

PROPOSED RIDGEWOOD SOUTH HISTORIC DISTRICT
BOROUGH OF QUEENS

The proposed Ridgewood South Historic District is significant as a large, intact grouping of fully developed model tenements that reflect the development of Ridgewood in the early 20th century. A contiguous district in both typology and style, it is composed of over 210 buildings, primarily three-story brick tenements, and the St. Matthias Roman Catholic Church Complex. The tenements were constructed between 1911 and 1912 by the G.X. Mathews Company and were designed by architect Louis Allmendinger. Known as “Mathews Model Flats,” these “new law” tenements had larger rooms and more adequate sanitary facilities than their 19th-century predecessors. Built in long rows of repeated designs that create a sense of place, the facades retain a high degree of integrity and are distinguished by their yellow and burnt-orange brick facades, cast-stone details, ornate pressed metal cornices, and stoop and areaway ironwork.

Several factors contributed to the development of Ridgewood, which was characterized by open farmland and several amusement parks in the 19th century. Denser building activity had begun with the coming of the electric trolley in 1894, and after consolidation, Ridgewood was subjected to the eastward expansion of a growing New York City. Located adjacent to Brooklyn’s Eastern District (which contained the communities of Bushwick, Williamsburg and Greenpoint), Ridgewood became an ideal location for upwardly mobile German-Americans to relocate, away from the over-crowding and more recent immigrants inhabiting Bushwick and Williamsburg, as well as Lower East Side.

German immigrant Gustave X. Mathews began building in Ridgewood in the first decade of the 20th century. Using wider lots, large air shafts, private sanitary facilities, and limiting occupancy to two families per floor, Mathews created a new tenement model that was a radical improvement to the overcrowded apartment houses of Williamsburg and the Lower East Side. By creating improved living quarters and controlling costs so that the apartments could be affordable to families of modest income, Mathews met with immediate success. He built and sold over 300 tenements in Ridgewood between 1909 and 1912, receiving 25% the tenement house permits issued in Queens in 1911. As testament to their improved design, the “Mathews Model Flats” were exhibited by the New York City Tenement House Department at the Panama-Pacific Fair in San Francisco in 1915. The buildings in this district are fully developed Mathews Flats buildings, which became standards for later tenement house construction, and are characteristic of the development of the area in the first quarter of the 20th century.

In addition to being innovative in plan, the tenements are striking in appearance. Built after 1905 when fire codes in Ridgewood began requiring masonry construction for attached rows, the buildings have load-bearing masonry walls constructed of speckled, light colored Kreisler brick. Using mainly pale-yellow and burnt-orange brick, the buildings have fine detailing, including corbelled, projecting, contrasting and geometric patterned brickwork, brick pilasters, and contrasting brick bases and cast-stone string coursing. Most of the tenements employ the same design with Romanesque Revival-style round and segmental arches of contrasting brick, and a cast-stone door lintels. With mainly flat facades, the mid-block buildings are recessed from the street wall of the corner buildings, adding further interest to the row. Other handsome details include Classically-inspired cast-stone entablatures, pressed metal cornices and original ironwork at the stoop and areaway. The buildings facing Woodward and Onderdonk Avenues have commercial storefronts at the first floor and apartments on the second and third floors, while the side streets are completely residential.

The St. Matthias Roman Catholic Church complex, which includes a cathedral, rectory, school and convent, faces Catalpa Avenue at the eastern edge of the district. Constructed of pale yellow or amber brick, these four buildings are architecturally congruous with the rest of the district and are significant in the telling of Ridgewood's history and development. The first building, designed by the prominent architect F.J. Berlenbach as a combined church and school, was erected on the property in 1909 and is currently used as the school. As the congregation grew with the population of the surrounding area, the grand cathedral—which was designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style—was completed in 1926.

The buildings in the proposed district are mostly intact, however some alterations include new stoops, replacement windows and doors, removed ironwork, new awnings and altered storefronts. A cohesive collection of speculative urban architecture, the tenements in the Proposed Ridgewood South Historic District retain extremely high levels of architectural integrity and represent an important part of the development of housing in New York City.