

# SITE HISTORY

**Former Public School 90 Site**  
**2274-2286 Church Avenue**  
**Block 5103, Lot 58**  
**Flatbush, Brooklyn, NY**



# HPI Presentation Agenda

- Explain HPI's involvement with the PS 90 Site
- Provide an abbreviated history of the site
- Describe HPI's archaeological testing at the site
  - Detailed results are available in a series of reports on file with the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission (NYCLPC)
- Discuss HPI's ongoing research into a Descendant Community and work with the Task Force

**Please be aware that the nature of this discussion involves some disturbing information that we strive to handle and share sensitively and with respect.**



# HPI's Involvement

- HPI (archaeologists and historians) has worked in NYC for over 38 years
- Completed four separate documentary studies of the PS 90 Site (1998-2019)
- Archaeological testing (2001) found limited human remains within disturbed soils, possibly of African American ancestry
- HPI helped to create a Community Engagement Plan and Unanticipated Discoveries Plan to address the handling of human remains should they be found on the site in any future development (2019)
- Working with City, we are helping to identify a descendent community and support the Task Force



# Historical Context

- Flatbush (Midwout) was established in ca.1651 by the Dutch who farmed and created a village center on what is now Flatbush Avenue a block west of the PS 90 site.
- The Reformed Dutch Church of Flatbush was founded in 1654 and at one time owned the PS 90 Site.
- Many Flatbush families owned enslaved Africans.
- Dutch was spoken well into the 19th century.



# Historical Context

- The written history of the Dutch residents is voluminous.
- The written history of the enslaved people is virtually silent.
- Historians have calculated that between 70 and 80 percent of all Flatbush families in 1800 enslaved at least one person.
- At one time, Kings County had a larger concentration of enslaved people than any other county in New York State.



# Documentary Study Conclusions

- History books suggest that enslaved Africans had been buried on or near the site, possibly when it was part of the Bergen or Stryker farm, or under ownership of the Reformed Dutch Church of Flatbush
- No *primary* sources citing the exact location of the African American Burial Ground were found
- The enslaved population was predominantly of African origin and descent, with a few references to enslaved “Indians”
- One example of a primary source referencing the cemetery was an 1810 obituary in the *Long Island Star* that marked the death of Eve, age 110, buried in the Village of Flatbush “African burying ground”



## DIED,

The 23d Inst. in the village of Flatbush, (L. I.) in the house of her last master, Lawrence Voorhes, a negro woman named Eve, aged near 110 years. She was born in the beginning of the last Century, in the afore-said viliage, and for more than 80 years lived under the roof of her third master, Lawrence Ditmas. She was a woman of strong intellectual capacity, and enjoyed an almost uninterrupted health, till within eight days of her departure. Such were her active powers, that she was seldom known to be unemployed, even in the most advanced period of her life. Her ordinary occupation during the summer months was, by her own ehoice, the dressing of a garden spot, and in this employment, in which she much delighted, she was still engaged the last summer of her life. Her behaviour was modest and unassuming, and her disposition naturally lively and chearful, excepting some slight rheumatic afflictions, she had none of the infirmities usually attending old age.—She had the perfect use of all her senses 'till the last. On Sunday evening her remains were piously interred in the African burying ground of the village of Flatbush, attended by a great concourse of the, people of colour.

*The Long Island Star*  
March 29, 1810 p.3

“a negro woman named Eve, aged near 110...piously interred in the African burying ground of...Flatbush”



