

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
January 13, 1998; Designation List 287  
LP-1978

**NEW UTRECHT REFORMED DUTCH CHURCH CEMETERY**, 8401-8427 16th Avenue, 1602-1622 84th Street, and 1601-1621 85th Street, Brooklyn. Established, c. 1653-1654.

Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6325, Lot 1.

On November 18, 1997, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery (Item No. 3). The hearing was duly advertised according to the provisions of law. There were eight speakers in favor of designation, including the minister of the church representing the Consistory. There were no speakers in opposition. The Commission received one letter in favor of designation.

#### Summary

The New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery, established around 1653-1654, before the church was organized, is an important reminder of the town's earliest period of development. The cemetery was centrally located on the village's Main Street, now 84th Street, and the original church was constructed adjacent to it in 1700. The cemetery encompasses approximately one acre of land and contains gravestones and memorials dating from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, representing much of the town's long history. It includes the family plots of the earliest New Utrecht families, including the Van Brunts, Cortelyous, Cowenhovens, Cropseys, and Bennetts; a communal, unmarked grave of American Revolutionary War soldiers; and an area near the intersection of today's 16th Avenue and 84th Street where church members of African descent (both slave and free) were buried. Approximately 1,300 people have been interred in the cemetery during the past three centuries.



## DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

### History of New Utrecht and the Reformed Dutch Church<sup>1</sup>

The town of New Utrecht was one of the first six towns established in Kings County.<sup>2</sup> Located in southwestern Brooklyn, in what is now known as Bensonhurst, New Utrecht was named after the Dutch city of Utrecht, home of Cornelius Van Werkhoven, a member of the Dutch West India Company who first began purchasing land from the Nyack Indians in 1652. He was attracted by this high ground with a clear view of the bay and the narrows between Staten Island and Brooklyn. After Van Werkhoven's death in 1655, his employee, Jacques Cortelyou, received permission from the Company to lay out and sell lots to create a town. By 1660 there were eleven houses in the village, and Governor Peter Stuyvesant granted New Utrecht a charter in 1661. The first residents, who bore such Dutch names as De Sille, Terhune, Jacobsen, Corlear, Van Dyke, Van Brunt, and Beeckman, had to travel to Flatbush or Flatlands for religious services, so in 1677 the community of 26 families organized its own church. The first building they constructed, completed in 1700, was an octagonal-shaped stone structure with a peaked roof surmounted by a belfry with an iron cross and a large rooster weathervane.<sup>3</sup> This building was located facing the village's Main Street (today's 84th Street, near 16th Avenue)<sup>4</sup> close to the northeast corner of the cemetery, which had been established as early as 1653-1654. The tower of the church, the tallest structure in the neighborhood, was used by sea captains as a navigational aid. During the Revolutionary War, New Utrecht was one of several points of encounter which constituted the important Battle of Long Island, in which the American forces were badly outnumbered and outmaneuvered by General Howe's British troops. With the American retreat to Manhattan, the building of the New Utrecht Reformed Church was occupied by British soldiers and used first as a hospital, a prison, and then a riding school. The troops held target practice on the church's weathervane and in the cemetery, destroying many of the earliest headstones. After the war, the people of New Utrecht returned to their church and repaired it. Two blocks away,<sup>5</sup> in front of a small school built by the church, they erected a Liberty Pole in 1783 to commemorate the departure of the British.

### The Cemetery<sup>6</sup>

The cemetery of the New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church was established before the first church building was constructed. The earliest settlers buried their dead near their homes. Since the houses were fairly closely spaced, this became a communal cemetery, beginning in 1653-54.<sup>7</sup> The church and cemetery were central to the life of the village, indicated by their location and the large tract of land allotted to them. In 1828, when the new church building was built two blocks from the cemetery, the church still owned all the intervening land.

