



A GUIDE TO HISTORIC NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS

# PROSPECT LEFFERTS GARDENS BROOKLYN





The Historic Districts Council is New York's citywide advocate for historic buildings and neighborhoods. The Six to Celebrate program annually identifies six historic New York City neighborhoods that merit preservation as priorities for HDC's advocacy and consultation over a yearlong period.

The six, chosen from applications submitted by community organizations, are selected on the basis of the architectural and historic merit of the area, the level of threat to the neighborhood, the strength and willingness of the local advocates, and the potential for HDC's preservation support to be meaningful. HDC works with these neighborhood partners to set and reach preservation goals through strategic planning, advocacy, outreach, programs and publicity.

The core belief of the Historic Districts Council is that preservation and enhancement of New York City's historic resources—its neighborhoods, buildings, parks and public spaces—are central to the continued success of the city. The Historic Districts Council works to ensure the preservation of these resources and uphold the New York City Landmarks Law and to further the preservation ethic. This mission is accomplished through ongoing programs of assistance to more than 500 community and neighborhood groups and through public-policy initiatives, publications, educational outreach and sponsorship of community events.



**Council on  
the Arts**



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## PROSPECT LEFFERTS GARDENS

This neighborhood was once part of the Town of Flatbush, one of the original six towns established by Dutch and British Colonists in what is now Kings County. Flatbush remained an independent municipality until it was annexed in 1894 by the City of Brooklyn, which then became part of Greater New York in 1898. Up until this point, much of Flatbush was used for agricultural purposes. One of the largest landowners was the Lefferts family, which settled in Brooklyn in 1661. Various branches of the family maintained expansive farmsteads throughout Kings County, as well as in Queens, Long Island and New Jersey. The estate comprising much of Prospect Lefferts Gardens eventually passed to John Lefferts. An early proponent of development, he helped found the Flatbush Plank Road Company in 1855 to improve access to the area.

As was often the case in New York City, transportation was the primary catalyst for urban development in the neighborhood. Continuing his father's efforts, John's son James Lefferts invested in the Brooklyn, Flatbush & Coney Island Railway Company, established in 1878. Initially serving pleasure seekers traveling between the Flatbush Long Island Railroad terminal and the beach, this became a true commuter line in 1896 when it was extended northward to downtown Brooklyn and eventually crossed the Brooklyn Bridge to Manhattan in 1901. John Lefferts began to subdivide the estate in 1887 when he announced the sale of 516 lots east of Rogers Avenue. A promotional pamphlet proclaimed that, "the absurdity of devoting lands so desirable, central, and valuable to raising corn and potatoes has finally induced the owner to part with [the] lots." The local press pronounced it "the most brilliant auction sale ever made in Flatbush," which likely encouraged James Lefferts to put an additional 600 lots—most of the remaining farmstead—up for sale in 1893. Perhaps because these lots surrounded Lefferts' own homestead, he added restrictive covenants prohibiting standard "noxious" uses (primarily industrial) and further stipulating that all buildings would be single-family houses.

The lots covered by these covenants consisted of the area between Flatbush Avenue and Rogers Avenue from Lincoln Road to Fenimore Street, and was and is referred to as Lefferts Manor. In 1919 the Lefferts Manor Association was established to enforce the restrictions and preserve the area's single-family residential character. Though the covenants limited use to single-family houses, the Association and the press were quick to point out that this did not overly restrict the neighborhood's architectural variety. As one article noted, "the rule has not brought about any monotonous style of architecture. Some of the residences are of imposing size, in stone, stucco or wood. Others are dignified brick buildings in a row." Outside Lefferts Manor, development was somewhat less constrained. Many blocks were built up with two-family row houses—some closely resembling their single-family counterparts and others more clearly embracing their duplex character. Some contain six-story elevator apartment buildings designed in a variety of styles. Flatbush Avenue in particular has a wealth of small-scale commercial buildings with fine architectural details.

