

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Williamsbridge Oval Park

other names/site number Williamsbridge Reservoir, Williamsbridge Playground and Recreation Center

2. Location

street & number Reservoir Oval East - Reservoir Oval West [] not for publication

city or town Bronx [] vicinity

state New York code NY county Bronx code 005 zip code 10467

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements as set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property [X] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide [X] locally. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Ruth A. Perpoint
Signature of certifying official/Title

DSHPO

3/30/15
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property [] meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. ([] see continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register
- [] see continuation sheet
- [] determined eligible for the National Register
- [] see continuation sheet
- [] determined not eligible for the National Register
- [] removed from the National Register
- [] other (explain) _____

for Alexis Chermatly
Signature of the Keeper

date of action

5/14/15

Williamsbridge Oval Park

Bronx County, New York

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u>5</u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>7</u>	<u>0</u>	TOTAL

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/

Park & Recreation Center

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION & CULTURE/

Park & Recreation Center

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19th & 20th CENTURY REVIVALS/

Beaux Arts – Landscape Plan

MODERN MOVEMENT/

Moderne – Rec Center

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Granite

walls Granite

roof

other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Williamsbridge Oval Park

Bronx County, New York

Name of Property

County and State

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or that represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all boxes that apply.)

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location
- C** a birthplace or grave
- D** a cemetery
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F** a commemorative property
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by historic American Building Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other repository: _____

Areas of Significance:

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Community Planning & Development _____
- Architecture _____
- Landscape Architecture _____

Period of Significance:

1937 _____

Significant Dates:

1937 _____

Significant Person:

N/A _____

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A _____

Architect/Builder:

Aymar Embury II, Stuart Constable _____

Nelson M. Wells, Gilmore David Clarke _____

Williamsbridge Oval Park
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Bronx County, New York
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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property 18.87 acres

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 18 | 594699 | 4525924
Zone Easting Northing

3 18 | 594748 | 4525801
Zone Easting Northing

2 18 | 594751 | 4525853

4 18 | 594603 | 4525627

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Corinne Engelbert (edited Daniel McEneny, NYSHPO)

organization Columbia University date 2/12/2015

street & number 315 West 113th Street, 2D telephone 541.515.3824

city or town Manhattan state NY zip code 10026

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner (Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO)

name NYC Parks – Contact Theresa Braddick

street & number Olmsted Center, 117-02 Roosevelt Avenue telephone _____

city or town Flushing state NY zip code 11368

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 *et seq.*)

Estimated Burden Statement: public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20503

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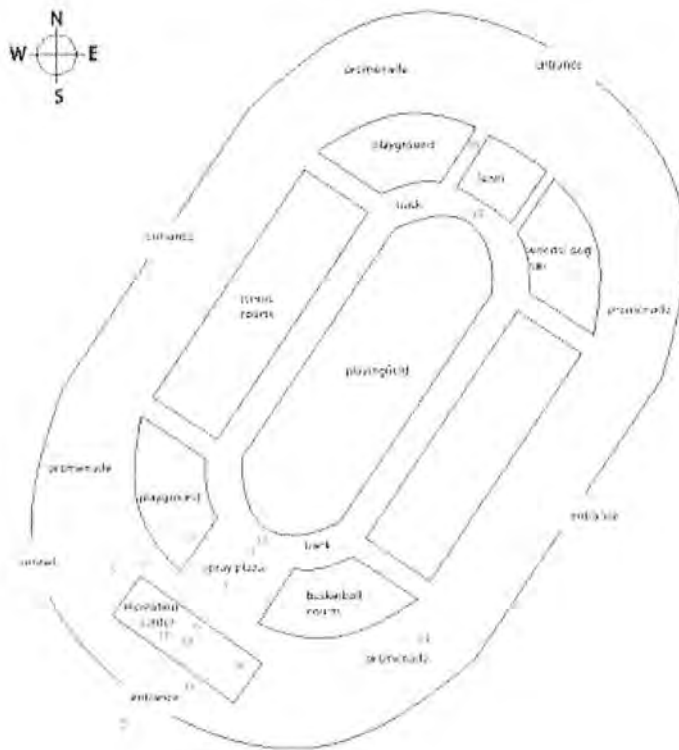
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Williamsbridge Oval Park
Name of Property
Bronx County, New York
County and State

The Williamsbridge Oval Park – Description

Overview-

Located in the Bronx, the Williamsbridge Oval Park, once a forty-one foot deep reservoir, is now an 18.87 acre public park engineered and constructed in 1937 under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The park is oval in shape, hence the name, and bounded/encircled by Reservoir Oval East and West. It is aligned so that its long axis runs northeast to southwest. For clarity, this axis will henceforth be referred to as if it were aligned directly north-south. The most significant features of the park are an intact, radial Beaux Arts landscape plan and an Art Moderne style recreation center. Elements from the former reservoir, a tunnel and repurposed stone, have been incorporated into the design; however, the park gains its primary significance from its date of construction and its association with the WPA. The resource count includes the 1937 park plan, the recreation center, the tunnel, three entrance gates, and the iron fencing that surrounds the park. Elements such as stone walls, paths, stairs and courts are included within the plan. Contemporary features such as park benches and playgrounds are considered furniture and not included within the resource count.



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Williamsbridge Oval Park
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Site-

The park is located in a low-rise neighborhood, surrounded by early twentieth-century residential buildings, several parking lots, and two stretches of single-story garages. The buildings surrounding the park are mostly two to seven stories and are accessed either directly from Reservoir Oval Street or back on to it. Many of the smaller structures, which are either single-family homes or small apartments, are built of wood, while the larger apartment buildings are primarily brick. Parking lots and one-story single car garages separate some of these structures. It is within a short distance of major roads such as East Gun Hill Road and Perry Avenue and is also within easy access of the Norwood 205th Street subway station.

