

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
June 25, 1996, Designation List 273  
LP-1837

**NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, AGUILAR BRANCH**, 172-174 East 110th Street, Manhattan. Built 1898-1899, enlarged with new facade 1904-05; architects, Herts & Tallant.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1637, Lot 141.

On July 15, 1991, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch, and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 4). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. A total of eight speakers testified in favor of the proposed designation; all eight of those speakers were in favor of this as well as other items on the calendar at the hearing, but urged the Commission to continue its work in Harlem. Three speakers declined to take a position regarding this proposed designation until such time as that work continues. A representative of the Library noted that the Aguilar Branch was scheduled for renovation.

#### Summary

The Aguilar Branch of the New York Public Library initially was built for the Aguilar Free Library Society, which was founded in 1886 as an independent library to provide circulating books for immigrant Jews. The society was named after Grace Aguilar (1816-1847), a popular British novelist and essayist of Sephardic Jewish descent, and this building serves as a reminder of the legacy of private philanthropic support of the city's libraries during the late nineteenth century. A first Aguilar Free Library was built on this site in 1898-99. In 1903, the library consolidated with the New York Public Library, and a year later with funds from Andrew Carnegie, the building was extended at the rear, a third story was added, and the existing facade was enlarged and redesigned. Both the first building and the extant Classical Revival structure were designed by the firm of Herts & Tallant, which is best known for its theater designs. The Aguilar Free Library is an impressive example of the firm's non-theater work. Part of the New York Public Library system for nearly ninety years, this branch, which was renovated in 1993-96 and reopened in May 1996, continues to bear Grace Aguilar's name.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### The Namesake of the Aguilar Free Library<sup>1</sup>

Grace Aguilar (1816-47), born near London, England, was a member of a Sephardic Jewish family which had been in England since the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in the mid-seventeenth century. Her father, Emanuel, a merchant and the presiding *Parnass* (Philosopher) of a Sephardic Congregation, had educated his precocious daughter. At age 14, Grace had published a volume of poetry, and when she was 26 she published *The Spirit of Judaism*, which made her famous. She published four other major works during her lifetime, as well as essays and poems in British and American journals.

Grace Aguilar was also an insistent advocate for English translations of Hebrew holy texts. She inspired Rabbi Isaac Leeser to publish the first English version of the Pentateuch in 1845, and she was the impetus for Dr. Abraham Benisch's 1851 English translation and transcription of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> Shortly before her death, a group of young Jewish women sent her a message of appreciation reading, "Until you arose, it has in modern times never been the case that a woman in Israel should stand forth as the public advocate of the faith of Israel."<sup>3</sup>

Grace Aguilar died of a stroke at the age of 31 while visiting her brother in Frankfurt, Germany. After her death, her mother, Sarah, dedicated herself to the publication of Grace's seven remaining unpublished works. At the end of the nineteenth century her novels, poetry, and essays were widely popular, especially among young people, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. The Aguilar Free Library's nine copies of the *Vale of Cedars*, her posthumously-published novel about the Spanish Inquisition, were in constant circulation.<sup>4</sup> That novel and *Home Influences*,<sup>5</sup> a narrative about a group of young people living together with their aunt, were her most popular works.

### The Aguilar Free Library's Origins<sup>6</sup>

As a popular novelist and advocate of the written word, Grace Aguilar was a highly appropriate namesake for the Aguilar Free Library Society. The Society was incorporated November 15, 1886. The board of directors, consisting of affluent, philanthropic Jews, organized a library "for the free circulation of carefully selected literature, in the homes of the people of this City,

with distributing branches in localities where the Jewish population was dense." They intended principally "to meet [this] great need in the lower districts of the city, where the influence of wholesome literature is a most important factor in uplifting the mental and moral tone of a class that woefully lacks refining influences."<sup>7</sup>

Among other terms for free circulating libraries, the City's 1886 Act of Incorporation required that the Society acquire a minimum of \$20,000 worth of real estate, 10,000 books, and maintain a circulation of at least 75,000 volumes per year. The international financier, philanthropist, and Society trustee Jacob H. Schiff (1847-1920) gave the Society \$10,000 in 1887, and the Society raised another \$10,000 through subscriptions.<sup>8</sup> It then purchased The Hebrew Free School at 206 East Broadway.

