

**FIRST REFORMED CHURCH OF JAMAICA**, 153-10 Jamaica Avenue, Queens.  
Built 1858-59, architect Sidney J. Young; two-story extension 1902, architect Tuthill & Higgins.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 10097, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at the northern lot line where it intersects with the eastern sidewalk line of 153rd Street, then extending easterly along the northern lot line approximately 120 feet, then extending southerly to the northern sidewalk line of Archer Avenue, then extending westerly along the northern sidewalk line to the eastern sidewalk line of 153rd Street, then northerly along said sidewalk line to the point of beginning (to correspond approximately to the extent of Jamaica Green).<sup>1</sup>

On November 21, 1995, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the First Reformed Church of Jamaica and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Six people spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received several letters and other expression of support for this designation.

## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### Summary

The First Reformed Church of Jamaica,<sup>2</sup> built in 1858-59, is one of the finest Early Romanesque Revival structures in New York. This building is the third church constructed on this site for this congregation, which was formed before 1702. Designed and constructed by master carpenter Sidney J. Young, with the assistance of master mason Anders Peterson, this building followed the design precedent set in Brooklyn by Richard Upjohn in his Church of the Pilgrims (1844). The building's asymmetrical towers, round-arched openings, and corbel tables show a sophisticated use of brickwork and reflect the growing popularity and influence of the architectural style known as the *Rundbogenstil*. This building replaced a classical-style wooden church which had been constructed in 1833 and burned in 1857. That building, in turn, replaced a smaller, octagonal structure which had been erected in 1715. The First Reformed Church met here until the 1970s when the building was acquired by the City of New York as part of an urban renewal plan. From 1982 to 1990, this church was used by another congregation known as the Glorious Church of God in Christ. Current plans call for the conversion of the structure into a performing arts center.



### The First Reformed Church of Jamaica<sup>3</sup>

The earliest recorded document from the First Reformed Church of Jamaica is a baptismal record of 1702. It is known, however, that a congregation of Dutch settlers had been meeting in the area for some time before this. They had moved into western Queens from Brooklyn and held their services in the Presbyterian Church which was owned by the town of Jamaica and thus available to all. By 1715, the consistory of the Dutch Church decided they needed their own building, and a wooden, octagonal-shaped edifice with a steep roof and cupola was constructed on this site, close to Jamaica Avenue.

Because Jamaica was still a small town, the church did not get its own pastor until 1741. Prior to the Revolution, the ministers were generally supportive of the British. In 1775, however, Solomon Froeligh, an ardent Whig, assumed the ministry and began a regular attack on the British from his pulpit. When the British gained control of New York, Froeligh was forced into hiding, and the church building was used as a storehouse for the British soldiers.

Following the war, there were enormous changes at the First Reformed Church. In 1792, for the first time, one-half of the sermon was delivered in English and the other half in the traditional Dutch. By the 1830s, the growth in the congregation necessitated a larger building, and the cornerstone for a Classical Revival style, frame church was laid in 1832. On June 2, 1833, the minister preached the last Dutch sermon in the 117-year-old church, and on the following day the old church building was torn down.

The congregation continued to thrive in this building until 1857. On November 19 of that year, just after the congregation had completed refurbishing the building, a fire started in a carriage manufactory nearby and spread to engulf the church. It was one of twenty buildings which were destroyed that night. Immediately the church consistory made plans to rebuild. While some members of the congregation wished to move the new building away from the noise and traffic of Jamaica Avenue, others wanted to stay on the site, emphasizing the importance of tradition. Members of the congregation were sent out to analyze other church structures in the New York area for ideas on rebuilding. One person sent on this mission was church member and master carpenter Sidney J. Young. On July 22, 1858, the church consistory

accepted Young's plans and specifications for the new church building, designed in the Early Romanesque Revival style.

### The Early Romanesque Revival Style

In the 1840s, James Renwick introduced this style to the United States in his building for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. By mid-century, the round-arched style had become this country's dominant style of Romanesque architecture.<sup>4</sup> By 1858, the Early Romanesque Revival had become an important style for church architecture in New York City. This trend began with Richard Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn (1844). Not only was this the first use of the round-arched Early Romanesque Revival in America, but the placement of asymmetrical towers flanking the broad gable of the basilica plan set the precedent for most American churches in this style.