Directly contiguous and to the south of the park is the Valentine-Varian House (NR listed 1978). Constructed in 1758, the stone house was moved to its current site in 1965. To accommodate the new location, the park was bumped out to the south in that year. It is now operated by the Bronx County Historical Society as the Museum of Bronx History. To the north and across the street from the park is the Williamsbridge Reservoir Keepers House (NR Listed 1999). Though both are tangentially related to the history of the park, their primary significance is in other contexts, and the two adjacent historic sites have not been included within the park's National Register boundary.

The Williamsbridge Oval Park-

The park contains the entire area of the former reservoir. It is primarily on two levels. The upper level, which encompasses the edges of the park, is elevated, while the central portion is sunk below ground level. These levels are adaptations from the berm of the former reservoir. Three parallel paths, the middle being the widest, run along the elevated circumference of the park. They are paved with hexagonal tiles. The paths are lined with rows of trees, which are evenly spaced and further emphasize the oval shape of the park. Some of these trees have been lost, leaving gaps in the regular spacing, and a few appear to have been replaced with new trees of different varieties.

Entrances-

There are five entrances to the Williamsbridge Oval Park, all linked by the iron fencing that encircles the park. Two are significant in size and the remaining three are more discrete granite pillars. The tunnel is at the southwest corner of the park, just off of Brainbridge Avenue. It stands in the same location as it did when the site was a reservoir; however, it was redesigned when the park was constructed in the 1930s to act as an entrance. It cuts through the former reservoir berm and is made of rusticated granite blocks arranged around a shallow, yet substantial arch. The arch is terminated with a large keystone.

On the south side of the park there is a grand flight of stairs, which is accessed through a large gate. The gate is bounded on either side by massive stone or concrete piers, which have been painted white. The stairs are divided into three parallel sections, all of which lead directly to the promenade and the south entrance of the recreation center. To either side of the staircase is a low wall made of the same rough granite as the tunnel. The wall is capped by either smooth stone or concrete, which has also been painted white. Due its connection and integration into the to the recreation center, this entrance not been counted as an individual structure in the resource count.

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The north, east, and west sides of the park have smaller gates, which provide direct access to the promenade. Each of these entrances has a small area with benches overlooking the park. They are partially enclosed by granite piers. On the north and west sides, one enters the park at a higher elevation. As a result, each of these entrances has two sets of granite stairs, which run in opposite directions and descend to the lower level of the park. However, because the perimeter of the east side of the park is closer in elevation to the lower level of the park, here, in place of stairs, two gently sloping paths provide access to the lower level of the park.

The Plan-

The Williamsbridge Park retains a Beaux Arts inspired radial plan. The central portion of the park is sunk below ground level with another path surrounding its perimeter. At the park's center is an oval football field, now with synthetic turf, surrounded by a 400m running track. Between the track and the outer path are eight distinct sections. On the west side are eight tennis courts enclosed by a chain-link fence, running parallel to the edge of the park. Opposite the tennis courts, on the east side of the field, is a fenced area identical in size to the tennis courts. This area does not appear to have a current use with the exception of a small play structure within it.

Two of the sections are composed of large playgrounds, located to the south and north of the tennis courts. The area to the south is the original site of the girl's playground, while the playground to the north was added at a later date. Both playgrounds were recently renovated and include elaborate play structures. In the southwest section of the park, where the boy's playground once was, are two small basketball courts.

The area at the base of the north staircases is heavily wooded and is divided into three sections. The northern playground is located in the northwestern section among the trees. A small patch of lawn defines the central section, which is bounded by two rows of trees to either side. In the center of the lawn is a mound of soil surrounded by loose granite rocks and planted with some flowers and shrubs. The eastern zone of this wooded area has several fences and includes two dog runs.

The Recreation Center-

Dominating the south side of the park is a two-story granite recreation center. From the north, the recreation center acts as a visual anchor defining the south end of the park. The area in front the building is a spray plaza. A recent addition, it is a meandering space set between two curving, fenced-off planted beds. These beds are planted with flowers and cherry trees and are lined with benches.

The north elevation of the recreation center is composed of three sections. The central portion is a two-story rectangle with a projecting vestibule. The vestibule is defined by three doorways separated by four granite piers, which terminate in a curve. The right and left doorways have been enlarged and the glass doors replaced by solid metal ones. While these two outer doorways are functioning, the central doorway, which was historically a third entrance, is bricked over with cement blocks. These blocks have geometric voids in the shape of circles, semi-circles and rectangles, a pattern that was inspired by the screens covering the windows on the men's and women's locker rooms inside the vestibule. Above each door, on the second story, are glass doors that lead out

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onto individual balconies. To either side of the vestibule, located within the central rectangular portion of the façade, are two narrow windows, reflecting the verticality of the piers.

The two wings, located to either side of the vestibule, are one story tall and six bays across giving the composition a strong horizontal emphasis. They are gently curved, responding, like the paths and trees, to the shape of the park. The first five windows on either side, moving from the center out, are wider than they are tall. In these windows the center three panes are operable, while the panes on either side are fixed. A final window terminates each wing. These are set slightly apart and are narrower than the previous windows. While none of the windows are original, the replacements replicate the original configuration.