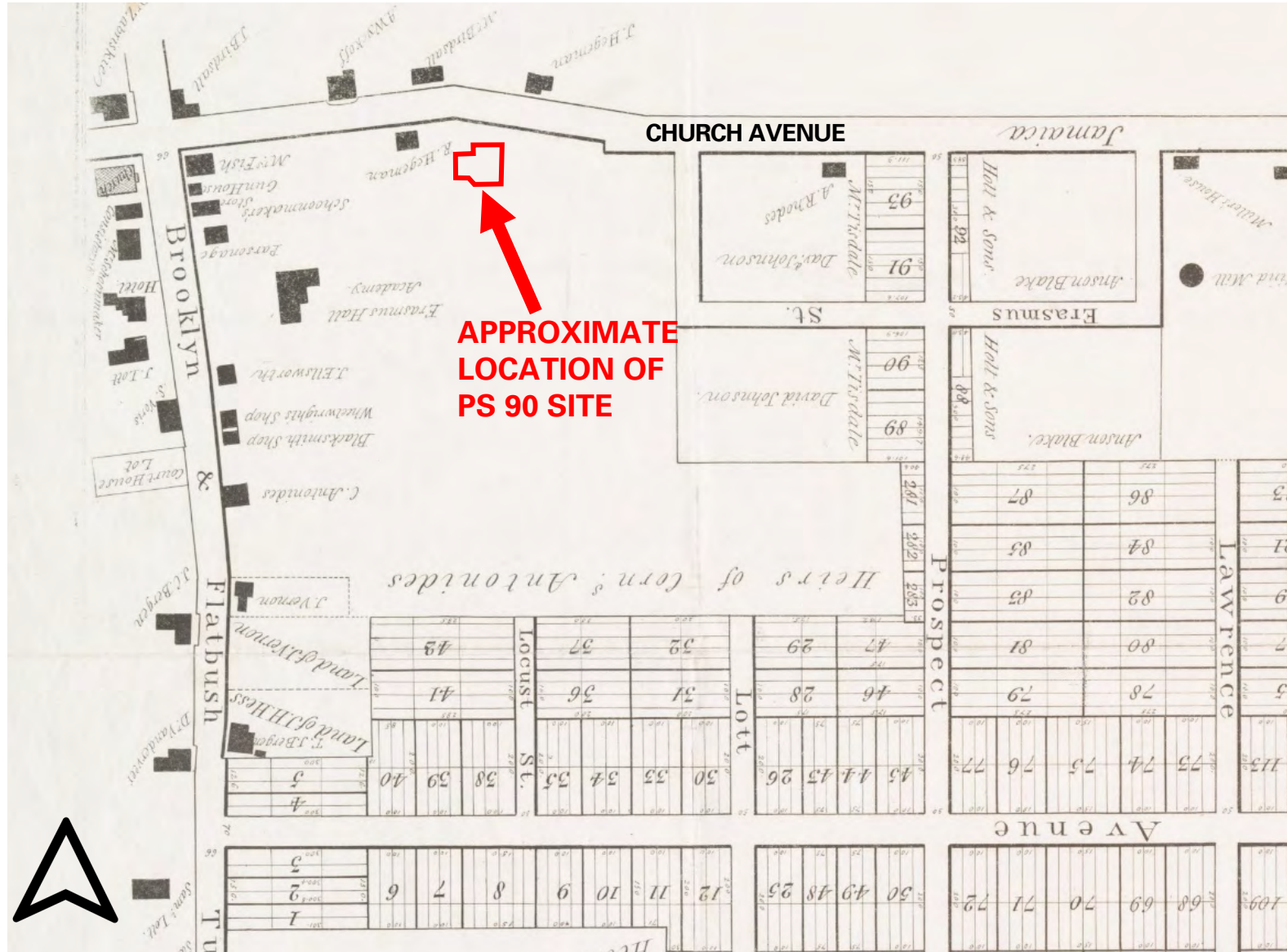
# Documentary Research

- In 1884 historian Henry R. Stiles wrote about a “colored people’s burying ground” near a pond on or near the PS 90 Site and the Flatbush Engine Company. He reported that when the property was owned by the Reformed Church and Bedford Avenue was laid out in 1865, graves were opened and remains reinterred at the Cemetery of the Holy Cross.
- Another historian (Snyder 1945) wrote that skeletal remains were found when the basements of Flatbush School No. 1 and the house of A. Van Dyke were excavated.





# Documentary Research: Map Review



## 1835-36 Flatbush Survey

**Church Avenue** had a crook in it just north of the PS 90 site and **Bedford Avenue** had not yet been laid out

At this time, there were **no** mapped buildings, lots, or burial grounds near the PS 90 Site

