BROOKLYN COLLEGE EXCAVATIONS AT THE NEW UTRECHT REFORMED CHURCH

SUMMER 2002
The New Utrecht Reformed Church is the fourth oldest church in Brooklyn. Founded in 1677, in the heart of the Dutch town of New Utrecht (Fig. 1), the first church was built in 1700 at 16th Avenue and 84th Street, a few blocks away from where the present structure stands (Figs. 2, 3). The current Gothic Revival style church at 18th Avenue and 84th Street was constructed in 1828, incorporating some stones from the original church (Figs. 4-7). It was designated a New York City Landmark in 1966, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Although primary source materials have been difficult to obtain, there are several conflicting references concerning a small academy for boys that once stood on the grounds of the second New Utrecht Dutch Reformed Church building. Teunis Bergen, in his manuscript *History of New Utrecht* indicates that the “first school in New Utrecht stood on 84th Street near 18th Avenue and was moved in 1800 to a nearby location and designated as District No. 1”. The *Brooklyn Eagle*, in a booklet published in 1946, states that “the old New Utrecht school house near [the church] was torn down to make way for the new church” (p.7). Thus, it is obvious that the grounds of the New Utrecht Reformed Church have archaeological potential. The only way to test this potential was to conduct test excavations to determine what features or structures remained, the state of their preservation, and their possible significance. This was the object of the archaeological excavations.

From June 12 through June 26, 2002, fifteen students in the Brooklyn College Summer Archaeological Field School, under the direction of Dr. H. Arthur Bankoff conducted archaeological test excavations on the grounds of the New Utrecht Reformed Church. Excavation was conducted completely with hand tools. All soil was sifted through ¼” mesh screening. Five trenches were opened in an area immediately to the southeast of the church and east of the newer addition (the office and storage facility) (Figs. 5b, 6). Four of the trenches measured two by two meters, the fifth measured three by three. While no structures were uncovered in the peripheral smaller two by two meter trenches, the larger trench laid bare the remains of two adjoining fieldstone foundation walls, preserved to a height of approximately 45 cm (18”) and 50-60 cm (2’) thick (Fig. 8). The walls extended about 3m (10’) from north to south, met at a corner and ran almost 2 m (6’) toward the west (Fig. 9). The complete dimensions of the building could not be determined.

Artifacts from within the structure and its surrounding surfaces were consistent with a late eighteenth to early nineteenth century date. These artifacts included ceramics, both locally-produced and imported. Most notable among these were a glazed red earthenware chamber pot, possibly of local Rockingham ware (early 19th century) (Fig. 12), Pearl Ware with blue transfer printing (Figs. 14, 15), which could also be from ca. 1830, and blue and green shell-edged Pearl Ware plate fragments (1780 – 1830), all of which may have been imported from England. Glass bottles and bottle fragments are also well-represented. The illustrated example (Fig. 13) dates to before 1840. Out of outstanding interest are the coins and medallions found in the excavation. The most striking is a gold quarter-eagle (2 ½ dollar coin) (Fig. 16) found in very good condition, with the initials A[?]WB engraved on the reverse. This medallion was not associated with the structure, and is probably a watch fob lost by someone going to church. It most likely dates to the first decade of the twentieth century. Probably more closely connected
with the academy building is a 1780 Mexican real (Fig. 17). These coins were common
tender in the colonies and early decades of the United States, especially before U.S. coins
were minted and widely circulated. The inscription on the obverse reads “Carolus III,
Dei Gratia”, which is completed on the reverse with “Hispan[ia] et Ind[ies] R[ex]”
[Charles III, by the grace of God King of Spain and the Indies]. Other artifacts such as
marbles (Fig. 18) and clay smoking pipes (Fig. 19) also speak to activities on the
academy and church grounds. Animal bones include butchered cow bones and teeth and
pig tusks and molars. The artifacts and pictures of the excavation have been prepared for
exhibit and await installation in a location within the church buildings.

The test excavations of 2002 (Fig. 20) indicate that there are potentially well-preserved
deposits from the Colonial period on the church grounds. Any proposed expansion of the
church structure should take this into account. The artifacts and bones give us a sense of
the everyday life of the academy and the students, as well as glimpses into later activities
on the site. The church and the Friends of New Utrecht should be conscientious and
vigilant in their role of protector of the archaeological resources. The site can be ruined
and its significance lost by pot hunting and amateur digging. Further responsible
archaeology of the academy might throw some more light on the life of an important
community institution of the times, and can be important in a program of educational
outreach and fostering pride in the local community.
Figure 1: The six original towns of later Kings County
Figure 2: Southwestern Brooklyn, USGS map (1994). Approximate location of the New Utrecht Reformed Church.
Figure 3: USGS Map (1994), Location of New Utrecht Reform Church
Figure 4: Aerial view of New Utrecht Reformed Church site
Figure 5: a) Aerial photo of New Utrecht Reformed Church site
b) Close up of same photo, excavation site outlined
Figure 6: Schematic map of New Utrecht Reformed Church site, excavation area outlined in red.

Figure 7: Church facade
Figure 8: Foundation wall

Figure 9: Entire foundation exposed
Figure 10: Wall detail

Figure 11: Wall detail
Figure 12: Glazed red earthenware chamber pot

Figure 13: Bottle fragment; pre-1840
Figure 14: Pearl Ware teacup with transfer decoration
Figure 15: Pearl Ware transfer-printed small bowl
Figure 16: Obverse and reverse of gold Quarter Eagle watch fob
Figure 17: Obverse and reverse of Spanish (Mexican?) real (1780)
Figure 18: Glass marbles (19th century)

Figure 19: Ceramic smoking pipe fragments
Figure 20: The New Utrecht Reformed Church site in the course of excavation.