Shortly after the completion of the Church of the Pilgrims, James Renwick followed with the Church of the Puritans (1846) at Union Square and Leopold Eidlitz and Otto Blesch continued the tradition with St. George's Church (1846) on Stuyvesant Square. In Brooklyn as well, there were many Early Romanesque Revival churches: Plymouth Church (1849), South Third Street M. E. Church (1855), South Congregational Church (1857), and the Hanson Place Baptist Church (1856-57).<sup>5</sup> In Jamaica the success of Saint Monica's Roman Catholic Church (1856-57) also undoubtedly had an influence on the First Reformed Church's choice of this style.

Because the Gothic Revival style had become so closely identified with the Anglican Ecclesiological movements in England and the United States, other denominations turned to earlier and simpler forms of the Romanesque from which to adapt a style for their churches. Unlike the Anglican (Episcopal) Church with its emphasis on ritual, the other Protestant sects concentrated their efforts on preaching, and the basilica plan of the Romanesque better met their needs. However, the nineteenth-century architects did not simply revive the round-arched medieval style but sought to adapt it to contemporary needs and taste.

Germany, with its strong Calvinistic tradition, took the lead. In order to disassociate the new style from the medieval Romanesque, the Germans called their adaptation the *Rundbogenstil* or the round arch style. Though based on the round-arched Romanesque, this new style drew motifs from all

periods which used the round arch, pairing them with simple geometric shapes. Thus round-arched openings and corbel tables were set against high flat brick walls which were derived from the Lombard style, the Romanesque of Northern Italy. The strong vertical emphasis made evident by tall asymmetrical towers on the facade was further reinforced by flat pilaster strips making no reference to a base or capital. Elaboration was held to a minimum. Motifs such as corbel tables and window openings were finished with simple square edges. The Germans also borrowed motifs from other periods. From the early Gothic they adopted the lobed quatrefoil which corresponds with their frequent use of the Venetian window with its lobed head. During the 1830s such well-known architects as Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Friedrich von Gärtner were making the *Rundbogenstil* popular throughout Germany.

#### The First Reformed Church Building

The cornerstone for the new building was laid in September 1858, with the dedication of the new structure taking place in October 1859. In addition to the designs of master carpenter Young, this building used the talents of numerous local artisans. The masonry work was done by master mason Anders Peterson, who had also worked on another nearby Queens site, St. Monica's Roman Catholic Church, as well as many others. The interior of the First Reformed Church boasted elaborate frescoes by Manhattan artist J. Stanley D'Orsay, new gas lighting fixtures, upholstery, and an organ.

In 1900, another ambitious building program was begun on the church.<sup>6</sup> A one-story chapel, the Degrauw Memorial Chapel, was added to the west side of the church. Designed by congregant Nicholas W. Hausman, this structure has since been demolished although evidence of its existence is still discernible on the side of the building. During the next two years, the main section of the church building was refurbished and a two-story extension containing a choir loft and several small rooms was added to the south end of the structure. The plans for this addition were by Jamaica architect Cuyler B. Tuthill of the firm of Tuthill & Higgins.<sup>7</sup> This addition, though even more simplified in its design, carries on the decorative scheme of the Early Romanesque Revival with its large, round-arched openings and arcades. Tuthill's addition replaced an apse which had been added to the church sometime in the 1870s. Between 1900 and 1902, the interior

was fitted with new frescoes, a new organ, and new stained-glass windows. Sixteen windows were commissioned for the church, and all but one were designed and executed by Emil Zundel, a member of the congregation from Hollis. Eight of the windows in the sanctuary were designed as memorial windows and depicted specific Biblical scenes as painted by a nineteenth-century artist named Hoffmann. One of the windows, which depicts the Good Samaritan, was designed by Frederick Stymetz Lamb and was executed by the New York firm of J. & R. Lamb, Church and Memorial Art Workers.<sup>8</sup> (While the windows on the main facade remain largely intact, those on the east elevation have been damaged.)