By the 1960s the Association began to rely on zoning regulations to enforce the residential character of the neighborhood, and in the 1970s a portion of the neighborhood was designated as a New York City historic district to preserve its architectural character. The Prospect Lefferts Gardens Neighborhood Association was founded in the late 1960s to foster racial integration in the area and to promote the vitality of the greater neighborhood (both inside and outside Lefferts Manor), a goal shared by the many civic organizations that continue to advocate for the preservation of Prospect Lefferts Gardens.



I

**139 TO 215 LEFFERTS AVENUE**  
**158 TO 214 LEFFERTS AVENUE**  
 Between Bedford  
 and Rogers Avenues  
*(Frank S. Lowe, 1905-06)*  
 NYC-HD

This block and many of its neighbors—those on Sterling Street, Lefferts Avenue and the north side of Lincoln Road between Bedford and Nostrand Avenues—are within the locally-designated historic district, but excluded from the National Register listing since historically they were not subject to the restrictive covenants that characterize Lefferts Manor to the south. This meant that developers were able to erect multiple-family dwellings including these 58 two-family

rowhouses erected by the Kingston Realty Company. Architect Lowe designed these buildings to resemble their single-family counterparts, with only one entrance and stoop serving both apartments. The two-family model became especially popular in Brooklyn beginning in the 1890s as an affordable option for families, which could rent out the top floor while occupying the parlor and basement floors, and with developers, who were exempt from tenement house regulations (which only applied to dwellings with three or more families).

### LEGEND OF DESIGNATIONS

National Historic Landmark:	NHL
National Register of Historic Places	NR
New York City Historic District:	NYC HD
New York City Individual Landmark:	NYC IL
New York City Interior Landmark:	NYC INL

2

**GRACE REFORMED CHURCH**  
 163 Lincoln Road  
*(George L. Morse, 1893)*  
 NYC-HD



This congregation traces its origins to 1856, when a Sunday school for African-American children “was started in a small building in the woods” in what is now Prospect Park. Two years later, in 1858, it was formally incorporated as the Society for the Amelioration of the Colored Population in Flatbush. The school—which also hosted occasional prayer meetings, funerals and temperance events—was given in 1871 to the Dutch Reformed Church, which began regular church services. After moving several times, the church settled at its current location in 1893 on land donated by the Lefferts family. A decade later, in 1903, Grace Chapel was organized as the independent Grace Reformed Church. Its graceful building features Tiffany stained-glass windows, also donated by the Lefferts family. The Sunday school (1903-04) facing Bedford Avenue was also designed by Morse.



3

**74 TO 170 LINCOLN ROAD**  
*(Slee & Bryson, 1908-16)*  
 NYC-HD, NR

Lincoln Road is the northern boundary of Lefferts Manor. The lots to the north were not subject to restrictive covenants as were those to the south, which explains the striking contrast in scale between the six-story apartment buildings on one side of the street and the freestanding wood houses with relatively spacious lots on the other. All but one of these houses was designed by the same architectural firm for Frederick B. Norris, one of the most prolific developers in the neighborhood. (No. 98, designed by Eric Holmgren, was built in 1922 on the only remaining vacant lot.) Even working within the constraints of the restrictive covenants, developers and architects could produce an impressive range of building types and architectural styles. The freestanding house, designed with a multitude of roof shapes and a profusion of turrets and gables, was what the Lefferts family had in mind when it started subdividing its property in the late 19th century. Though somewhat late examples, these buildings are typical of the suburban-type residential building that characterized much of “Victorian” Flatbush.