By 1889, the Aguilar Free Library Society had established three branches: one at 721 Lexington (at East 58th Street) which had been the Young Men's Hebrew Association; and two in buildings formerly owned by the Hebrew Free School Association on the Lower East Side, 206 East Broadway (at Jefferson Street) and 624 East Fifth Street (between Avenues B and C). Both organizations also donated their libraries to the Society. The Society aimed to serve communities of immigrants, particularly Jewish ones, whose neighborhoods were far from the existing Bond Street and Ottendorfer branches of the New York Free Circulating Library.

The Aguilar Society continued to maintain its three branches during the 1890s.<sup>9</sup> On May 1, 1896, the Society opened its fourth branch at 176 East 110th Street, because "a great demand for a library exist[ed] in this section."<sup>10</sup> The area was developing quickly, due in part to the recent construction of the Second and Third Avenue elevated railroad lines. Also, most of the residents of this neighborhood were Jewish, both of Sephardic and Ashkenazic origin.

The Society's president, Judge Samuel Greenbaum, predicted in the *Eighth Annual Report, 1896* that "at the end of another year it will be necessary to largely extend this library." The Society voted to construct an entirely new library building, the first and only time the Society had done so. In 1898, the Society purchased a 25-by-100-foot midblock lot at No. 174 East 110th

Street for this purpose. The Society's *Tenth Annual Report, 1898* declared that "the new library will be a model one. As such it can not fail to exert a powerful influence for good and to become a potent factor in the upbuilding of the neighborhood where it is located." The report further noted that the new facility was to have an open-shelf system "for the first time in the history of the Library."<sup>11</sup>

#### The Architects, Herts & Tallant<sup>12</sup>

Henry Beaumont Herts (1871-1933) and Hugh Tallant (1870-1952) formed their firm, Herts & Tallant, in 1897; the firm remained very active until it dissolved in 1911. The firm was celebrated for its theater designs, particularly in the Times Square area of New York City. However, the firm also carried out commissions for residential architecture. The Aguilar Library is a rare example of the firm's designs for an institutional building. Herts, the son of Henry B. Herts, the founder of the Herts Brothers decorating firm, studied architecture and engineering at Columbia University, while Hugh Tallant received two degrees from Harvard College. They both attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, where they met. Upon their return to New York, they formed their partnership.

Among their extant New York City theater designs are the New Amsterdam (1902-03), the Liberty (1904), the Lyceum (1902-03), and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (1907-08). Herts alone designed the Shubert and Booth Theaters (1912-13).<sup>13</sup> Examples of their designs for residential buildings include the Isaac L. Rice mansion (1901-03), 346 West 89th Street at Riverside Drive (a designated New York City Landmark), and No. 49 West 71st Street (1909) in the Upper West Side/Central Park West Historic District. They also designed the City Athletic Club on West 54th Street. The Aguilar Library is an impressive example of the firm's non-theater work.

#### The Initial Library Design<sup>14</sup>

The Aguilar Free Library Society selected the design of the first building on the East 110th Street site after holding a competition.<sup>15</sup> The board of the Society called in Professor William R. Ware of Columbia University to help judge the competition entries which were submitted by architects Oscar Lewinson, Henri Fouchaux, Robert D. Kohn, and

Herts & Tallant. The firm of Herts & Tallant was awarded the commission for its late Romanesque Revival/Art Nouveau-inspired scheme.<sup>16</sup> The three-story symmetrical facade was composed of two monumental rusticated limestone piers supporting a segmental, rusticated limestone arch. This limestone ensemble framed an intricate recessed three-story, three-bay cast-iron screen. This was the "first real attempt" made by Herts & Tallant to incorporate the decorative use of cast iron, a utilitarian and structural material, into the facade's design.<sup>17</sup> The central first-story bay projected and was flanked by paired entry doors and five-step stoops. The 110th Street branch of the Aguilar Free Library opened on June 19, 1899, and by November 1, 1900 contained 15,000 books. It was partially financed by the \$39,708 appropriation given in 1898 by the City of New York.<sup>18</sup>