#### Description

The First Reformed Church of Jamaica sits in a small park called Jamaica Green,<sup>9</sup> near the busy shopping area of Jamaica Avenue. An iron picket fence set on a concrete base surrounds the building and encloses a broad lawn. Faced in brick above a brownstone water table, the main elevation of the church is composed of a broad, gabled front flanked by a four-story tower on the east and a three-story tower on the west. A short flight of brownstone steps with iron railings leads to two round-arched portals which are outlined by brick reveals and filled by panelled wooden doors. Between the two doors a decorative corbel depicting the original church building has been set in the brick. The inscription on the corbel reads: "First church built A.D. 1715/ Rebuilt 1833/ Destroyed by fire November 16, 1857/ This edifice dedicated to the worship of the Triune God October 8th, 1859." A brownstone belt course, which includes a course of dentils in the center section, runs above the first-story level and serves to link the slightly projecting towers to the central section. In the center section of the second story are three large, round-arched windows that are emphasized by brick reveals. A raking brownstone cornice set off by a corbel table caps this center section of the facade.

The towers at each side are treated in a similar manner. Brownstone courses set in the brick mark each level of the towers. At the first story, a narrow, round-arched window is set in brick reveals and framed by pilaster strips cut by round-arched panels. These motifs continue in the upper sections of each tower, with variations in the sizes and shapes of the windows, including rondels at the third

story of the eastern tower. Blind arcades and corbel tables are the only other decorative elements. At the fourth story, the larger tower is pierced by a group of three louvered openings in each facade. Octagonal corner turrets, with crenellation between them, crown each tower. Metal caps, painted green, top the turrets of the eastern tower.

The original section of the church is rectangular in plan and extends straight back from the front towers for five bays. The decorative scheme is the same on both sides. Originally covered with slate, the pitched roof is now covered by asphalt shingles. On the walls, tall brick pilaster strips separate each overscaled window opening and extend from the water table to the brick cornice. A bold corbel table is located just below this cornice line. Opaque window screens cover the windows, including the tower windows. The western elevation shows some deteriorating brickwork in the cornice area. There is also evidence of the one-story chapel which was added to this side of the building in 1902, but subsequently removed. Much of this elevation is covered by vines and the window closest to the tower has been bricked in.

A two-story, two bay, brick addition, also added in 1902, is at the rear of the building. It has a shallow hipped roof with asphalt shingles and is slightly narrower than the original church structure. On each side there is one large round-headed window opening and one which is mostly filled with brick. The three bays at the rear are marked by large blind, round-arched forms. Simple, decorative forms recessed in the brick are located near the

cornice level and between each window. Another access door has also been cut in the lower part of the southwestern-most window of the original church.

#### Subsequent Church History<sup>10</sup>

After the site of the church was incorporated into the Central Jamaica Urban Redevelopment Project, the First Reformed Church, under the leadership of Rev. Dean Wolbrink, sold the building in 1973 to the City of New York. The First Reformed Church renovated another larger building nearby for its use while the old structure remained vacant and was the object of extensive vandalism. The building was slated for demolition in 1975, but community groups fought for its preservation. The building was designated a New York City Landmark in 1979 by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, but the City's Board of Estimate building turned back the designation later that year. Between 1982 and 1990, the Reverend Elder James Hamlet and his church, the Glorious Church of God in Christ, rented the building from the city. It is now under the jurisdiction of the City Department of Housing Preservation and Development. Current plans call for the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation to make the building a local performing arts center.

Report prepared by  
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#### NOTES

1. The Tax Map lot reflects the remapping carried out in conjunction with the urban renewal plan. However, the conditions shown on the City Surveyor's Tax Map do not correspond to actual site conditions.
2. Much of the information in this report was taken from the *First Reformed Church Designation Report* (LP-1018), prepared by Ruth Selden-Sturgill of the Research Department of the Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1979. The building was designated by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on March 13, 1979, but the designation was turned back by the City's Board of Estimate.
3. The early history of the First Reformed Church comes primarily from the following sources: Henry Onderdonk, Jr., *History of the First Reformed Dutch Church of Jamaica, Long Island* (Jamaica: The Consistory, 1884); Reformed Church of America, *Jamaica Consistory Records, 1857-59*; and John Garney Van Slyke, *The Reformed Church of Jamaica, Long Island* (New York: Baker & Godwin, Printers, 1876).
4. As identified by Carroll L. V. Meeks, "Romanesque Before Richardson in the United States," in *Art Bulletin*, 25 (March 1953), 17-33. For information on the development of this style, see Karl Mollinger, *Elemente des Rundbogenstiles* (München: E. Roller, 1846); Robert Dale Owen, *Hints on Public Architecture*