4

## 95 MAPLE STREET

(Gordon M. Freutschild, 1917)  
NYC-HD, NR



This block of Maple Street was the last to be developed in Lefferts Manor, mostly in the 1920s and '30s. Like Lincoln Road (site 3), it was also built up with freestanding houses, although of very different architectural character. Designed by a number of architects for just as many developers, the houses display a notable cohesiveness, employing simple cubic forms, brick façades and slate or Spanish tile roofs. Even the trio of houses completed in the 1950s (nos. 84 to 96) were clearly designed to fit into their architectural context. The stylistic vocabulary tends towards the Colonial Revival, with the occasional Tudor or Mediterranean Revival. No. 95 is the most impressive house on the block, set on an extra large lot with a landscaped garden. It was built for William H. Todd, who also commissioned the adjacent house at no. 109 at the same time.



5

MAPLE STREET ROW HOUSES  
Between Bedford and Rogers Avenue  
(1909-11)  
NYC-HD, NR

While the freestanding house was closest to what the Lefferts family envisioned for their subdivision, the row house proved to be the more popular building type for the neighborhood's developers. For one thing, their smaller lot size meant that more houses could fit on a given block. This stretch of Maple Street, for example, contains 84 rowhouses, while the previous stop west of Bedford Avenue, consisting mostly of freestanding houses, has only 36. This block is one of the most harmonious in the neighborhood. All of the houses were built within a very short period, between 1909 and 1911, and were commissioned by only two developers. The 50 closest to Bedford Avenue (nos. 126 to 174 and 125 to 173) were designed by Axel S. Hedman for Eli H. Bishop and Son. Many feature hipped, octagonal Spanish tile roofs above the projecting bays—a whimsical detail unusual for the neighborhood. Benjamin Driesler, another very prolific local architect, designed the 34 row houses on the east side of the block towards Rogers Avenue (nos. 178 to 216 and 177 to 215). Standing only two stories tall plus the basement, these buildings were relatively modest and closely resemble the two-family rowhouses found throughout the neighborhood. Larger, more ornate examples can be found by taking a short detour down either Midwood Street or Rutland Road west of Bedford Avenue.



This firehouse is almost the mirror image, although built with different materials, to the landmark Engine Company 40, Hook & Ladder Company 21 (1895) in Windsor Terrace. Lauritzen designed at least eight firehouses in the years just before the then-independent City of Brooklyn merged into Greater New York. This building originally had space for a steam fire engine, a hose truck, a ladder truck and six horse stalls. The projecting tower above the right corner was presumably for drying hoses. Architectural inspiration came from medieval and Jacobean England, particularly the ornate window surrounds and the ogee pediment above the left bay. In 1996 the building was essentially rebuilt, and a third story added, behind the historic façade.

6

FIREHOUSE ENGINE COMPANY 149 AND  
LADDER HOOK & LADDER COMPANY 63,  
NOW ENGINE COMPANY 49, HOOK &  
LADDER COMPANY 23  
491 Rogers Avenue  
(Peter J. Lauritzen, 1895-96)

7

174 TO 270 FENIMORE STREET  
NR

Fenimore Street is the southern boundary of Lefferts Manor. West of Bedford Avenue the line runs down the middle of the street, hence the single-family houses to the north side of the street and the six-story apartment buildings on the south (similar to site 3). Between Bedford and Rogers Avenues, however, the Lefferts family's restrictive covenants were in effect on both sides of the street. The boundaries of the National Register Historic District, which originally included only the north side of this block, were expanded in 2017 to encompass the houses at nos. 174 to 266. Most of these were built in the late 1890s and early 1900s, making them some of the earliest in the district, and were designed by a number of prominent local architects using the picturesque massing and complex rooflines typical of the period. At the end of the block stands the Fenimore Street Methodist Episcopal Church (now Fenimore Street United Methodist Church). It was built just before James Lefferts subdivided his estate and was therefore exempt from the covenants that would have barred non-residential uses. As such, it is perhaps the earliest and only institutional building in Lefferts Manor. It was built in two phases. The original church (architect undetermined, 1889-90) consisted of a long, narrow structure running along Rogers Avenue, while the Sunday School addition (1895-96), designed by John J. Petit, ran parallel and created the distinctive twin peaked roofline on Fenimore Street.



