

Cemeteries dying from neglect

Historic burial grounds now trash dumps

BY ROLANDO PUJOL
rpujol@am-ny.com

The deceased outnumber the living in New York, a reminder that the city is as much a metropolis as it is a necropolis.

That reality is easy to miss, yet tiny cemeteries lie tucked on Manhattan side streets and 20,000 souls rest fitfully beneath Washington Square Park.

But then there are dozens of smaller historic cemeteries, some of which have been neglected. In certain cases, these outer-borough cemeteries have become trash dumps or havens for drug addicts. They become overgrown with weeds and trees or, worse, attract grave vandals.

Neglected sacred ground

As even more small cemeteries become full and thus lose income, the problem may only worsen, activists said. Solutions can be elusive, and were it not for volunteers and preservationists who essentially adopt them, their descent could be unstoppable.

Other factors shape



A number of headstones at Bayside Cemetery have been desecrated. (PHOTOS: R.J. MICKELSON/AMNY)

their fate — demographic changes, ownership questions and scarcity of funds among them.

"Everyone thinks it's sinister or horrible, but basically, it's a business. They can't sell new graves, they can't have an income, they can't hire a maintenance guy," said Lynn A. Rogers, executive director of Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries, of Staten Island.

Prospect Cemetery

Cate Ludlam understands these problems all too well. She has led an effort to restore Prospect Cemetery in Jamaica, where her fore-

fathers are buried.

Ludlam has rescued Prospect by raising funds and marshaling volunteers. The centerpiece is a once-derelict 1850s chapel, which gleams anew as a performance venue.

A landscape architect will craft plans to restore the grounds, thick with vegetation despite earlier clearings.

Bayside Cemetery

In Ozone Park, Bayside Cemetery, a Jewish burial ground, has fallen into decline, with vast vegetation overgrowth and vandalized crypts. A lawsuit against

the Upper West Side, awaits a court hearing.

John Lucker, who filed the class-action suit, sees no excuse. His grandparents are buried there.

The suit alleges that the synagogue ignored legal obligations to preserve the graves and misappropriated funds for their care.

The synagogue is fighting the allegations. Rabbi Julia Andelman called Bayside's state distressing, but the suit destructive. She said most of the cemetery was sold to scores of now-defunct burial societies, which once looked after their parcels. A new nonprofit group to aid Jewish cemeteries, CAJAC, has begun restoration.

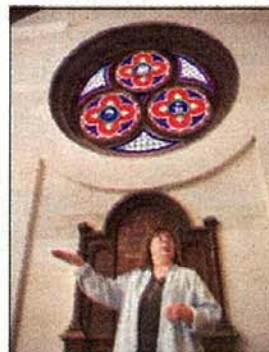
Friends of the dead

On Staten Island, Friends of Abandoned Cemeteries has been rescuing cemeteries since 1981.

Aside from organizing volunteers and focusing on maintenance, it's vital to tease out stories of the dead and publicize them, Rogers said. "You need to make it a productive, useful place."

Still, simple societal callousness may be to blame.

"Young people are not being raised with a sense of their own history or sense of roots. ... I know people who don't know where their parents are buried. I think that's very sad," Ludlam said.



Cate Ludlam in the restored Prospect Cemetery chapel

the Manhattan synagogue that founded it in the 19th century, Shaare Zedek, of

FAMOUS DEAD

New York is home to many famous bones. Here are some:

Former President Ulysses S. Grant:

This is but an excuse to trot out an old joke. Who's buried in Grant's Tomb? Nobody. But the general and his wife are entombed there.

Cemetery: Grant's Tomb, Morningside Heights
Status: Protected

Ichabod Crane:

Yes, a fellow by that name did exist, and his appearance is said to have in part inspired Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow."

Cemetery: New Springville Cemetery (Asbury Methodist), Staten Island

Status: Semi-abandoned

Peter Stuyvesant:

Stuyvesant Town. Stuyvesant High School. Bedford-Stuyvesant. His Dutch name is everywhere, and "Old Peg Leg" was a crucial figure in Gotham history.

Cemetery: St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, East Village
Status: Protected

Clement Clark Moore:

The Chelsea resident is often credited with writing "'Twas the Night Before Christmas."

Cemetery: Trinity Church Cemetery, Washington Heights
Status: Protected (AMNY)