The south side of the recreation center can be reached in three ways. The first is from the promenade, which runs past this front elevation. The second is up the small flights of stairs located on each side of the wings of the recreation center. The third is from outside the park, by ascending an imposing flight of stairs. From this third perspective, the building appears to be just one elongated story, hugging the rim of the embankment. Again the façade is broken into three sections with the central portion defined by three recessed doors separated by four granite piers. While similar to the north side of the building, the doors are not set nearly as far back, and the piers are considerably shorter, reflecting the difference in height. Other major differences include a longer flight of stairs leading up to the entrance, a shorter central pavilion, and a chimney on the west side. The most dramatic differences between the north and south façade lies in the wings. On this southern facade, the wings are significantly narrower and are straight with the exception of the rounded, interior edge, where the wings meet the central pavilion. Each wing has three windows, which are three panes tall and wide.

The two doors on the north façade of the recreation center lead into the lower lobby. On the south side of the lobby are two staircases leading to the upper level of the recreation center. The walls of the lobby are exposed brick set in Flemish bond with the exception of the space directly between the two flights of stairs, where there is a small alcove created through the ornate arrangement of brick. To the left of the lobby is a workout room and to the right a community room with tables and chairs. Both rooms were renovated in the early twenty-first century and do not include any historic detailing.

The upper lobby of the recreation center is also exposed brick, as part of the original design. There are two small curved nooks off of this lobby, which were originally intended as a space for concessions.¹ The room to the west is a newly renovated computer room and the room to the north is a large, open, tall space. It is in this second room that the large doors and windows, which are evident on the outer façade, are located. On both sides of the room are doors that provide direct access to two different terraces. These terraces are the roof over a section of the building's wings and are open to the public during the summer months.

¹ 1936, Plan of Williamsbridge Playground Recreation Center, Drawing number XE-104 101-PL, Olmsted Center, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Flushing, New York.

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Williamsbridge Oval Park - Significance:

The Williamsbridge Oval Park is significant under criterion A in the area Community Planning and Development as an example of a WPA-funded project that was part of the rapid expansion of the New York City parks system under the leadership of parks commissioner Robert Moses. Opened in 1937, the park is a former reservoir and twenty-acre New York City park that retains a historic landscaped plan and its associate features, multiple recreation features integrated into the plan, and a two-story recreation center. The site is also significant under criterion C in the areas of Landscape Architecture and Architecture for its intact Beaux Arts inspired landscape plan and Moderne style recreation center. The design for the project was the work of chief architect Aymar Embury II, who is also responsible for the creative approach to reusing the former 1880s reservoir. While elements of the reservoir survive in the form of berms, a granite tunnel and various stone walls, the site is more interpretable as a WPA era city park, thus, the period of significance has been established as date of the park's completion.

New York City Parks-

The end of the 1920s brought with it a realization of the acute shortage of parks in New York City. In 1932, only 7 percent of New York City land was designated for recreational use, despite 10 percent being generally considered an adequate amount.² This placed New York last among the ten largest cities in the United States. For every fourteen thousand children under the age of twelve, New York City had just one playground. The shortage was the result of a system that had not expanded with New York's booming population and a significant increase in leisure time for the average worker. Prior to World War I, the average factory worker worked nearly seventy hours a week. By 1920, the work week had fallen to sixty hours, and by 1929, just before the stock market crash, factory workers were working approximately forty-eight hours a week. This dramatic decrease was largely due to technical innovation. At the same time, the city's population soared. Between 1920 and 1930 alone, the population of New York City increased by over twenty percent to almost seven million. Yet while the city as a whole, and particularly the outer boroughs, grew dramatically, the park system had not been substantially expanded since the 1870s.³

The benefits of parks were widely understood. They were seen not only as places of recreation, but as a way of breaking up the dense urban fabric to provide more wholesome living conditions, greater public safety, and reduced traffic. Parks were also considered particularly important in keeping the city's wealthiest residents at time when many were already heading to the suburbs.⁴ Also, they were for also for the un-wealthy, who could not afford to go to the country for the weekend.

In 1930, two key reports were issued. The first, issued by the New York Association's Metropolitan Conference on Parks, under the leadership of Robert Moses, called for the "immediate acquisition of thousands

² Robert A. M. Stern, Gregory Gilmartin, and Thomas Mellins, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 707-710; "New Parks For The Teeming City and Near-By Areas," *New York Times*, Aug 3, 1930, 115.

³ Stern, 707-710.

⁴ "New Parks For The Teeming City and Near-By Areas, 115."

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of acres of the last natural areas in the city.”⁵ The second was a report by a special committee led by city controller Charles Berry, which lamented the inadequacy of New York City parks and recommended the addition of 3,893 acres, at an assessed value of almost \$58 million.⁶

Major steps to expand the New York City parks system were not taken until 1934, when Mayor Fiorello La Guardia sought to streamline the efficiency of the parks department by doing away with the five member board and appointing Robert Moses as sole commissioner of a unified New York City parks system. Moses wasted no time in assembling a design team with eighteen hundred employees, which included the chief architect of the Williamsbridge Playground, Aymar Embury II, to work on “drawing up plans for the expansion, rehabilitation and modernization of New York's parks.”⁷

Works Progress Administration-

The Public Works Administration (PWA) was established in 1933 as part of the federal New Deal Program to build large-scale public infrastructure projects such as electrical utilities, airports, highways, dams, bridges, hospitals, and schools. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was established in 1935 to focus on relatively small projects and hire unemployed and unskilled workers.⁸ New York City received one-seventh of all expenditures made by the WPA from 1935-36. In the first two years alone, \$113 million were allocated to New York City parks and recreation, making it the largest urban park and playground construction program of the New Deal.⁹ By 1936, more than seventy thousand people were employed in New York City park projects. As the WPA funding suggests, the creation of parks, playgrounds, and community recreation facilities was a priority of the national government. By the end of the 1930s, the national government had spent a total of \$750 million on community recreation facilities in an attempt to democratize access to recreation.¹⁰

Undeveloped land for the expansion of the parks system was not easy to come by, and Moses searched for “any idle, vacant piece of land,” as well as any piece of land that could be obtained from some other department.¹¹ On June 27, 1934, the parks department successfully obtained the obsolete Williamsbridge Reservoir, along with the Highbridge Reservoir in Washington Heights, Manhattan, from the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity through the Commissioners of the Sinking Fund.¹²

⁵ “Robert Moses and the Modern Park System (1929-1965),” NYC Parks, 1930, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/about/history/timeline/robert-moses-modern-parks>.