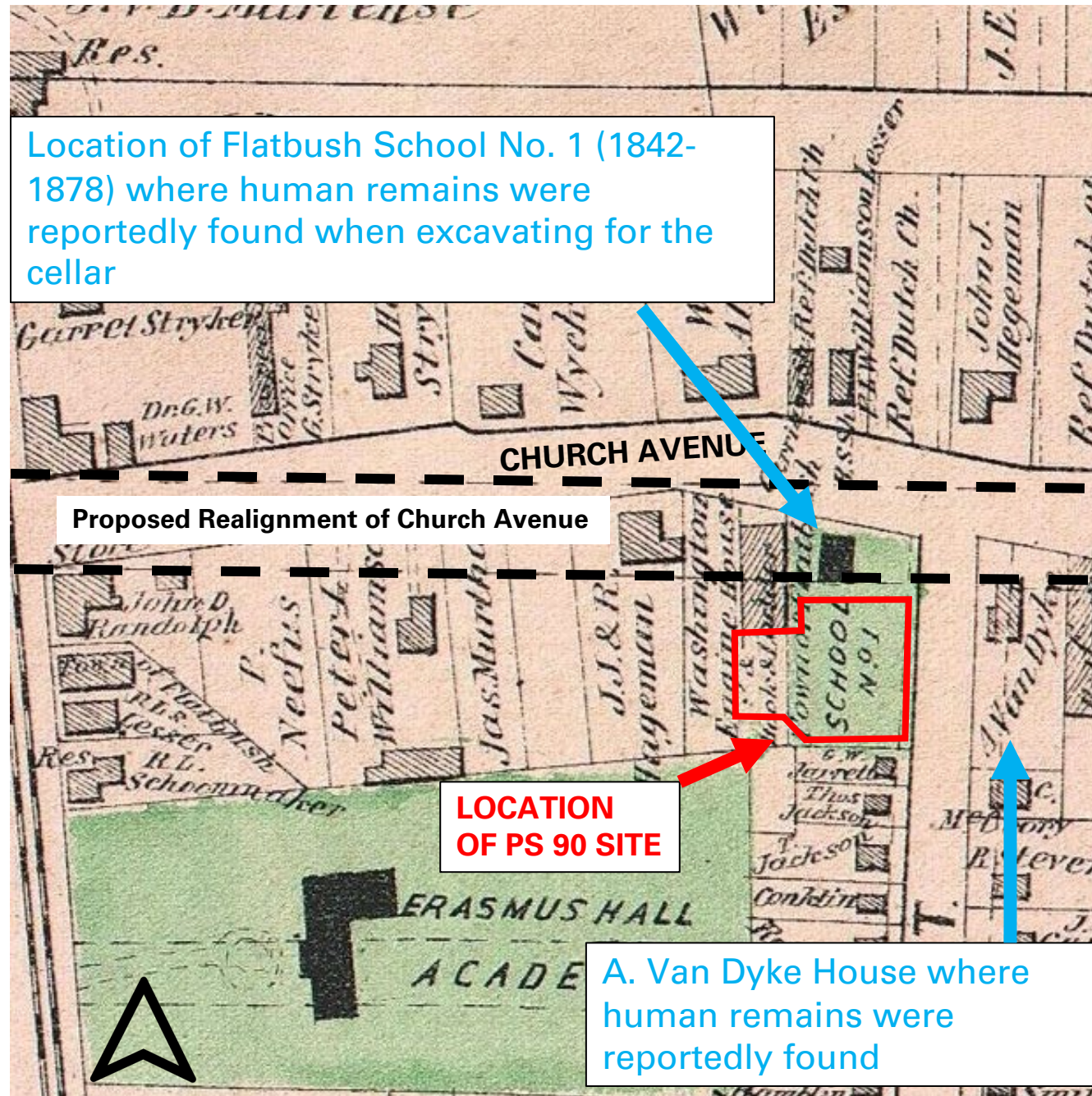




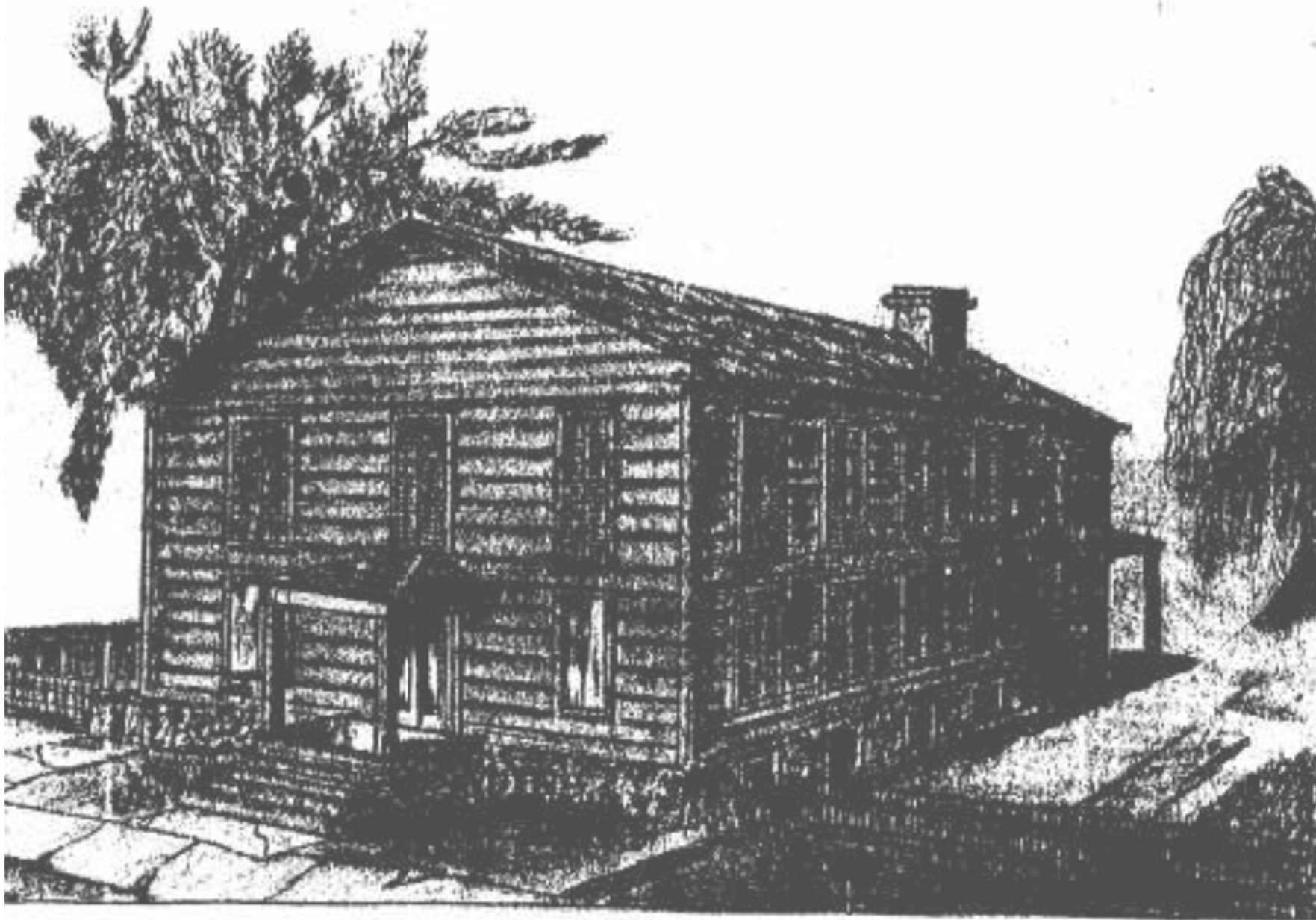
1873

**Church Avenue** was crooked - the dashed lines on the map show that there were plans to straighten it

At this time, the Reformed Dutch Church owned land on the north side of Church Avenue, Flatbush School No. 1 was immediately north of the PS 90 Site, an Engine House was to the west, and the Van Dyke house was to the east







*Flatbush Village School, 1842-1878*

Rendering of the original Flatbush School No. 1 that stood in what is now Church Avenue from 1842 to 1878.