#### The Enlarged Library

In 1899, President Greenbaum announced that Andrew Carnegie had granted a "princely gift" of \$5,200,000 "toward the construction of forty-two (eventually sixty-one) branch libraries..."<sup>19</sup> to the City. At the same time he acknowledged that "it is clear that the time is very near at hand when all the free circulating libraries will necessarily come under one general control."<sup>20</sup> By 1901, the library needed to expand. On February 24, 1903, the Aguilar Free Library was reluctantly absorbed into the new New York Public Library system of neighborhood libraries.<sup>21</sup>

In 1904 the City, using both Carnegie and City funds, purchased the lot at 172 East 110th Street. Although the joists and floors of 174 East 110th Street were maintained, the building's facade was removed. The City then retained Herts & Tallant, the original architects, to design a new facade (fig.1) twice as wide and a story higher than the first facade, with new floors to match the existing stories. This reconstructed building opened on November 29, 1905, the thirteenth library in New York City funded by the Carnegie gift.

Basic organizational elements of the first facade, an overscaled masonry enframing around central iron-and-glass bays, are repeated in the new design. However, the overall style of the building was changed from the original Romanesque/Art Nouveau. Instead, the redesigned Classical Revival facade uses colossal flanking pilasters supporting an entablature and enclosing

orders of engaged iron colonnettes in an almost theatrical manner, as if a proscenium arch were framing a stage. This design gives the Aguilar Branch a particularly distinctive character which sets it apart from other contemporary branch library buildings.

In 1903, following the consolidation with the New York Public Library, the Aguilar Library's sizable collection of Yiddish materials was transferred to the Jewish Division at the main branch, forming the nucleus of holdings which have since grown to great importance. The Aguilar Branch has been in continuous use as a library, although today the residents of the surrounding community are predominantly Hispanic and African-American. In 1993, the branch was temporarily closed, and the building was given a major renovation by the architectural firm of Gruzen Samton.<sup>22</sup> The Aguilar Branch reopened in May 1996.

#### Description

The Aguilar Branch of the New York Public Library (fig.1) is located on the south side of East 110th Street between Lexington and Third Avenues. The three-story steel-frame building is faced with limestone above a granite base, enclosing a screen of galvanized iron and glass. It is enriched with terra-cotta ornament. The Classical Revival facade is composed of two monumental fluted, limestone piers with carved granite tori (fig.2) decorated with a guilloche pattern and plinths. The terra-cotta Ionic capitals support a limestone entablature (fig.3). At the entablature, the architrave, frieze, and cornice are enriched by terra-cotta ornamental details, including fascia, egg-and-dart, dentil, and floral courses. At either end of the frieze, Renaissance-inspired rinceaux and heroic nudes border and hold the enframed cartouche, running the length of the frieze, on which is incised the inscription, "New York Public Library"(figs. 3 and 4). The building

is topped with a flat roof.

The stone ensemble frames a three-story, three-bay, intricate glass and galvanized-iron, recessed screen (fig.5). The bays are separated by attenuated colonnettes engaged to decorative friezes separating the stories. The orders of the colonnettes are Doric at the first floor, Ionic at the second, and Corinthian at the third. (At the time of designation, the restoration of the facade was incomplete. The first story frieze and Doric colonnettes had not been replaced.) The details of the cast-iron transom bars and mullions include leaf-and-dart and waterleaf-and-tongue motifs. The building's entrance, located in the east bay, is approached by a set of four granite steps, the walls of which are topped with carved, oversized consoles (fig. 2). Both plinths of the fluted piers are also adorned by carved, oversized consoles. The recessed door has a decorative cast-iron enframing and a cast-iron ornamental screen over the transom. (The original double-doors have been replaced.) The window bays contain paired one-over-one, aluminum sash and single-pane transom lights (both installed during the renovation). The flagpole projecting at the central bay on the second story is not original. In the 1993 renovation, a handicap-access ramp was installed in the areaway at the East 110th Street entrance (fig. 6) and the interior renovated. Although the installation necessitated the cutting of the western stone wall of the entry stairs, no carved stone ornament was removed. A non-historic cast-iron fence that lines the ramp was installed at the time of the alteration and bars placed on the first story windows.<sup>23</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. For further information see, Beth-Zion Lask Abrahams, "Grace Aguilar: A Centenary Tribute," *The Jewish Historical Society of England, Transactions Sessions, 1945-1951*, 16, 137-148.
2. *Ibid.*, 143. The Pentateuch are the first five books of the Bible. The Hebrew Bible corresponds to the Christian Old Testament.