⁶ “New Parks For The Teeming City and Near-By Areas,” 115.

⁷ “Robert Moses and the Modern Park System (1929-1965),” 1934.

⁸ In 1939, after the WPA was abolished, the Federal Works Agency (FWA) took charge of both the PWA and the WPA. The FWA functioned until 1949, when the General Services Administration and U.S. Department of the Interior absorbed its responsibilities.

⁹ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 460; Hilary Ballon and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Robert Moses and the Modern City: The Transformation of New York*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 73.

¹⁰ Marta Gutman, “Race, Place, and Play: Robert Moses and the WPA Swimming Pools in New York City,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, no. 4 (January 1, 2008): 532.

¹¹ “New 20-Acre Playground Opened in Bronx; Moses and Lyons Dedicate it Before 2,000,” *New York Times*, Sept 12, 1937.

¹² Press Release, New York City Department of Parks, Sep 10, 1937, on “Historical Reports, Press Releases, and Minutes.” NYC Parks. Accessed April 27, 2014. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/news/reports/archive>.

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The Williamsbridge Reservoir (1889)-

The area of Williamsbridge, now also known as Norwood, was settled in the seventeenth century. The area draws its name from a 1673 bridge, which was built over the Bronx River as part of the Old Boston Road. The bridge's location, just west of the current intersection of Gun Hill Road and White Plains Road, was named after the property owner John Williams and the village, which surrounded his farm.¹³ The site of the reservoir, just west of the Bronx River, became part of New York City in 1874.¹⁴

The Williamsbridge Reservoir was opened in 1889 as part of the Bronx and Byram Rivers' water system, which supplied water to the western portion of the Bronx. The reservoir was 925 feet long and 525 feet wide.¹⁵ It consisted of a 46-foot high earthen and stone embankment with a concrete bottom and included an adjacent reservoir keeper's house.¹⁶ The reservoir was designed to receive water from Westchester County, through a 15.2-mile pipeline known as the Bronx River Pipeline.¹⁷ In the 1910s, the Bronx and Byram Rivers watersheds were merged with the newly constructed Catskill system (1907-29). This reduced the importance of the Williamsbridge Reservoir and from 1919-1925 it served as a backup system, before it was decommissioned and drained in 1925.¹⁸

Construction of the Oval Park-

After acquiring the reservoir from the Department of Water Supply, Gas and Electricity, the initial proposal was to convert the Williamsbridge site into a stadium that could seat a 100,000 spectators; however, this proposal was met with resistance from local residents, who were concerned with possible congestion. Another option proposed a swimming pool, but this idea was eventually dropped in favor of a playground. Public response to this final proposal was positive. In reference to plans detailing the transformation of the site, the *New York Times* wrote that this would develop into "one of the most unusual playground centers in the city."¹⁹ Of particular interest was the wide promenade, laid out on the reservoir embankment, which the *New York Times* felt was comparable to "the broad walks that many European cities have built along the tops of their abandoned fortifications."²⁰

¹³ Federal Writers' Project, *New York City: Vol. 1, New York City Guide*, (Guilds' Committee for Federal Writers' Publications, Inc., 1939), pg. 538.

¹⁴ Lloyd Ultan, Dr., "History of the Bronx River" (lecture, History of the Bronx River, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, New York, November 16, 2002), notes taken by Maarten de Kadt, accessed April 27, 2014, <http://bronxriver.org/?pg=content&p=abouttheriver&m1=9&m2=58>.

¹⁵ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Williamsbridge Reservoir Keeper's House*, Landmarks Preservation Commission Designation Report, 2000, 2.

¹⁶ In addition to being listed on the National Register, the Williamsbridge Reservoir Keeper's House also a New York City Landmark

¹⁷ "Williamsbridge Oval," New York City Parks, Accessed Mar 10, 2014, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/williamsbridgeoval/history>.

¹⁸ Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Williamsbridge Reservoir*, 4.

¹⁹ "Promenade to Cap Huge Play Centre," *New York Times*, May 9, 1935, 15.

²⁰ Ibid.

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The proposed plans called for reducing the thirty-seven foot high embankment to a maximum height of thirteen feet. While this outer edge would be reduced, the height of the central oval (formerly the reservoir basin) was to be increased by twelve feet in the center and sixteen around the sides.²¹ The end result would be a sunken, gently sloping basin surrounded by an embankment lower than that of the historic reservoir.

The consulting architect for the project was Aymar Embury II (1880-1966).²² Aymar Embury was born in New York City and studied engineering at Princeton, from which he graduated with a Master of Science in 1901. He began working in New York City and apprenticed with three prestigious firms: George B. Post, Howells and Stokes, and Palmer and Hornbostel. He went on to design many country homes and city townhouses and published several books, becoming an authority on early American architecture.²³ Aymar Embury came to work for the parks department after Robert Moses was appointed as a commissioner in 1934. He played a significant role in reshaping New York City parks as the chief or consulting architect on many park projects. It is estimated that he may have completed as many as six hundred projects, including the Central Park Zoo, Prospect Park Zoo, and the New York City building at the 1939 New York World's Fair.²⁴ He believed that an architect's function was to "coordinate units so that they do the required job and at the same time create a pleasant emotion."²⁵ This careful thinking went into the design of the recreation center and Williamsbridge Playground.