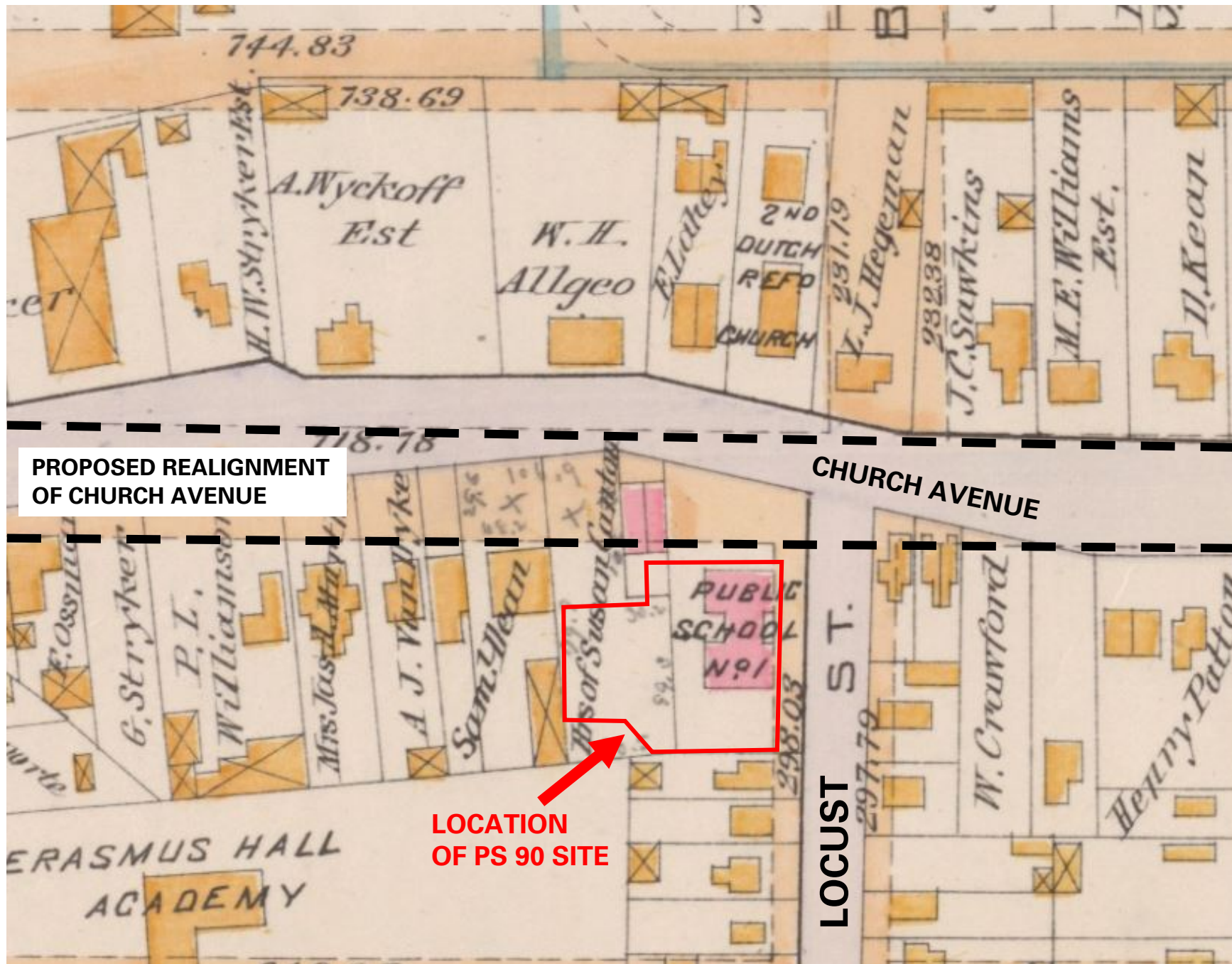
Skeletal remains were reportedly found in 1842 when its basement was excavated. They were reportedly removed and reburied in Holy Cross Cemetery.





In 1878, PS 90 (then called PS 1) was built and Flatbush School No. 1, in the footprint of Church Avenue, was razed. (Photo ca. 187? from Brooklyn Public Library Digital Collection)





