

Landmarks Preservation Commission
February 1, 1966, Number 5
LP-0091

FIRST SHEARITH ISRAEL GRAVEYARD, 55-57 St. James Place, Borough of Manhattan. 1683

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 279, Lot 17.

On October 19, 1965, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the First Shearith Israel Graveyard and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site. (Item No. 63) The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Two speakers spoke in favor of designation. In a letter to the Commission the Congregation Shearith Israel, which owns the property, endorsed the proposed designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

This small graveyard is what remains today of the early burial ground of the Sephardic Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel. It was established on this site in the Seventeenth Century and thus represents one of the oldest cemeteries within the City. Handsome headstones are here interspersed by marble sarcophagi with simple flat-slab tops. One little monument is surmounted by a small pyramidal stone cap. The unique quality of this small plot lies not only in the simplicity of its early tombs but in its forgotten aspect, surrounded by houses - a reminder of our earliest history.

The fact that such little fragments of the past do yet remain in this City gives to them an unusual importance. The openness these cemeteries provide among buildings and their great antiquity make them treasured relics in our midst.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

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 Shearith Israel Graveyard has a special character, 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 Shearith Israel Graveyard is an impressive little burial plot containing some fine early tombs, that it represents the earliest days of an important group within the City, and that having survived since the Seventeenth Century, it is a valuable part of our heritage.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 8-A 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 designates as a Landmark the First Shearith Israel Graveyard, 55-57 St. James Place, Borough of Manhattan and designates Tax Map Block 279, Lot 17, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.