The original church was located near where the Metropolitan Baptist Church (erected as the St. John's German Evangelical Church) now stands, facing 84th Street. The location of a grave within the cemetery was a sign of an individual's or a family's importance to the community. Clustered closest to the church are the family plots of the earliest New Utrecht families, including the Van Brunts, the Cortelyous, the Lotts, the Cowenhovens, the Cropseys, and the Bennetts. Other family groups are distributed throughout the cemetery, some plots marked by low posts and railings, and others with graves situated in close proximity to each other. While most of those buried here were clearly of Dutch lineage and members of the church, there are also, at some distance from the building, a few graves marked by a cross with Scotch-Irish or Italian names. Behind the extant church (where the first church once stood) is a communal, unmarked grave of American Revolutionary War soldiers. In the northwest corner, near the intersection of 16th Avenue and 84th Street, is the area where Africans (both slaves and free) were buried, unmarked by any gravestones. Even though Africans were always allowed membership in the Reformed Dutch Church (as indicated on a list of the earliest members of the church showing "Zwaan, the Negro, and Christine, his wife"),<sup>8</sup> they were buried without markers up to the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup>

The church kept extensive records during its long history. Most of the earliest, however, dating from 1653 to 1840, were lost or destroyed, making it difficult to compile a complete account of the burials which took place here. The sextons of the church kept ledger books, called "The Book of the Dead," listing all the burials they performed. The

earliest recorded burial we know about is that of Adelaide Summens, which took place in 1775. The majority of recorded burials took place during the nineteenth century, but the cemetery is still in active, although limited, use, and the most recent burial occurred in 1997. According to the latest count of the recorded burials, approximately 1,300 people have been interred here.

Despite the early founding date of the cemetery, the earliest surviving headstones date from the late eighteenth century. During the Revolutionary War, when the British occupied the church, the soldiers used the tombstones in the cemetery for target practice. In addition, many early headstones were made of less durable material such as brownstone which has not lasted over time.

Most of the stones are arranged in rows across the cemetery from 84th Street to 85th Street (approximately north to south). This arrangement allows for the inscriptions to face east (toward the old church and the location of the second coming of Christ, as believed by the faithful of the church). The extant stones of the eighteenth century are of red sandstone or brownstone, with the curving tops typical of this period. During most of the nineteenth century, limestone was commonly used for the stones, and they have eroded badly. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, polished granite was used with the result that these inscriptions and designs are the clearest and most legible.

There is a wide variety of types of designs and inscriptions on the headstones in the cemetery. While many have very simple family names and dates, others, especially those of the eighteenth century, are inscribed with evocative poetry, such as:

Behold and see as you pass by,  
As you are now so once was I;  
As I am now you soon will be,  
Prepare for Death and follow me.

The tombstones of the late nineteenth century are more highly decorated, often carrying designs such

as funerary urns, or they are shaped like obelisks. Infrequently occurring designs include engraved, or Celtic crosses, or the square and divider representing the Freemasons. The Dutch Reformed sect considers this kind of tombstone decoration ostentatious, and so it can be assumed that these people were friends of influential members of the church, or had converted to the church from another religion.

In addition to the tombstones, close to the northeastern corner of the cemetery is a monument erected in 1916 by the Daughters of the American Revolution honoring General Nathaniel Woodhull, a hero of the Revolutionary War, who was wounded during the Battle of Long Island and died near here. Not far away is a granite column erected in memory of two local doctors who gave their lives caring for their neighbors during a cholera epidemic in 1856.

The cemetery currently occupies approximately one acre of land on 16th Avenue, between 84th and 85th Streets. Slightly trapezoidal in form with its two shorter sides being approximately 184 feet long, the side bordering 16th Avenue is 224 feet long, and the fourth side is 236 feet long. The western part of the cemetery was cut off when 16th Avenue was laid out and graded. Beyond this, there have been minimal changes to the graveyard. Maintenance efforts have included the resetting of stones and rearrangement of landscaping. In 1913, a cast-iron fence was installed around the perimeter of the property. To deter vandalism, it was replaced in the 1960s by a seven-foot-high, chain-link fence with an entrance on 85th Street. During 1927, a wall was erected on 85th Street when the street was graded. (The grade of the entire cemetery is higher than the surrounding streets.) Today, many of the stones have fallen over and the vegetation is overgrown, but the family groups are still intact.