There are many other individuals who contributed to the design of Williamsbridge Playground in areas such as engineering, landscaping, and architecture. They include Stuart Constable, who worked as chief designer and later executive officer of the New York City Parks Department; Nelson M. Wells, who prepared many of the planting plans; and Gilmore David Clarke, a nationally prominent civil engineer and landscape architect who was a consultant to the parks department.²⁶

The park was divided into ten distinct sections. A central field in the shape of an oval would be used for multiple sports, including football and hockey, with the option to flood it in the winter for skating. The southern side of the park would consist of the recreation center with a boys' and a girls' playground to either side. The north side would have a small lawn with wooded areas to either side. The east and west sides of the park would each have eight tennis courts and a promenade would line the outer perimeter.

With the exception of the center field and lawn, the park would be densely planted with approximately five hundred trees. They were planted in orderly rows lining the numerous paths that would circle the park.²⁷ This formal planning is also evident in the symmetry of the recreation center, which is on axis with either end of

²¹ "Promenade to Cap Hugel Play Centre," 15.

²² *Designs for a Public Structure*, June 11, 1935, Public Design Commission of the City of New York, New York.

²³ Landmarks Preservation Commission, "Tompkinsville (Joseph H. Lyons) Pool," New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2008, 9.

²⁴ "Aymar Embury II," Lehman College Art Gallery, Accessed Feb 25, 2014, <http://www.lehman.edu/vpadvance/artgallery/arch/bio/embury.html>.

²⁵ "Aymar Embury, Architect Dead," *New York Times*, Nov 15, 1966, 47.

²⁶ 1935-1936, Plans of Williamsbridge Playground, Olmsted Center, Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Flushing, New York.

²⁷ "Promenade to Cap Hugel Play Centre," 15.

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the oval as well as the playing field. In fact, the delineation of the various spaces within the park are planned around this central axis. This symmetry, which acts as the driving force behind the park's design, reflects the formality present in Beaux-Arts planning.

In 1937, the park was opened to much fanfare, despite not being entirely complete. Two thousand residents attended the opening as did Robert Moses, Bronx Borough President James J. Lyons, and Captain Howard L. Peckham, the deputy works progress administrator.²⁸

Beaux Arts Landscape Plan-

Beaux-Arts landscape design was popular in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many ways, it attempted to emulate European Renaissance and Baroque landscapes by incorporating formal geometry, linear hedges, walls, fountains, and oblong reflecting pools. Additionally, significant emphasis was given to elements such as classical sculpture, which was used as focal points in the design. In the United States, the style remained popular into the Great Depression and through the 1940s.²⁹

The landscape design of the Williamsbridge Playground relies heavily on the formal symmetry of Beaux-Arts design, which is embodied in the sectional layout of the park and the multiple rows of evenly spaced maple trees encircling it. Additionally, the designers used aspects such as the recreation center and the north staircases as focal points within the park. Another aspect of the Beaux-Arts inspired design was the rectangular pool located directly in front of the recreation center; the pool has since been replaced by the spray plaza.

The Recreation Center-

The recreation center was always intended to be an important part of the park. It was built on the south side, easily accessible from the promenade as well as the lower level and clearly visible from across the playing field. According to plans from the 1930s, its primary propose was to house changing rooms and a child's play area. Patrons accessed the lower floor from the north side. A large vestibule with three doors provided the transition to the lobby. The east wing of the building was devoted to the men's changing facilities, while the west wing was reserved for women. From the lobby, a set of stairs led to the upper story, where a second lobby acted as the entrance from the south side of the building, off the promenade. The large central room on the north side of the upper story was intended as a playroom. On the south side, by the entrance, tucked behind the curves in the façade, were spaces for concessions.

At the time construction began, the *New York Times* reported that the roofs above the locker room located at each end of the building were intended to be open and used as terraces.³⁰ Several charcoal renderings of the building from the time of its construction depict figures standing and seated around umbrellas on the roof the recreation center. These terraces are still used during the summer months.

²⁸ "New 20-Acre Playground Opened in Bronx; Moses and Lyons Dedicate it Before 2,000," *New York Times*, Sept 12, 1937.

²⁹ "Beaux Arts / Neoclassical," The Cultural Landscape Foundation, accessed April 27, 2014, <https://tclf.org/content/beaux-arts-neoclassical>.

³⁰ "Recreation Building Planned for Old Reservoir Site," *New York Times*, May 11, 1935, pg. 19.

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The only parts of the recreation center that were clearly not built according to the 1936 drawings were the far sides of the wings on the lower level. The original intention, as evident in the drawings, was for two porticos to extend beyond the current wings of the building, which in turn would connect to two very small, enclosed offices. The porticos were also intended to provide a break in the building where the exterior stairs would lead from the lower level of the park to the promenade.

The architectural style and material of the recreation center is unusual compared to many of 1930s New York City recreation centers. While most of the city's recreation centers built during this period were primarily Art Deco, such as the Tompkinsville Pool in Staten Island, the design of Williamsbridge Recreation Center blends Art Moderne with strong classical influences.

The design consists primarily of a grand central entrance between two gently curving smaller wings. The vestibule, with its monolithic piers, is reminiscent of a classical portico with columns. This style of Art Moderne adapting classicism elements was popular throughout the United States during this period and was used in buildings such as the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington D.C., which was built the same year. In New York City, several public buildings constructed in the mid-1930s mirror the stark, austere Art Moderne/ classicism hybrid of the Williamsbridge Recreation Center, including the Department of Health Building (1935), designed by Charles B. Meyer; the Madison Square Post Office Branch on East 33rd Street (1937), designed by Lorimer Rich; and the Bronx County Building on the Grand Concourse by Freedlander & Hausle (1934).