8

CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF  
THE EVANGEL  
1950 Bedford Avenue  
(*Harold S. Granger of Nelson &  
Van Wagenen, 1916-17*)  
NR

The Gothic Revival style Congregational Church of the Evangel was the congregation's first purpose-built home. Church members began worshipping together at this site in 1907, having moved south to the Prospect-Lefferts neighborhood from the Lewis Avenue Congregational Church in Bedford-Stuyvesant. By this time, Flatbush was rapidly developing from farmland into commuter suburbs, and the occupants of the tidy new rows of architect-designed houses were building new places of worship consistent with the character of a desirable, middle-class community. The Church of the Evangel features the small scale, rustic materials palette, and irregular, picturesque massing of a medieval English parish church, which provided the formal basis of the Gothic Revival style as applied to American ecclesiastical architecture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Notable features include the crenellated tower, slate roofs, pointed-arch nave window and a c. 1927 Tiffany window located in the chancel (viewable from inside the church). Some of the building's rough-faced stone is believed to have come from excavations for subway stations in Manhattan. As the Prospect-Lefferts area began to receive a significant number of Caribbean immigrants and African-American migrants by the mid-20th century, the Church of the Evangel's membership changed in step with this demographic shift and in the 1960s was peacefully integrated. In 1977 the church's first African-American pastor, the Reverend Charles Fisher, began leading the congregation.



9

## PARKSIDE AVENUE DUPLEXES

352 to 386 and 377 to 413 Parkside Avenue  
(Benjamin Driesler, 1909)



Back outside of Lefferts Manor, the blocks between Winthrop Street and Clarkson Avenue were developed in large part by the Brown family and therefore not subject to restrictive covenants. During the late 19th century, the Browns maintained a rather sizeable estate on this property, which they operated as a semi-public botanical garden with several large conservatories and a notable flower collection. Enthusiastic supporters of Flatbush's transformation into an urban neighborhood, they began subdividing their property just after the turn of the century. In 1908, Parkside Avenue, which had existed on paper as Robinson Street, was cut through their land. Almost immediately the Browns hired Driesler to design these two rows of two-family houses. Architecturally innovative, these dwellings did not imitate single-family rowhouses, but instead proudly signaled the presence of two apartments with separate entrances, which were meant to maximize privacy between the units. This layout comprises a distinct, if short-lived, building type that has been referred to as the Brooklyn Duplex or Kinko House (after the Kings & Westchester Land Company, which was the first to build one in 1904-05). The adjacent rows of two-family houses at nos. 290 to 304 (completed 1912) and nos. 357 to 375 (1914)—also by Driesler for William Brown—are somewhat more traditional in that they forgo the double entrances, but are nonetheless stylistically inventive.

10

## PARKSIDE COURT

2 to 14 and 1 to 17  
Parkside Court

(Thomas J. Sinnott, 1909-10)



This private, dead-end street can be glimpsed from Parkside Avenue. Like Chester Court (site 11), it was a picturesque solution to the awkward interruption of the street grid by the exposed tracks of the Brighton Beach line. These two-family rowhouses were more traditional than the Parkside Avenue Duplexes, with a tall stoop leading to a single entrance providing access to both apartments. Sinnott, a local builder-architect, claimed this was to “avoid the two long flights to reach the upper apartment, there being only one flight above the stoop.” He further stated that, “my idea in erecting these has been to provide a structure in which a man with a family can have ample room and live as much by himself as in a single family house and yet have a full suite to rent for enough to pay all the carrying charges on his investment.” Sinnott also touted the “unique” rear piazzas, claiming the houses on the west side of the street overlooked Prospect Park. The stone rubble wall at the end of the court is an original feature, supposedly “adorned with plants and vines.”