Report prepared by  
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Research Department

### NOTES

1. The history of the development of this area was compiled from the following sources: "New Utrecht" in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, Kenneth T. Jackson, ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 821-822; Henry R. Stiles, *History of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn*, (NY: W.W. Munsell & Co., 1884), 255-269; Jerome Hoffman, *The Bay Ridge Chronicles* (New York: Bay Ridge Bicentennial Committee of Planning Board 10, 1976); *Historical Discourse Delivered on the 18th of October, 1877 at the Celebration of the 200th Anniversary of the Reformed Dutch Church of New Utrecht, L.I.*, Rev. David S. Sutphin, Pastor of the Church; Charlotte Rebecca Bangs, *Reminiscences of Old New Utrecht and Gowanus*, 1911, n.p.; *New Utrecht*, Brooklyn: *Brooklyn Eagle*, 1946; and various clippings in the New Utrecht file of the Local History room of the Brooklyn Public Library.
2. The others being Flatlands, Flatbush, Brooklyn, Bushwick and Gravesend.
3. A painting of this early structure hangs in the vestibule of the present church building.
4. This location is close to the site of the present Methodist Episcopal (formerly Methodist Episcopal) church, constructed in 1898 for the St. John's German Evangelical Church.
5. Which is now in front of the present church building.
6. Information about the cemetery has been obtained from church records, including "The Book of the Dead," compiled by the various sextons of the Church; as well as U.S. Department of the Interior: Heritage, Conservation, and Recreation Services, National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, "New Utrecht Reformed Church Complex (Boundary Increase)" (Form submitted by Peter Shaver, New York State Historic Preservation Office, October 2, 1997).
7. This date is from the *History of the Metropolitan Baptist Church, 1652-1898*, in the church archives.
8. According to Hoffman, up to one-sixth of the population of rural Kings County consisted of slaves until around 1820.
9. National Register nomination.

## 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 Utrecht Reformed Dutch Cemetery 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.

