the New York area at that time. These bricks were covered up in the mid-19th century when the present Romanesque style round-arched lintels were installed. Over the years, other changes were made to the church. The extension on the west end, or apse, was added in 1887 to accomodate the organ and choir-loft. Alterations of the interior took place in: 1836, when the original high backed pews were lowered; 1857, the first organ was placed in the east gallery; 1862, new pews were added and the old high pulpit was removed; 1889-1890, the stained glass windows were installed; 1922, the 1862 dais was replaced with a replica of the orginal pulpit. The stained glass windows by the Tiffany Studios comemmorate the descendants of many of the early settlers of Flatbush.

The third church is a fine example of American 18th century architecture. Although built in the early Federal period, the church is strongly Georgian in style and feeling. The tower, belfry, lantern (with clock), and steeple are of excellent design, and their elegance is all the more pronounced because of the simple restraint of the rest of the building. The octagonal wooden lantern has slender Tuscan columns at the corners. These columns support entablature blocks which are topped by graceful urns. The four principal sides of the lantern have round openings for the four clock dials and the remaining four sides have oval windows with delicate traceried muntins. The tall wooden steeple is also octagonal and is terminated by a gilded weather vane. The bell marking the hours, which was cast in Holland, was a gift to the church from the Honorable John Vanderbilt in the year 1796. This bell has tolled at the death of every president of the United States.

The cemetery adjoining the church, which occupies much of the expanded Landmark site, is the last resting place of most of the members of the early Dutch families of Flatbush. Some of these names, among others, are Lott, Vanderbilt, Martense, Lefferts, Schenck, Vanderveer, Stryker, Cortelyou, Bergen, Van Sicklen, Suydam and Schoonmaker. As there were no churches of other demoninations nearby, members of several non-Dutch families, such as the prominent Clarksons, were buried in the cemetery. Most interesting is the grave of "Richard Alsope Esq. of Middletown, Conn., Distinguished by genius and poetical talent, Died suddenly while on a visit to this place August 20, 1815. Aged 54 years." His monument, which lies flat on the ground, is in the shape of a full-sized coffin. One of the oldest legible stones in the cemetery is the headstone of Abraham Lott who died in 1754. It has the typical arched shape used in the 18th century and displays a naive carving of a winged cherub at the top. The lettering in Dutch reads as follows:

> Hier Lyt Het Lichaem
> Van Abraham Lott
> Overleeden op den 29ste
> July 1754 Jn T 70
> Jaar syns Leven.

The Clarksons and the Couwenhovens are entombed in above-ground vaults of white marble. These, as well as most other old marble stones in the cemetery, are now almost undecipherable. Many of the sandstone tablets are, likewise, badly eroded, but a few of the early headstones are of harder material and are quite well preserved. There are some 25 different types and species of trees planted in the cemetery which add immeasurably to its beauty. The cemetery has, at all seasons of the year, an air of peace and tranquility.

Until 1830, the consistory of the church had met in a room in the Erasmus Hall Academy. In that year, a spot in the cemetery, just south of the church, was prepared by placing the tombstones flat on the ground and a wooden one-story building for the use of the consistory was erected above the graves.

By 1871, there was need for more space for the Sunday school and other church activities. A fairly large chapel was then erected at the northeast corner of Grant Street (Snyder Avenue) and Flatbush Avenue. It was built of stone in the Victorian Gothic style and was similar in apperance to an English country church. This chapel was demolished in 1922, the same year in which construction of the present church house was begun.

The years during the First World War saw the role of the church expanding greatly as a center of community service for all people of the area and, to meet this need, a large multi-purpose building was required. The Brooklyn architectural firm of Meyer & Mathieu was engaged to design a church house which would satisfy these demands.