While the Williamsbridge Recreation Center shares a few stylistic features with other New York City recreation centers, its materials set it apart entirely. While the majority of 1930s recreation centers were constructed from concrete and brick, the exterior of the Williamsbridge Recreation Center is built of granite that was recycled from the historic reservoir.³¹ The granite, along with the design, creates an aesthetic that is far grander than most other recreation centers of the period.

Conclusion-

From its inception in the 1930s until the 2000s it appears that Williamsbridge Playground underwent very little change with a couple of exceptions. The two playgrounds and the east row of tennis courts were likely reconfigured in the late 1970s and, in what is believed to be the 1950s or 1960s, the center doors on the lower and upper levels of the recreation center were bricked over. On the lower level, the change allowed for a reception desk to be installed behind the center door. The change was skillfully executed and did not impact the design of the building. The material used was a patterned cement block with geometric voids in the shape of circles, semi-circles and rectangles, based on the screen in front of the windows of the men's and women's changing rooms in the building's vestibule. The original French doors and transom lights were also replaced when they were widened to meet code. They were replaced with metal doors that bear the seal of the New York City Department of Parks.

³¹ Press Release, New York City Department of Parks, Sep 10, 1937, on "Historical Reports, Press Releases, and Minutes." NYC Parks. Accessed April 27, 2014, <http://www.nycgovparks.org/news/reports/archive>.

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Williamsbridge Oval Park
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With little maintenance, the park eventually fell into a state of disrepair. This prompted the city in the early 2000s to initiate a multi-phase plan for the rehabilitation of the park. To date, the central grass field was replaced with synthetic turf and the girls' and boys' playgrounds were redesigned. Most significantly, the rectangular pool in front of the recreation center was replaced with an organically shaped spray plaza.

In 2009, the Williamsbridge Oval Park closed for renovations as part of the project. It reopened in 2013 after having undergone renovations totaling \$5.2 million.³² The renovations to the interior of the building included a fitness room, a community room, a large group workout room, and a computer room for after school programs. An important part of the project was the reorganization of the interior space to allow for toilets that could be accessed directly from outside. The work also included a significant restoration of the exterior of the building. The granite façade was restored, graffiti removed, and many of the original windows were replaced with new windows that replicate the original configuration.

While elements of the Williamsbridge Oval Park have changed since its initial construction, its significant features are still largely intact. The playground, which was funded by the WPA and built during a time of rapid expansion of the New York City parks system, remains an excellent example of adaptive reuse. The design, which was the work of one of New York City's most prolific architects, Aymar Embury II, successfully combines a Beaux Arts inspired landscape with the Art Moderne design of the 1930s recreation center. The cohesiveness of the design combined with the site's history as a reservoir makes the Williamsbridge Reservoir Playground especially significant among New York City parks.

³² BWW News Desk, *Photo Flash: NYC Parks Cuts Ribbon on Renovated Williamsbridge Oval Recreation Center*, Nov 23, 2013, accessed February 27, 2014, <http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Photo-Flash-NYC-PARKS-CUTS-RIBBON-ON-RENOVATED-WILLIAMSBRIDGE-OVAL-RECREATION-CENTER-20131123#.Ux5zZxb7WYU>.

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Williamsbridge Oval Park
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Verbal Boundary Description

The nominated property is located in Bronx County, New York. The boundary is, as the historic name implies, oval in shape. It is bounded/ encircled by Reservoir Oval West and Reservoir Oval East and is indicated by a heavy line on the attached map.

Boundary Justification

The Williamsbridge Oval Park is located on the lands historically associated with its 1937 date of construction.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