3. Ibid., 146.
4. As cited in: Aguilar Free Library Society of the City of New York, *Seventh Annual Report, 1895*, 26.
5. By 1868, *Home Influences* had been published in 24 editions. In the introduction to the novel Aguilar wrote that she believed that sentiment influenced thought and thought, action. Therefore, to influence both sentiment and action, parents and teachers needed to refine the thoughts of children by providing good literature. Abrahams, 144.
6. See Aguilar Free Library Society of the City of New York, *Annual Reports, 1886-1903*, *passim*; Harry Miller Lydenberg, *History of The New York Public Library* (New York, 1923), 241-246, 532; and Sam P. Williams, *Guide to the Research Collections of the New York Public Library* (Chicago, 1975), 27.
7. Aguilar Free Library Society, *First Annual Report 1889*, 5. These are statements of the Society's President, Judge Samuel Greenbaum.
8. Lydenberg, 243.
9. Although the location of each of the three branches was changed to a nearby building at least once during the decade.
10. Aguilar Free Library Society, *Ninth Annual Report, 1897*, 9.
11. See Aguilar Free Library Society, *Eighth Annual Report, 1896*, 12; *Tenth Annual Report, 1898*, 9, 22. The land was purchased from Louise Lese on May 12, 1898, for the sum of \$9,500. *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, 30.
12. H.B. Herts obituary, *New York Times*, March 28, 1933, 19:1; H. Tallant obituary, *New York Times*, December 9, 1952, 33:2. For further detail on Herts & Tallant, see the Landmarks Preservation Commission's files for the Isaac Leopold Rice Mansion, the New Amsterdam Theater, and the Shubert Theater.
13. The New Amsterdam, Lyceum, Shubert, and Booth Theaters are designated New York City Landmarks. The Brooklyn Academy of Music is in the Brooklyn Academy of Music Historic District.
14. *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, 9, 19, 25, 30- 31; *Thirteenth Annual Report, 1901*, 10.
15. *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, 30
16. A photograph of the first building appears as the frontispiece of Ibid. and is also published in Abbott Halstead Moore, "Individualism in Architecture: The Works of Herts & Tallant," *Architectural Record* 15 (January 1904), 78, 83.
17. Moore, 78.
18. *Tenth Annual Report, 1898*, 18; *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, 19.
19. Ibid., 9 and Robert A.M. Stern, G. Gilmartin, and J.M. Massengale, *New York 1900: Metropolitan Architecture and Urbanism, 1890-1915* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 98.
20. *Eleventh and Twelfth Annual Reports, 1899-1900*, 9.
21. The Aguilar Free Library became part of the Circulation Department (now the Branch Libraries) of the New York Public Library. Also see: Christopher Gray, "A Library Branch That Wasn't Designed by the Book," *New York Times*, June 9, 1996, VIII:7.
22. The work was carried out under Notice Of Review Number 93044, 11/09/1992 for facade restoration. Notice of Review Number 960007, 11/21/95 was issued for window replacements.
23. Some original elements have been maintained in the renovation of the interior. The interior is not included in the designation.



## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch, has a special character and special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Aguilar Branch of the New York Public Library was among only a few circulating libraries built particularly to benefit poorer Jewish immigrants in New York and was the only building commissioned and erected by the Aguilar Free Library Society; that it was enlarged and given a new facade after the consolidation with the New York Public Library in 1903 with funds from Andrew Carnegie; that it serves as a reminder of the legacy of private philanthropic support of the city's libraries during the late nineteenth century; that it is a distinguished Classical Revival style design by the architectural firm Herts & Tallant, predominantly theater architects; that it retains great architectural integrity; that it continues to be used as a public library; and that it continues to be called the Aguilar Branch, after a popular British novelist and essayist, Grace Aguilar.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch, 172-174 East 110th Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1637, Lot 141, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch  
172-174 East 110th Street, Manhattan

Fig. 1 Overall view of facade

Photo: Carl Forster



Fig. 2 Detail: Limestone pier on granite base



Fig. 3 Detail: Ionic capitals supporting entablature

Photos: Carl Forster





Fig. 4 Detail of frieze

Photo: Carl Forster



Fig. 5 Detail: Three-story, three-bay recessed screen

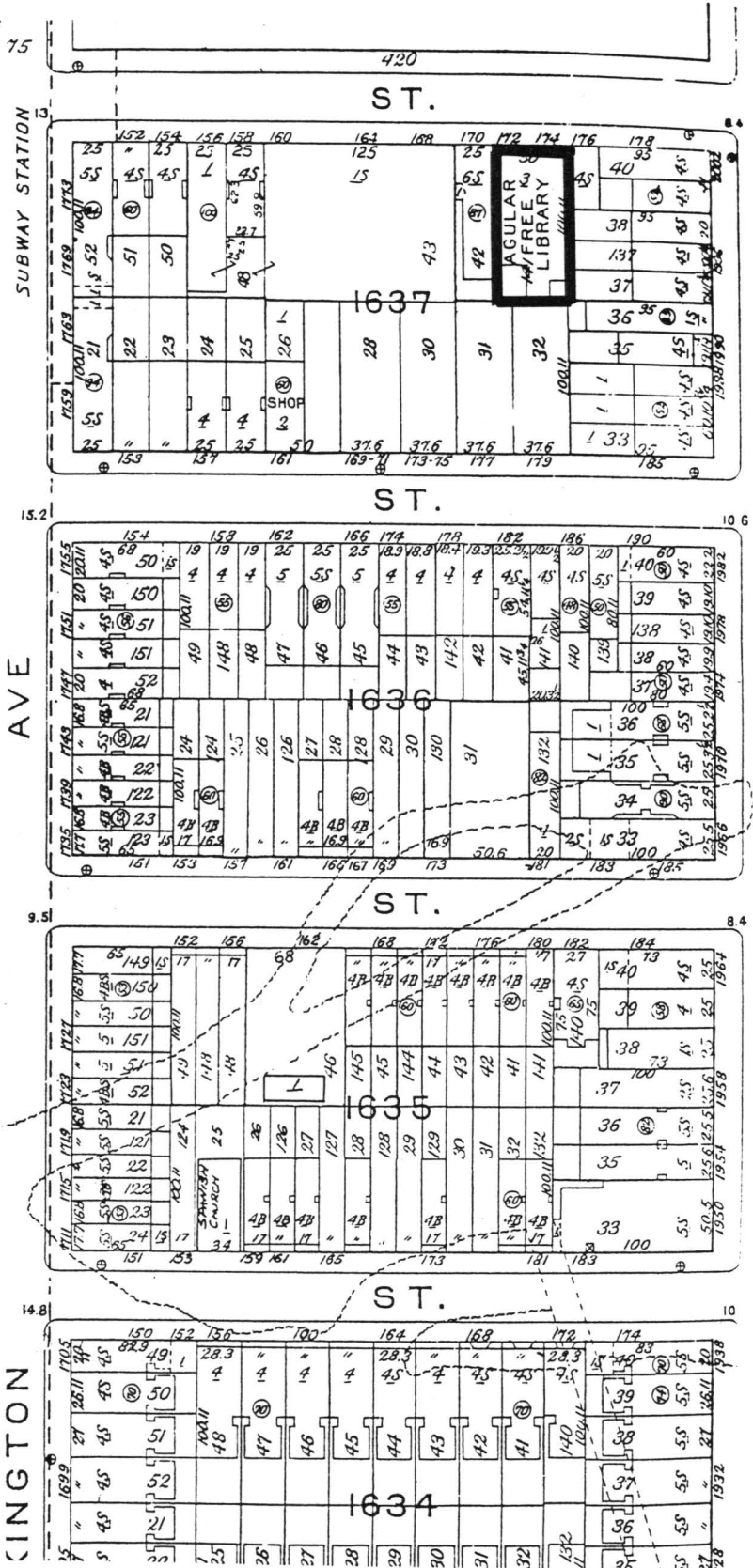
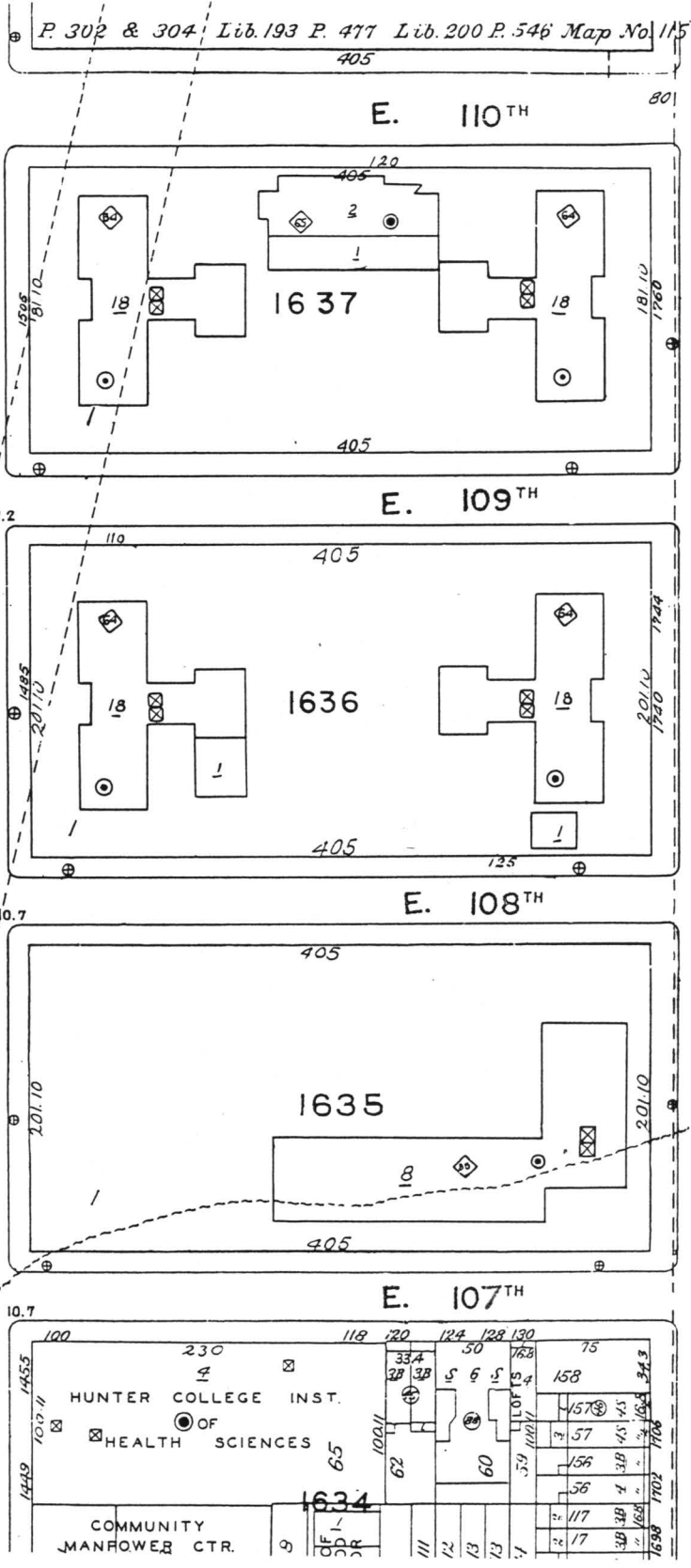
Photo: Carl Forster