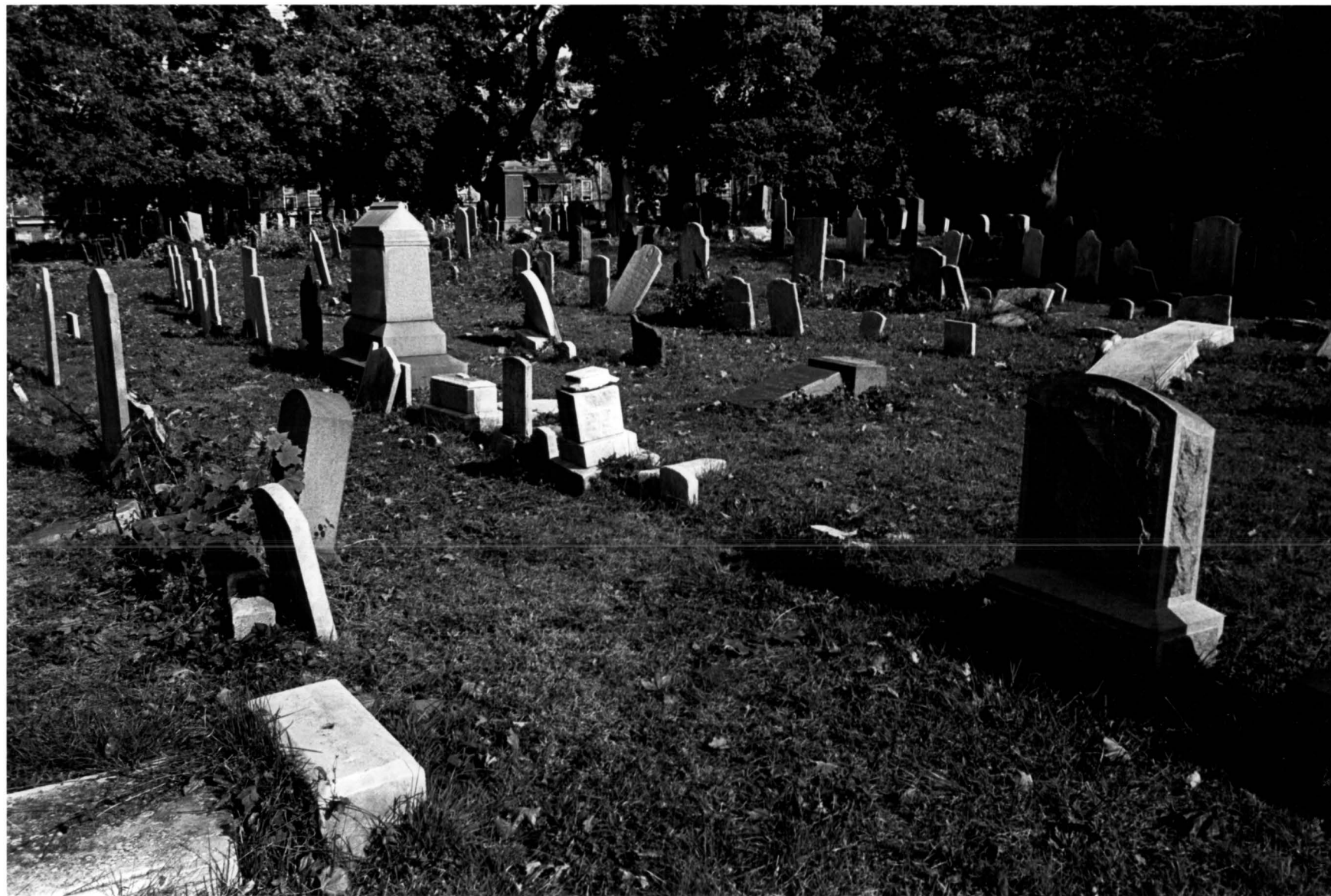
The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Cemetery, established in 1653-54, before the church was organized (in 1677), is a rare surviving Dutch colonial era burial ground; that the cemetery was adjacent to the first building of the Dutch Reformed Church which stood near the town's Main Street (now 84th Street) from 1700 through 1828; that the cemetery encompasses approximately one acre of land and that more than 1,300 people have been interred here during its long history; that the earliest gravestones were destroyed by British soldiers when they occupied the church during the Revolutionary War; that the extant gravestones, of sandstone, limestone and granite, dating from the late eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, represent much of the town's history, and include many of New Utrecht's founding families, such as the Bennetts, the Van Brunts, the Cowenhovens and the Cropseys; that this cemetery also includes numerous Africans in unmarked graves near the northwestern corner, and Revolutionary War soldiers in a mass grave located behind the site of the original church building; and that, in addition to its religious and familial importance, this property is a unique reminder of the history of New Utrecht, from its earliest period of development to the current time.

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 New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Cemetery, 8401-8427 16th Avenue, 1602-1622 84th Street, and 1601-1621 85th Street, Brooklyn, and designates Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6325, Lot 1, as its Landmark Site.