- (New York: George P. Putnam, 1849); and William Whewell, *Architectural Notes on German Churches* (Cambridge: J. & J. J. Dighton, 1842).
5. See Andrew Dolkart's "The City of Churches: The Protestant Church Architecture of Brooklyn, 1793-1917," (M.S. thesis, Columbia University School of Architecture, 1977).
  6. Information on this later phase of building and decoration comes primarily from the following: *Our Fair in Colonial Hall, February 21 and 22, 1901* (Jamaica: The Fair Committee, 1901); *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Nov. 1, 1902 and Dec. 1, 1902; and the clippings file on Jamaica, New York, at the Queens History Division, Queensborough Public Library.
  7. Tuthill & Higgins was a Jamaica-based architectural firm which had been established in 1897 by Cuyler B. Tuthill and John B. Higgins. Prior to 1900 the firm had designed the Jamaica Emergency Hospital and the Jamaica South School, as well as the Interstate Casino. See Dennis S. Francis, *Architects in Practice New York City 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1980), 101. In 1907 the firm designed a small office building at 90-33 160th Street, rebuilt c. 1933 as La Casina.
  8. The main windows are 17 feet high and because of Zundel's exceptional skill, a minimal number of constructional bars were used. It was thought at the time that any piece of glass over 12 inches in size needed the support of a constructional bar. Since these bars generally detract from the design, Zundel's ability to handle the glass worked to the advantage of his scenes. Little is known of Zundel; like most late nineteenth-century stained-glass workers, he followed the pictorial and landscape design precedents set by American artist John LaFarge, whose work at Trinity Church in Boston was widely known. Unlike the medieval technique of working in stained glass which arranged small pieces of glass into a mosaic for a jewelled effect, modern techniques utilized larger pieces of glass. These larger pieces of glass, often built up in layers to give an opalescent effect, were worked into a pictorial scene set into a landscape.
  9. Jamaica Green was constructed in 1985 in conjunction with the adjacent federal office building. A plaque on the gate which opens to the front walk of the church reads: "Jamaica Green. A Victorian park surrounding the former First Reformed Church. Dedicated November 11, 1985. Sponsored and designed by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development - Bureau of Open Space. Greater Jamaica Development Corporation." All new walks and steps in Jamaica Green are of brown granite. Cast-iron lamp posts have been placed along the walks in several locations.
  10. "A Reverent Restoration," *Daily News*, Oct. 3, 1982, B8; "Minister Appeals for Help to Save Historic Church," *Daily News*, Aug. 14, 1983, [np]; "Landmark Church Has A New Home," *Daily News*, March 4, 1984, [np].

## 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 First Reformed Church of Jamaica 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 First Reformed Church of Jamaica, designed by Sidney Young and erected 1858-59, is one of the finest examples of the Early Romanesque Revival styles in New York City; that the building, with its gable front and asymmetrical towers, reflects the design precedent set by Richard Upjohn's Church of the Pilgrims and the growing popularity of this style for non-Anglican churches during this mid-century period; that this is the third church building constructed on this site since 1715 for the First Reformed Church; that this building was designed and built by talented craftsmen from the congregation, including master carpenter Sidney Young and master mason Anders Peterson; that the building features fine design and solid brickwork; that renovations in 1902 added a choir loft to the southern end of the structure, designed by Cuyler B. Tuthill, as well as stained-glass windows by Emil Zundel and Frederick S. Lamb; and that the building's preservation and proposed re-use contribute a sense of history to the neighborhood.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 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 First Reformed Church and designates Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 10097, Lot 1 in part, consisting of the property bounded by a line beginning at the northern lot line where it intersects with the eastern sidewalk line of 153rd Street, then extending easterly along the northern lot line approximately 120 feet, then extending southerly to the northern sidewalk line of Archer Avenue, then extending westerly along the northern sidewalk line to the eastern sidewalk line of 153rd Street, then northerly along said sidewalk line to the point of beginning (to correspond approximately to the extent of Jamaica Green), as its Landmark Site.