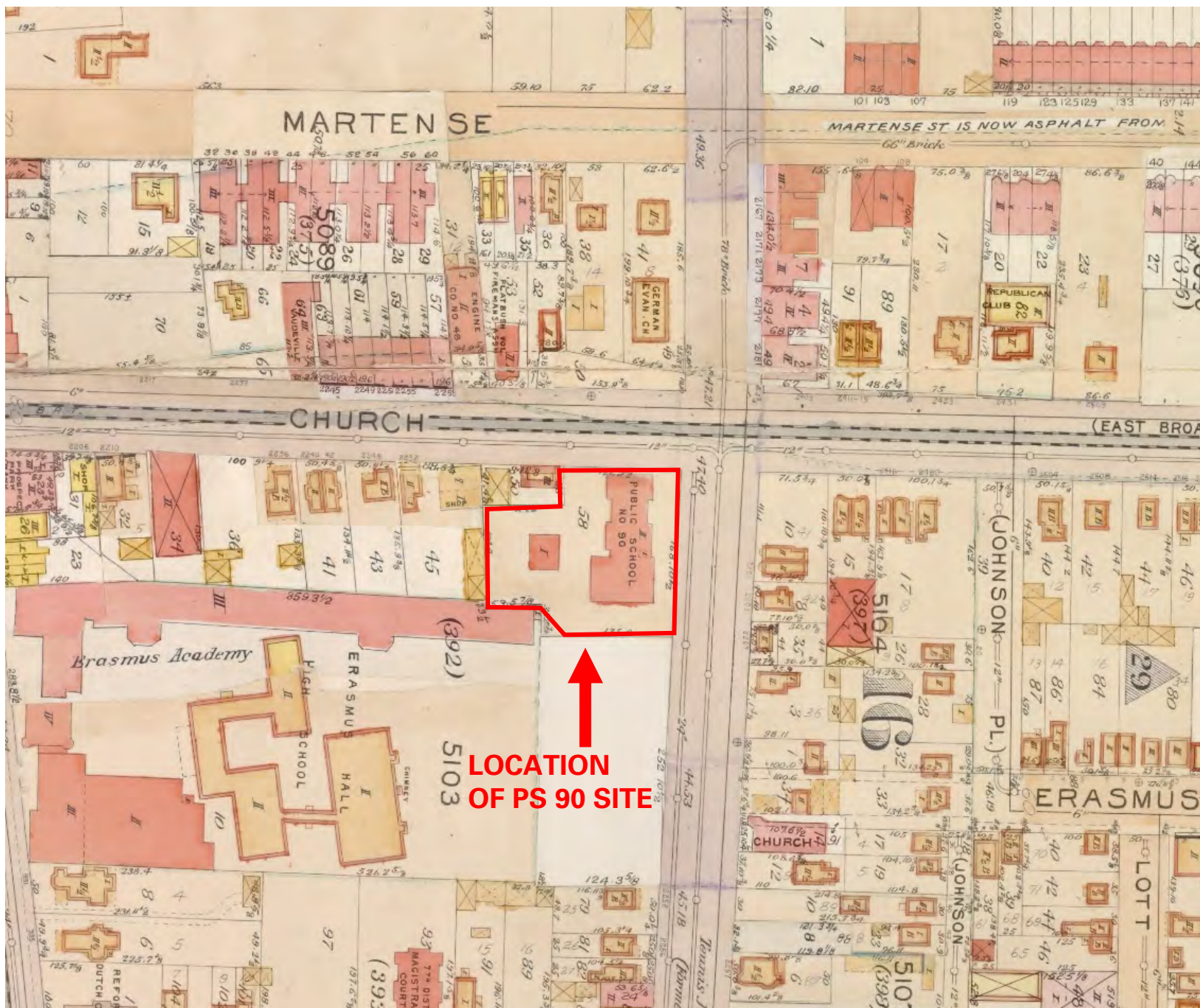
# 1890

**Church Avenue** was still crooked but the dashed lines on the map show that there were plans to straighten it.

By this time, Flatbush School No. 1 was gone, and a new school was built on the PS 90 Site (then called PS 1).







1906

**Church Avenue** had been straightened and all buildings in its route had been removed.

**Bedford Avenue** also had been straightened and widened with buildings in its route removed.

**PS 1** had been renamed **PS 90**



# Archaeological Sensitivity

Research in 2001 concluded the PS 90 Site had a *high potential* for:

- African American Burials
- Early Dutch home lot/farmstead remains
- Wells, outhouse pits, cisterns, and artifacts from:
  - Flatbush School No. 1 (ca.1842-1878) and PS1/PS 90 (1878-1960s)
  - The Washington Engine & Hook and Ladder Company (1865-1890)
  - The G. W. Jarrett House (1873-ca.1890)

**Archaeological Testing was recommended**



# Archaeological Fieldwork

- In 2001 archaeological testing was completed to establish “Ground Truth”
- Concrete around the school was removed under the direction of archaeologists
- 40 hand excavated Shovel Test Pits, each about two feet by two feet, were completed to seek any possible burial shafts
- 4 machine excavated trenches were then undertaken to look for burial shafts







# Stage IB Archaeological Testing 2001

Example of a Shovel Test Pit profile showing an ash layer at the top with mixed soils directly beneath it

# Field Testing Results

- Only one **Shovel Test Pit** had human remains - an adult premolar found immediately below the upper ash layer.
- Only one of four trenches, **Trench 4**, contained human remains including 3 teeth and small fragments of a lower jawbone in upper disturbed soils.
- No intact burials or burial shafts were found anywhere on the site.
- **The disarticulated remains from disturbed soils suggest they were not found where they were originally laid to rest. The burials were likely off-site and had likely been dispersed at some time during history.**