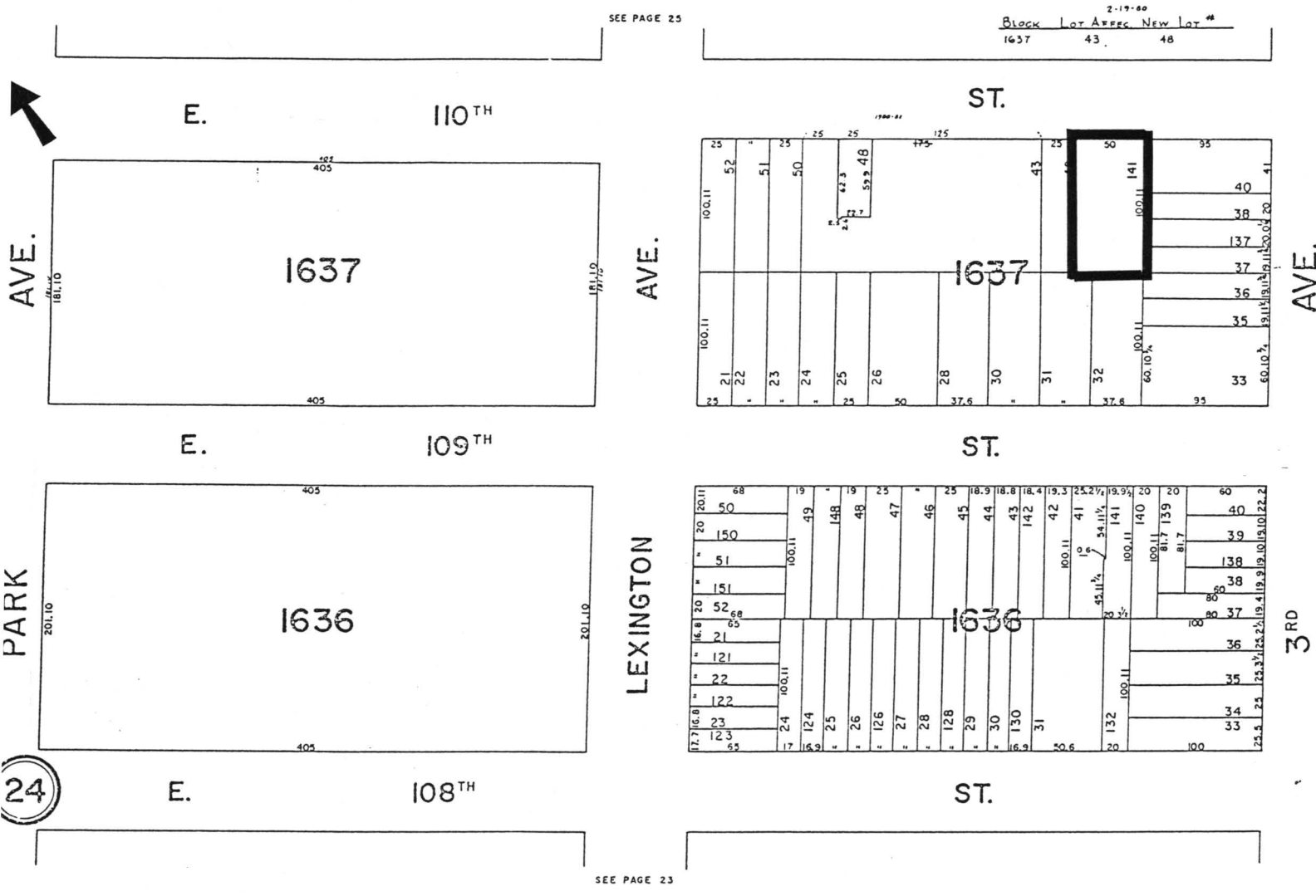
Fig. 6 Detail: Ramp in areaway

Photo: Carl Forster

# PART OF SECTION 6



New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch, 172-174 East 110th Street, Manhattan  
 Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 1637, Lot 141  
 Source: Sanborn, *Manhattan Land Book* (1995-96), pl. 124



New York Public Library, Aguilar Branch, 172-174 East 110th Street, Manhattan  
 Landmark Site: Manhattan Tax Map Block 1637, Lot 141  
 Source: Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map