First Reformed Church of Jamaica, 153-10 Jamaica Avenue, Queens.  
Jamaica Avenue facade from the northeast.

Photo: Carl Forster, Nov. 1995



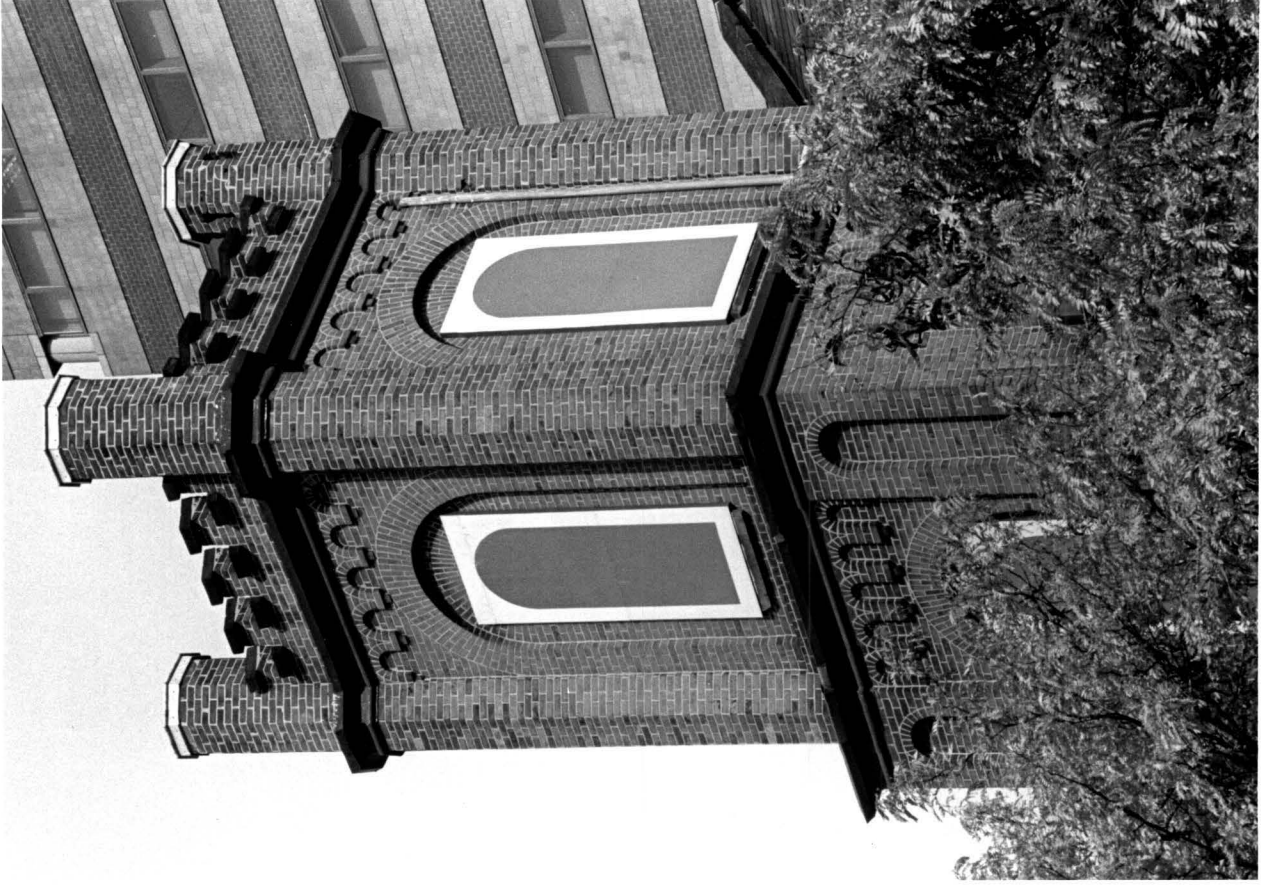
Detail of entrance doors



153rd Street elevation

Photos: Carl Forster





Top of west tower

Photos: Carl Forster



Top of east tower



East elevation, showing the base of the east tower



East elevation from Archer Avenue

Photos: Carl Forster



153rd Street and Archer Avenue elevations, showing 1902 addition, from the southwest