# Analysis

- Tooth in Test Pit: Premolar with small cavities from a young to middle-aged adult (20-35)
  - Sex and ancestry could not be determined
- Teeth and Bone from Trench 4: likely from a single person, possibly female, with defects in the tooth enamel suggesting possible periods of hunger as a child
  - Ancestry could not be determined with a high degree of accuracy, although the surface of the second Lower Molar showed minor “enamel wrinkling” that previously has been associated with African ancestry by other researchers. *But this is not conclusive, and should NOT be taken as a final determination*



# Artifact Disposition and Reinterment

- Artifacts related to PS 90 (1878-1960) were given to Erasmus Hall High School for curation and display
- The limited number of human remains found were accepted by Reverend Daniel Ramm of the Flatbush Reformed Church for appropriate reburial.



# Next Steps

- Continue research on descendent communities.
- Establish how best to tell the stories of the past
- Establish how best to memorialize the area





# Moving Forward

- The sensitivity of the site - proven through historical research and archaeology - needs to be acknowledged. We were asked, last year, to develop a Work Plan to move forward.
- A draft Unanticipated Discoveries Plan was created should human remains be found on the site at any future time.
- The Plan calls for all work to stop and for skeletal material to be sensitively handled and removed according to City and State protocols.
- Part of this Plan provides for the identification of a descendent community and the creation of a Task Force.
- HPI is continuing its research on the population that was interred near the PS 90 Site.



# Forming a Community Task Force...

## Action for the Future

- It takes a village; we need a village.
- We need your help to be the “village of the past” - to identify, through the best of our combined research efforts, those who may have been buried in this cemetery space in Flatbush.
- While the former burial ground may not be directly on this site, it merits a caring descendent community should any disturbed remains be found.





# Site History Summary

- The available primary documentary records do not reference a cemetery on the PS 90 Site.
- Secondary documentary sources vaguely describe a burial ground near the site, with burials reportedly having been found to the north and east.
- Archaeological work found no undisturbed burials on the site but did find few disarticulated human remains near Church Avenue.
- Additional disarticulated human remains *should* be anticipated.
- These people deserve the utmost care and respect with regard to their proper handling, removal, reburial, and memorialization.



# Extensive Research Was Carried Out by HPI at These Repositories:

- Brooklyn City Register
- Brooklyn College
- Brooklyn Historical Society
- Brooklyn Public Library-online plus Grand Army Plaza and Flatbush branches
- Brooklyn Surrogate Court
- Brooklyn Surveyor's Office
- Brooklyn Topographic Bureau
- Center for Thanatology Research and Education
- Erasmus Hall
- Holland Society Library
- Holy Cross Cemetery
- Kings County Clerk's Office
- Lefferts Homestead
- New York Municipal Archives
- New York Public Library
- New York State Library
- New York University Fales Collection
- New-York Historical Society
- NY State Historic Preservation Office
- NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission
- Office of Public Education & Interpretation of the African Burial Ground
- Reformed Protestant Dutch Church Archives
- Teachers' College Special Collections
- The Frances Donin collection on the Dutch Reformed Church, Flatbush and Flatlands
- Weeksville Heritage Center



# Research Included Reviewing:

- Deeds and land transfers
- Wills
- Early Reformed Dutch Church records
- Flatbush Fire Company records (1829-1848)
- Town of Flatbush Records
- Transcriptions of Dutch legal documents for Flatbush, Flatlands, and Gravesend (early land divisions)
- Reformed Dutch Church land leases, including a lease to the Trustees of the Town of Flatbush for Flatbush School No. 1
- Property maps and surveys
- Newspaper accounts
- Personal interviews with Robert Swan, an independent scholar regarding slave cemeteries, and John Manbeck, the former Brooklyn Historian
- Cemetery records
- Board of Health Records
- Public School records
- Maps and atlases
- Local histories



# Historical & Archaeological Resources

## Available Reports:

- Stage 1A Archaeological Assessment (Documentary Research)  
[http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch\\_reports/857.pdf](http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch_reports/857.pdf)
- Stage 1B Archaeological Investigation  
[http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch\\_reports/858.pdf](http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/arch_reports/858.pdf)
- Flatbush School District No. 1 NYCLPC Designation Report  
<http://s-media.nyc.gov/agencies/lpc/lp/2285.pdf>

\*Please note that the site name has changed over the years and has been referred to as P.S. 90, Beth Rivka, PS 325-K, Flatbush School District No. 1, among others.