11

CHESTER COURT  
HISTORIC DISTRICT

15 to 31 and 16 to 32

Chester Court

(Peter J. Collins,  
1911-12)

NYC-HD

A brief walk down this short, dead-end street off busy Flatbush Avenue is like stepping into medieval England. The cohesive collection of 18 Tudor Revival rowhouses—designed and built by a prominent local architect/developer—was inspired by 16th century “black-and-white” buildings of Chester, England (as well as the later “Black-and-White Revival” houses of the late 19th and early 20th centuries). The Tudor Revival style, common for freestanding houses of this period, was much more unusual for attached rowhouses. Characteristic features include the stuccoed upper stories with faux half timbering meant to imitate their ancient wood-framed predecessors. Though located just outside Lefferts Manor, these houses were originally intended for single-family occupancy; in fact, they are nearly identical to the group of 18 houses on Rutland Road just east of Flatbush Avenue designed and built by Collins in 1914-15 following the restrictive covenants.



I2

OCEAN ON THE PARK  
HISTORIC DISTRICT  
189 to 211  
Ocean Avenue  
NYC-HD

Ocean Avenue, a couple blocks west of Lefferts Manor, was mostly built up with six-story apartment buildings capitalizing on the park views and lack of restrictive covenants, but these 12 rowhouses are the exception. The ten limestone-fronted buildings (nos. 193 to 211) were designed in 1909 by Axel S. Hedman for developer Charles G. Reynolds in the popular Renaissance Revival style. These lots were especially deep, extending 150' to the Brighton Beach rail line, and the architect took advantage by setting the houses well back from the street line and

incorporating terraces and landscaped yards. Interestingly, no. 193 was once owned and occupied by Charles Ebbets, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers and developer of Ebbets Field. The adjacent brick rowhouses were built just a few years later. Civil engineer Philip A. Faribault designed his own home at no. 191 around 1915, while Reynolds commissioned Eric O. Holmgren for the complimentary building at no. 189 in 1917-18. Originally proposed as part of the Prospect Lefferts Gardens Historic District in the 1970s, this district's designation in 2009 was spurred on by the modern development at no. 185. Until 2008, it was the site of an elegant detached house that was part of the original development. Its sale and subsequent demolition spurred the neighbors to mount a successful campaign to win designation for the remainder of the row, and the empty site itself was briefly considered for landmark status in order for the LPC to guide its redevelopment (the LPC ultimately rejected the designation).



I3a

135 OCEAN AVENUE  
(Boris W. Dorfman, 1928)

I3b

153 OCEAN AVENUE  
(Morris Whinston, 1951)



This six-story apartment along this stretch of large mostly built between the popular architectural revival styles of the day. This building presents a jazzy Art Deco façade, busy with geometrically-patterned brickwork and cast-stone and polychrome-tile accents. Its narrow recessed entry court is marked by beacon-like columns and its corner towers are crowned with cascading stepped pyramids and corbelled arches—forms that are evocative of Mayan architecture. As with the neighboring buildings, the large footprint and six-story height of this apartment house took shape because of the 1901 Tenement House Act, which set higher standards for light and air in residential construction by regulating lot coverage, height and exterior wall exposure. The later Multiple Dwellings Law of 1928 further increased minimum courtyard sizes. Hidden from the street by seemingly monolithic façades, these buildings all incorporate at least one interior courtyard. This building has a roughly X-shaped plan of five distinct apartment wings organized around front, rear and side light courts. A few doors to the south is the former Prospect Park Jewish Center at 153 Ocean Avenue (attributed to Morris Whinston, 1951), a notably late iteration of the related Art Moderne style. It originally housed a spacious synagogue, a Talmud Torah school, a large auditorium, a library, meeting rooms and recreational facilities.