Photo: Carl Forster

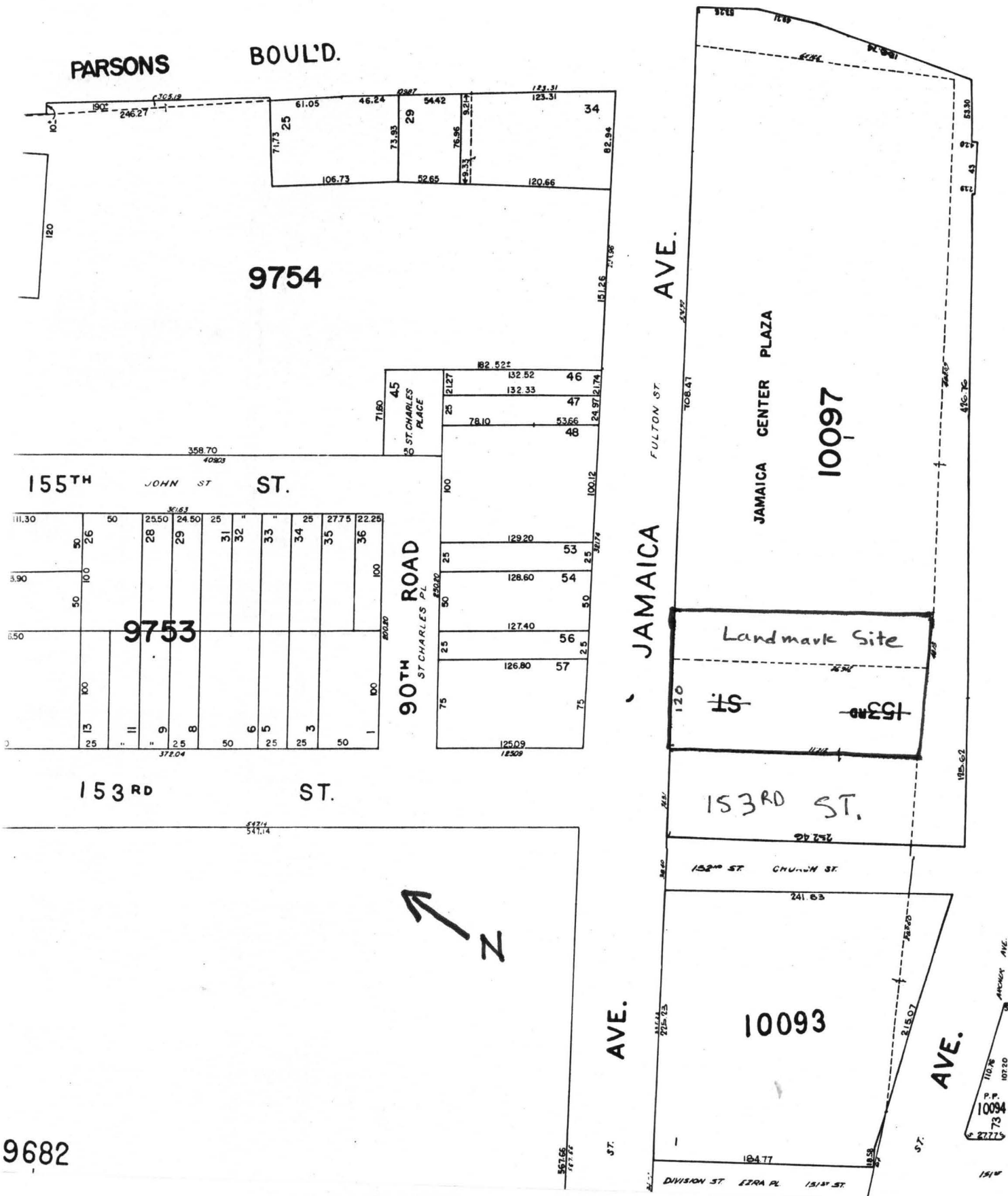


First Reformed Church of Jamaica  
Jamaica Avenue facade

Photo: LPC files, c. 1979







First Reformed Church of Jamaica, 153-10 Jamaica Avenue, Queens.  
 Tax Map Block 10097, Lot 1 in part.

Source: New York City Dept. of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map