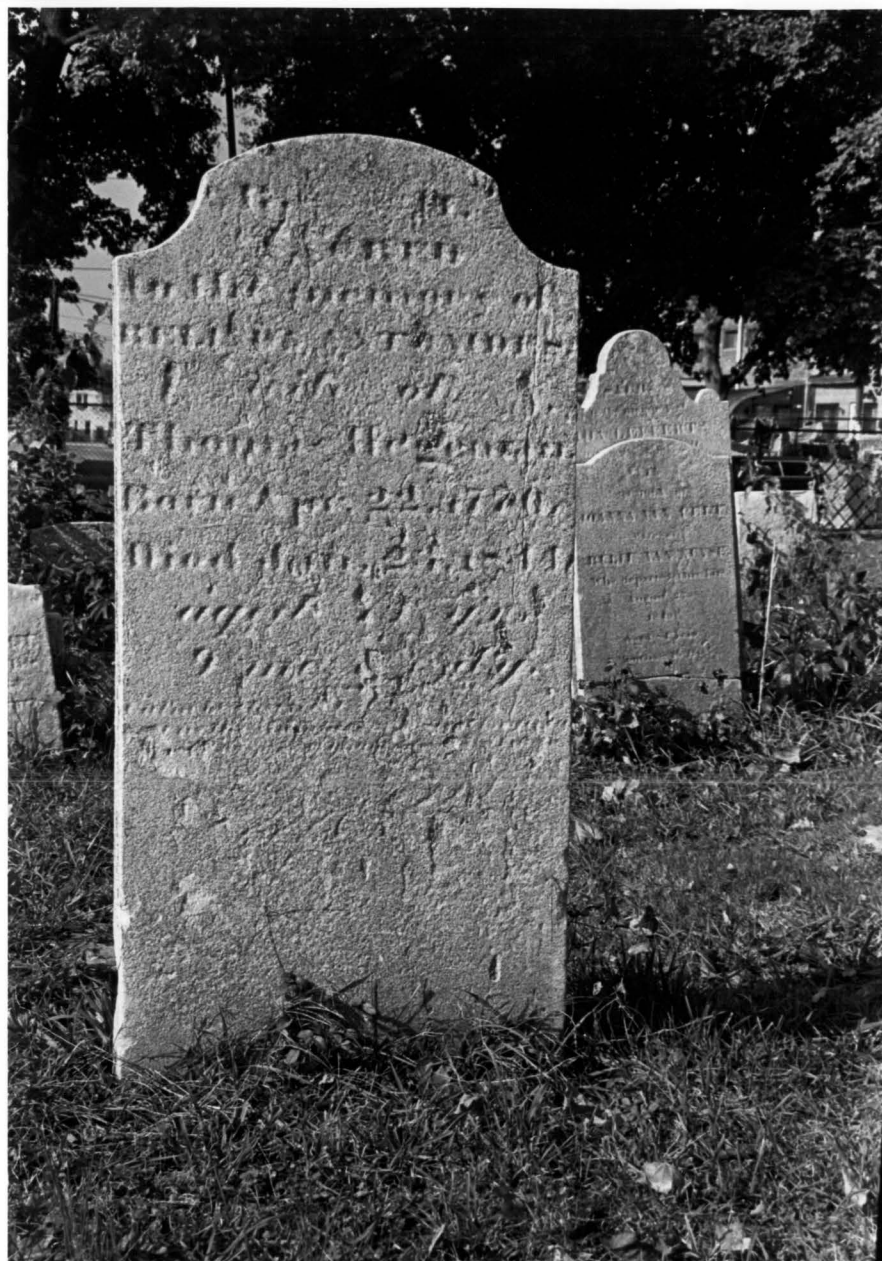




New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery  
84th Street and 16th Avenue, Brooklyn  
*Photo: Carl Forster*



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84th Street and 16th Avenue, Brooklyn  
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New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery  
Gravestone detail