I4

534 FLATBUSH AVENUE  
(Murray Klein, 1930)



The terra-cotta ornament on this small commercial building is nearly identical to similar structures throughout the five boroughs. Several of these were associated with Child's restaurants (including the landmark location on the Coney Island Boardwalk), although there is no indication this was ever occupied by the chain. Instead, records indicate that the first tenant of this building was the Tiny Tim Golf Club, which occupied the entire upper floor. Miniature golf was in the midst of a wild surge in popularity at this time. According to government estimates in 1930, there were 25,000 courses in the country, 15,000 built within the previous year. Indoor courses were the latest rage, allowing year-round play even in urban areas like Brooklyn. After the Great Depression brought a quick halt to miniature golf's popularity, later occupants of the building included the Prospect Park Jewish Center in the 1940s, which later built its own building in the neighborhood (site 13). The building's architect, Murray Klein, designed a number of theaters and other places of amusement in Brooklyn during the 1920s and '30s.



Flatbush Avenue, already a well-traveled street in the 19th century, became a major commercial thoroughfare in the 20th century as the neighborhoods around it were built up. Even the Lefferts family acknowledged this and apparently did not impose covenants on its lots lining the east side of the avenue. Residents and civic organizations closely watched the development and loudly protested any new building they believed was out of character. Such was the case for this bakery, which was criticized as too large and too industrial. One article quoted an aggrieved neighbor as saying that, “It seems almost criminal to permit a factory to be constructed at the entrance to one of the finest residential sections of the boro.” In spite of these concerns, the bakery was eventually built by the General Baking Company. Its design has been attributed to Comstock, who designed several bakeries in the city, including at least one other for the same company. Contemporary passersby might wonder what all the fuss was about. The two-story building fits nicely in its context (although the clock tower would have stood out at the time) and its spare, Classical details, fine brickwork and terracotta ornament are both restrained and well executed. Locals were eventually won over and fondly remember the lovely aroma wafting from this direction until the bakery closed in 1996.

15

**BOND BREAD BAKERY  
BUILDING**

479-497 Flatbush Avenue  
*(Attributed to Corry B.  
Comstock, 1924-25)*



16

**BROOKLYN CENTRAL OFFICE,  
BUREAU OF FIRE COMMUNICATIONS**

35 Empire Boulevard  
*(Frank J. Helmle, 1913-16)*  
NYC-IL

This Renaissance Revival style T-plan building was constructed for the Fire Department of New York City and served as the central fire communications and telegraph station for the borough of Brooklyn. Four other stations were planned and built during the 1910s and '20s in Manhattan, The Bronx, Queens and Staten Island, addressing in part the need for an improved citywide firefighting system. A 1911 article in McClure's magazine had called New York City's fire-alarm system the “worst” and most antiquated in the nation. These stations were intended to improve the efficiency of municipal fire-fighting efforts by receiving all fire signals from across a borough, and then routing the signals to the appropriate local precinct. The buildings were typically located in or near parks in order to minimize the threat of fire, but also to provide space for the large radio towers transmitting the fire signals. Architecturally, the Brooklyn station is an excellent example of the City Beautiful movement. This otherwise utilitarian building is given an important civic presence through the use of high-style design, materials and ornament, in this case inspired by an early Italian Renaissance “palazzo.” With its counterparts in the other four boroughs, the Brooklyn station represents an important step taken by the FDNY in response to the growing threat of fire in the city's tenement and industrial districts in the early years of the 20th century. The property is still owned by the FDNY.

17

**LEFFERTS HOUSE**

Prospect Park, near Willink  
Entrance at Flatbush Avenue  
and Empire Boulevard  
*(1777-83)*  
NYC-IL, NR



Though not technically in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, the Lefferts House is undeniably significant to the history of the neighborhood. It was built during the American Revolution, replacing the family's earlier homestead that was burned by colonial forces. This building originally stood near Flatbush Avenue between Maple and Midwood Streets, and was designed in the Dutch manner—with a low gambrel roof and overhanging eaves—evoking the family's long history in the area. After the death of James Lefferts (the original developer of Lefferts Manor), his family donated the old homestead to the City in 1918 with the condition that it be moved to its current site in Prospect Park. Since 1920, it has been operated as a house museum and is open to the public with exhibits on early 19th century life in Brooklyn.