Hans C. Meyer, was born in New York in 1885, graduated from Columbia University and later taught architecture in the public schools of New York. For a number of years, he was associated in a partnership with Joseph Mathieu. He was a member of the American Institute of Architects. He died in July, 1946, at Sea Cliff, Long Island. [3] Joseph Mathieu, also a member of the American Institute of Architects, was born at Baltimore, Maryland, August 4, 1885. He began his career by working as a draftsman in the office of the Supervising Architect at the United States Treasury Department in Washington, D.C. from 1908 to 1912. He worked for the architectural firm of Warren & Wetmore in New York City from 1913 to 1917 and then for the New York firm of Starret & Van Vleck from 1917 to 1920. [4]

During the years 1920-1938, Mr Meyer and Mr. Mathieu were in partnership at 316 Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. They designed many large and important buildings such as churches, parish houses, auditoriums, court houses and theaters. They were particularly well known for their church designs, and they won several awards in this field. They were often engaged as consulting architects for churches built in other areas of the eastern United States. [5]

A major feature of the expanded Landmark site is the church house which Meyer and Mathieu designed for the Dutch Reformed Church of Flatbush. It was carefully planned and beautifully executed. Work was begun October 14, 1922, the cornerstone was laid on April 8, 1923, and the completed building was formally opened on October 27, 1924. The many needs of the congregation were well met in the new church house. The basement contains a large recreation hall which also serves as a dining room, a kitchen and pantry, a social gathering room with a fireplace, as well as a stage and dressing rooms. The main floor has a spacious auditorium, to the right of which is a small chapel. To the left of the auditorium, are two large Sunday school rooms with fine stained glass windows. Across the front of the first floor are the consistory room, the church office and library, and a formal parlor. The central section of the second floor comprises gallery seats for the auditorium and the remainder of the space is taken up by numerous meeting and Sunday school rooms.

The exterior of the Church House is designed in the neo-Georgian style, so widely favored during the early decades of the 20th century. The walls are of red brick laid in Flemish bond. The principal facade is two-stories in height and nine bays wide. The five central bays are brought forward a slight distance to create a pavillion featuring six two-story cast stone fluted Corinthian pilasters which support a heavy entablature with large modillion blocks beneath the cornice. Above the cornice is a solid parapet which was originally topped by four classic urns. The central section of the parapet contains a long horizontal panel which bears the carved inscription, "DEDICATED TO THE GLORY OF GOD AND TO THE SERVICE OF MANKIND." The entablature and parapet continue on all sides of the building but on the sides, the frieze is of brick instead of stone and the parapet is executed in alternating sections of solid brick panels and open stone balustrade. The entire building is built on a high basement composed of cast stone blocks which project forward in front of the central pavillion to form a broad terrace enclosed by a cast stone balustrade and having a wide expanse of steps leading to the ground.

The four window openings and the main entrance which front on the terrace are all round arched. Within these arches are cast stone lunettes; each with an oval medallion in the center and draped swags on either side. These arched openings also have stone impost blocks and keystones. There is another entrance on the west side of the building and immediately to the right of it is a five-sided projecting one-story brick bay with limestone parapet. This bay houses the chancel of the chapel on the first floor.

Fine proportions, delicacy of design, and symmetry and balance are all conspicuous features of this beautiful building which continues to serve the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church and the Flatbush community.

A handsome wrought-iron fence surrounds the expanded Landmark site, enhancing the complex of church, church house, and cemetery.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Dutch word "Midwout" translates as "Middle Woods."

2. Rev. Thomas M. Strong, History of the Town of Flatbush, (New York: Thomas R. Mercein, Jr., 1842), pp. 99-100. Rev. Strong, born in Cooperstown, New York, April 28, 1787, died in Brooklyn, New York, June 14, 1861, served as minister of the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church from 1822 to 1861.

3. (Hans C. Meyer obituary), New York Times, July 7, 1946.

4. Joseph Mathieu, Resumé for a National Roster of Scientific and Specialized Personnel, United States Civil Service Commission, unpublished manuscript, 1941.

5. Meyer, Hans C., and Mathieu, Joseph, Meyer & Mathieu, Architects, Brooklyn, New York, New York, (n.d.), (n.p.)

DESIGNATIONS

Pursuant to the provision of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission amends its designation of the Landmark Site of the Flatbush Dutch Reformed Church to all additional property and improvements within Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 5102, Lot 1.

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Photo: Hannibal F. Zumbo

Parish House

Meyer & Mathieu   1924