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Photos: Carl Forster





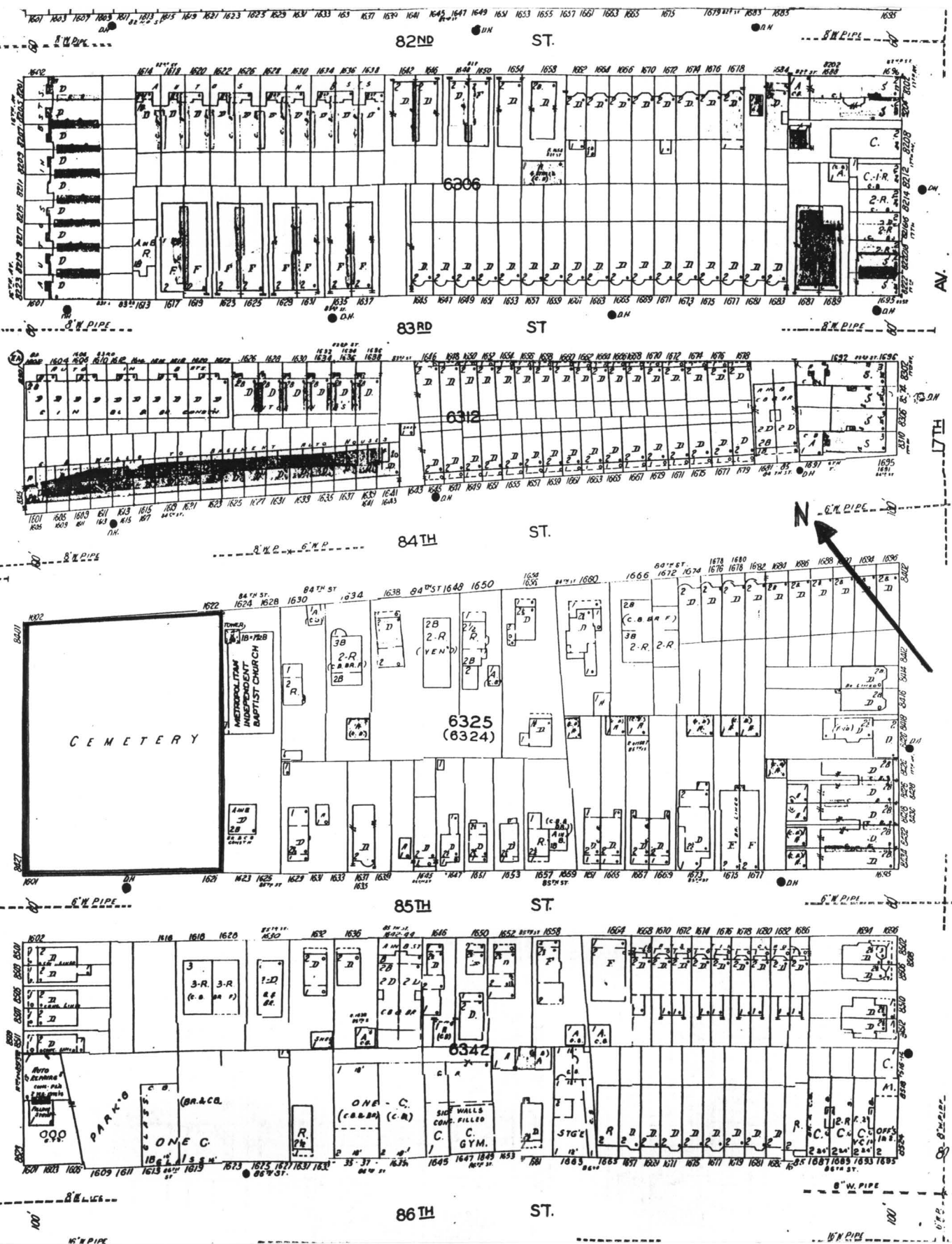
New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery  
Gravestone details

