

Old, ragged cemetery gets new life

\$1.2M in funds raised to restore burial ground from Colonial era

BY JOHN LAUINGER

TUCKED ALONG the Long Island Rail Road tracks in downtown Jamaica is a ragged old cemetery where most of the graves have been virtually lost in an emerging woodland.

The thick and untamed foliage, a rarity in the concretecentric downtown, conceals thousands of Colonial-era graves — and, perhaps, a few secrets.

Starting in September, the graveyard, known as Prospect Cemetery, will get a resurrection of sorts.

After years of planning, the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., acting as a steward for the city-owned property, has succeeded in raising \$1.2 million in city, state and private funds for the restoration.

"It's a dream come true," said Cate Ludlam, president of the Prospect Cemetery Association.

Ludlam, 62, of Long Island, is a descendant of the Ludlam family, founders of a portion of the graveyard, believed to be one of the city's oldest cemeteries.

It was built in stages, with the earliest known written reference dating to 1668, Ludlam said. It is the final resting place of dozens of Revolutionary War and Civil War veterans, as well as Egbert Benson, New York's first attorney general.

The restoration, which includes funding secured by Borough President Helen Marshall, will preserve

the cemetery's wooded character, but give it a face-lift.

"There is something very magical that emerged here, but we have to make that accessible to people," said Susannah Drake, a landscape architect whose Brooklyn-based firm, dlandstudio, was selected for the project.

The first phase of the project restored the cemetery's chapel. It reopened last year.

Peter Engelbrecht, an executive with the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., said the upcoming revamp will require what amounts to headstone triage.

"We probably have to save the ones right now that are in the most danger," he said, noting that students from Columbia University will inventory the graves using Global Positioning System technology.

The restoration may also unravel two historical mysteries.

The first involves a plateau hidden in the wooded section of the property that may be a Native American burial ground, Ludlam said.

The second comes from a history of the cemetery, written years ago, that notes headstones were once laid on the ground as a pathway. Ludlam said she is eager to find those mistreated headstones, if they exist.

"I have never seen those stones, and I have been here for 20 years, picking weeds," she said.

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Peter Engelbrecht of the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., Cate Ludlam (center), president of the Prospect Cemetery Association and Susannah Drake, a landscape architect, are excited for the restoration of the Prospect Cemetery, which dates back to 1668. Photo by Susana Bates