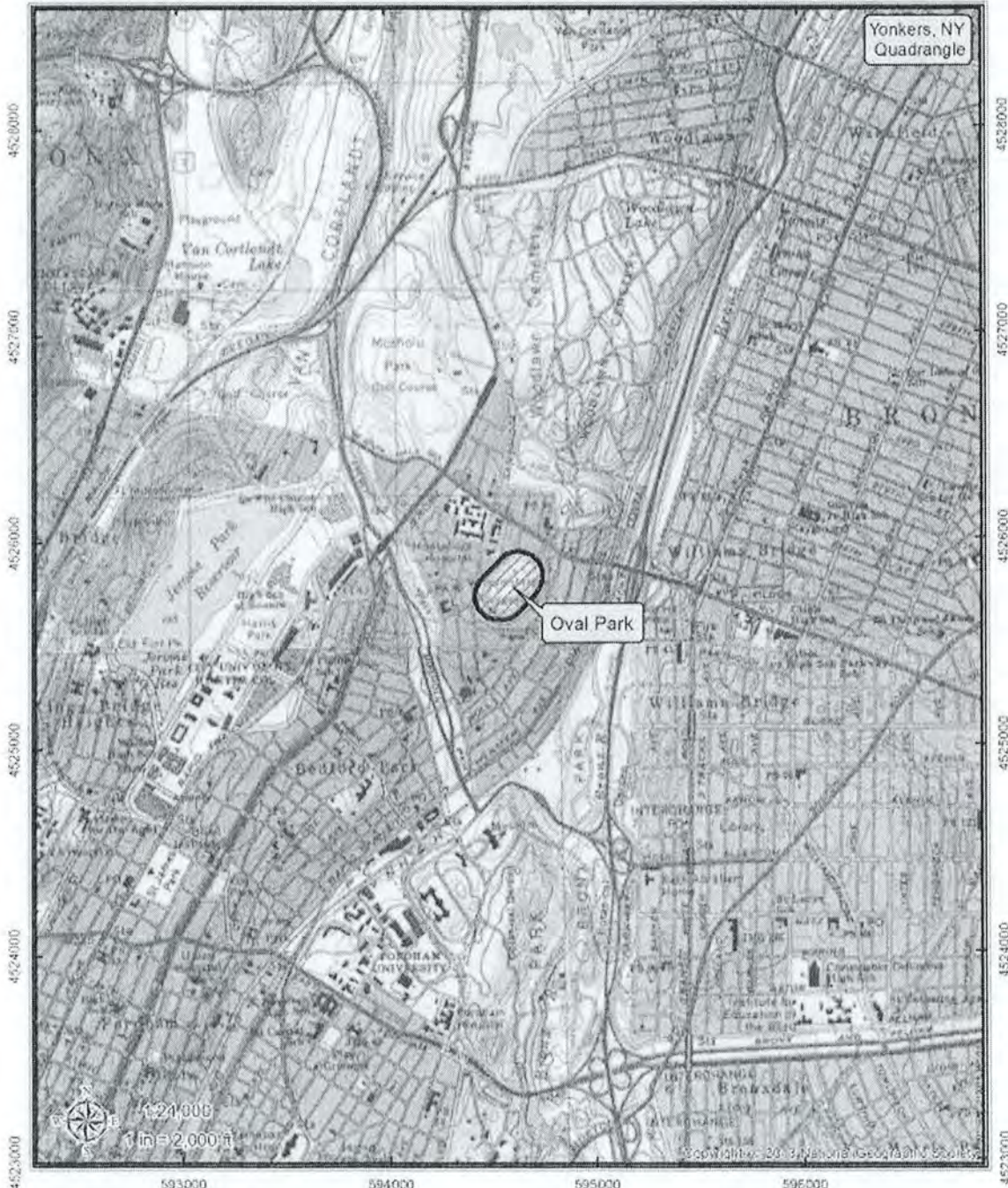
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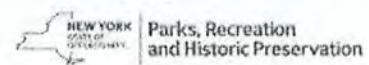
Williamsbridge Oval Park
Name of Property
Bronx County, New York
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Williamsbridge Oval Park
Bronx, Bronx Co., New York

3324 Reservoir Oval East
Bronx, NY 10467



Coordinate System: NAD 1983 UTM Zone 18N
Projection: Transverse Mercator
Datum: North American 1983
Units: Meter



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Additional Information

Name of Property: Williamsbridge Oval Park

City or Vicinity: New York City

County: Bronx County

State: New York

Images 1-19:

Photographer: Corinne Engelbert

Date Photographed: January 24, 2014, March 7, 2014, April 25, 2014.

Historic Views Courtesy of the New York City Parks archives.

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Photo Log (See keyed site plan – Section 7, Page 1):

- 1: View of tunnel looking northeast. January 24, 2014.
- 2: View of the south façade of the recreation center looking northeast. March 7, 2014.
- 3: View of recreation center and spray plaza looking southwest. April 25, 2014.
- 4: View of decorative concrete block between central pillars of the south façade of the recreation center looking northeast. March 7, 2014.
- 5: View of recreation center looking southwest. April 25, 2014.
- 6: View of the curving north façade of the recreation center looking southeast. January 24, 2014.
- 7: View of west façade of the recreation center looking southeast. April 25, 2014.
- 8: View of workout room on the lower floor of the recreation center. March 7, 2014.
- 9: View of the patterned brickwork between the stairs on the lower floor of the recreation center. March 7, 2014.
- 10: View of center room on the upper level of the recreation center looking northeast. March 7, 2014.
- 11: View of nook on upper level of recreation center looking southwest. March 7, 2014.
- 12: View of playing field from spray plaza looking northeast. April 25, 2014.
- 13: View of promenade from the south side of the recreation center looking southeast. April 25, 2014.
- 14: View of basketball courts from promenade looking northwest. April 25, 2014.
- 15: View of lawn looking northeast. April 25, 2014.
- 16: View of playground in northeast corner of the park looking west. April 25, 2014.
- 17: View of playground in southwest section of the park looking north. March 7, 2014.

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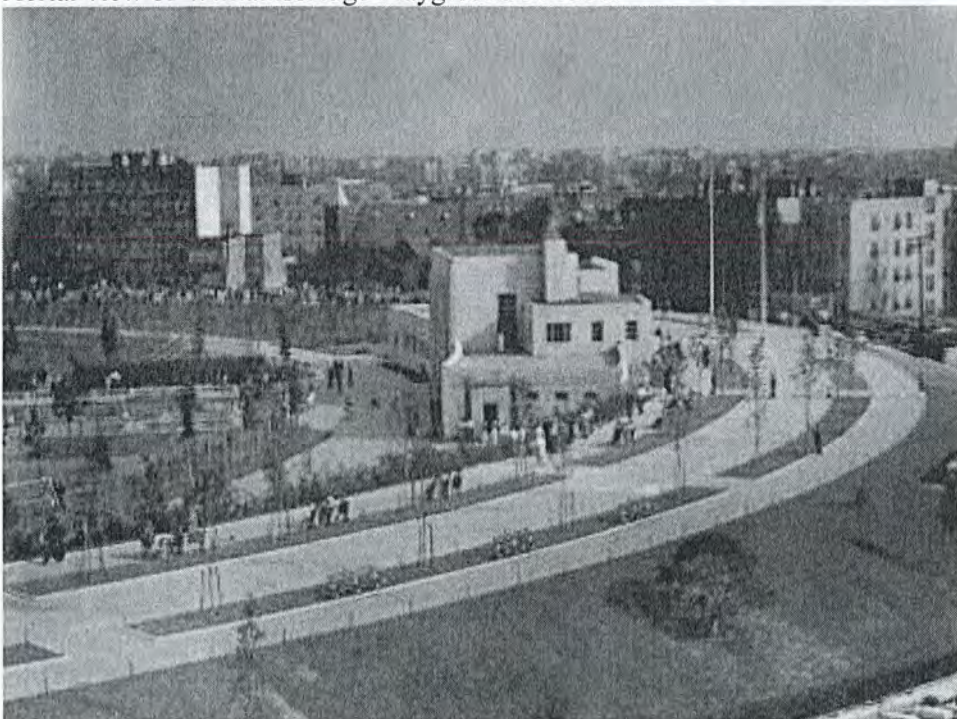
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Aerial view of Williamsbridge Playground in 1938.