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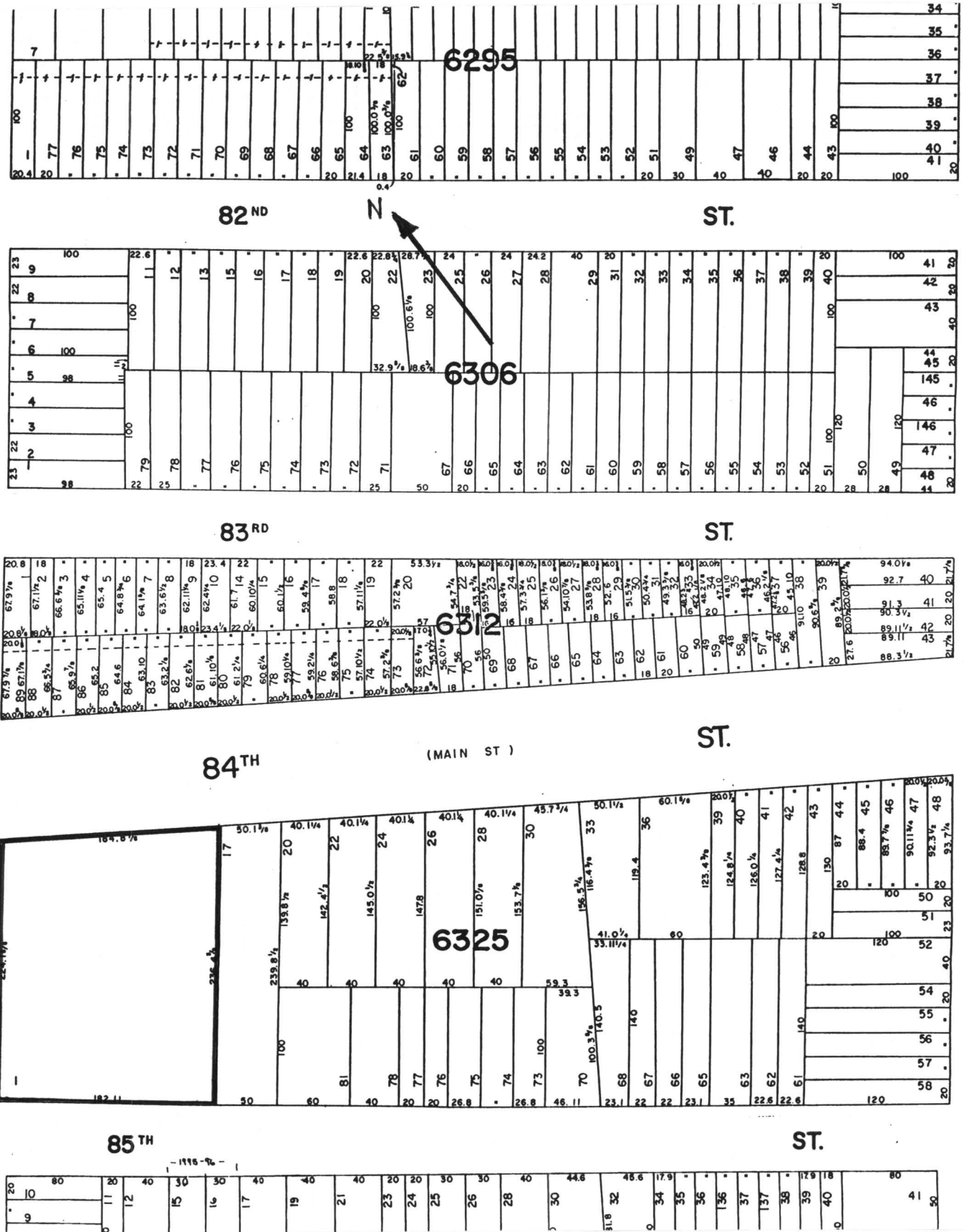


New Utrecht Reformed Dutch Church Cemetery  
 8401-8427 16th Avenue, 1602-1622 84th Street, and 1601-1621 85th Street, Brooklyn  
 Landmark Site: Borough of Brooklyn Tax Map Block 6325, Lot 1  
 Source: Sanborn Building and Property Atlas of Brooklyn, N.Y. 18th ed. (Anaheim, Ca.: Experian, 1997), vol. 12, plate 56



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16<sup>TH</sup>



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Source: New York City Department of Finance, City Surveyor, Tax Map