View of the west side of the recreation center circa 1938.











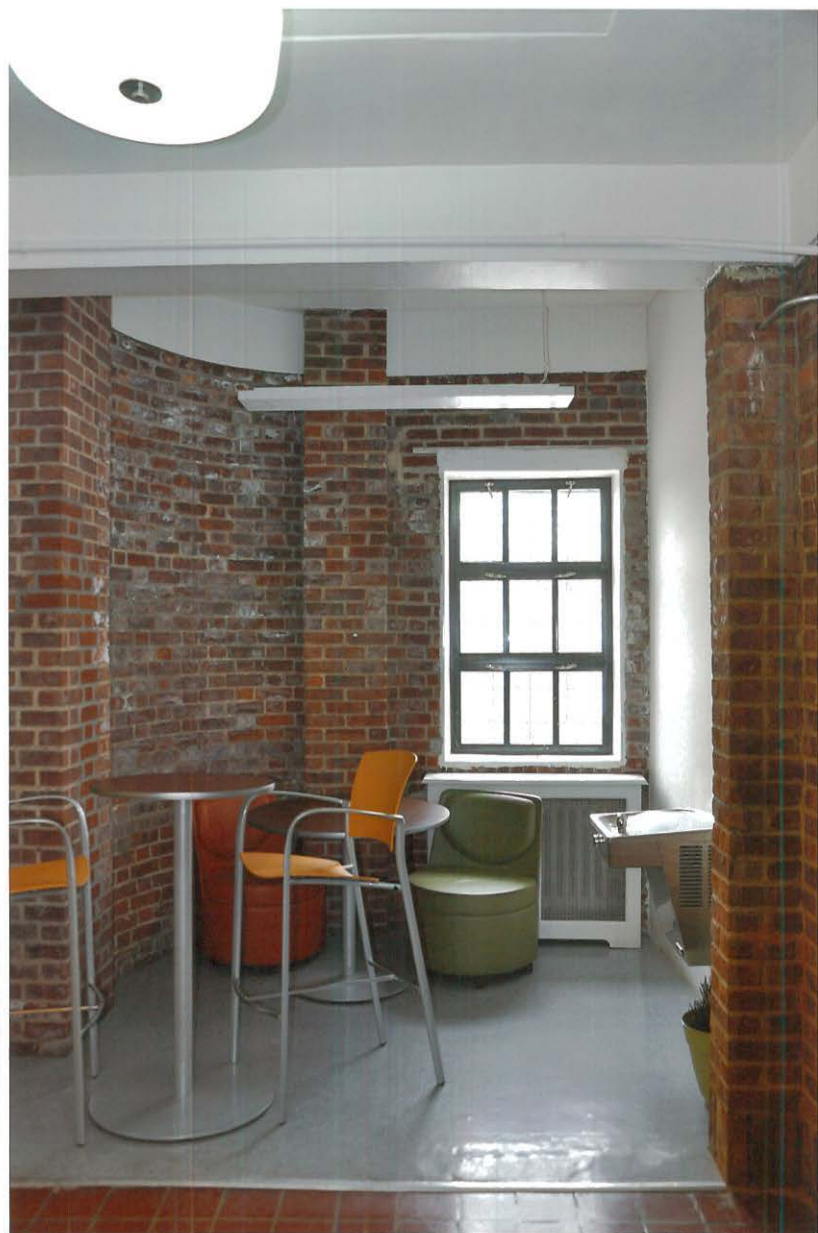


























UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Williamsbridge Oval Park

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: NEW YORK, Bronx

DATE RECEIVED: 4/03/15 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 4/24/15
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 5/11/15 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 5/19/15
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000229

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: Y PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: Y SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: Y NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 5/14/15 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

RECOM./CRITERIA _____

REVIEWER Abernathy DISCIPLINE _____

TELEPHONE _____ DATE _____

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

Division for Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 189, Waterford, New York 12188-0189
518-237-8643



Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor
Rose Harvey
Commissioner

31 March 2015

Alexis Abernathy
National Park Service
National Register of Historic Places
1201 Eye St. NW, 8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20005

Re: National Register Nominations

Dear Ms. Abernathy:

I am pleased to submit the following eight nominations, all on disc, to be considered for listing by the Keeper of the National Register:

Canajoharie Historic District, Montgomery County
Waccabuc Historic District, Westchester County
Skinny House, Westchester County
Crown Point Green Historic District
Barkin House, Nassau County
Murphy Grist Mill, Dutchess County
Williamsbridge Oval Park, Bronx County
Union Temple of Brooklyn, Kings County

I wish to call your attention to the map for the Waccabuc Historic District. On the tax map, you can see that a tiny sliver of land has been excluded that is connected to a much larger non-historic parcel west of the district (the intent was to exclude the larger parcel). However, the sliver is so small that on the USGS and ortho maps it cannot be seen. It just looks like an unnecessary solid line. We were not sure how else to indicate this. Please feel free to call me at 518.268.2165 if you have any questions.

Sincerely:

Kathleen LaFrank
National Register Coordinator
New York State Historic Preservation Office