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Running Out Of Space

By Elizabeth Cooper

With its vibrant, diverse population of 2.2 million, Queens is an ever-changing mosaic of neighborhoods, both urban and suburban. But, the rolling hills of the rural Queens of yore are still visible today in the lawns of the borough's quiet cemeteries.

Vast tracts of land are taken up by Queens' numerous cemeteries, which were set up by churches, synagogues and other organizations after 1847, when a law prevented any more graveyards from being

established in Manhattan.

Now, more than 150 years later, Queens cemeteries are nearly full, and some are looking to a future when they will not have revenue from new burials to pay for upkeep. With many acres to mow and care for, the cemeteries' minimal perpetual care fees cannot hope to cover the costs for long.

While religious cemeteries can draw funding from their denominations, cemeteries not linked to churches, synagogues or mosques must find a way to prevent themselves from becoming derelict and dangerous places.

"We have a responsibility to future generations to seriously look at our role as stewards to this land," said Linda Mayo-Perez, director of non-sectarian Maple Grove Cemetery in the heart of Kew Gardens. A few years ago, Maple Grove trustees estimated the cemetery has 15 to 20 years until it is full. However, by creating additional space for cremated remains and reclaiming plots that were purchased more than 75 years ago but never used, the cemetery may be able to prolong its life a few more years. Currently, about 80,000 people are buried there.

According to the New York State Board of Cemeteries, there is no plan yet for how to address the future of Queens' 19 not-for-profit cemeteries. However, there is a state fund for abandoned cemeteries and, according to board spokeswoman Theresa Westcott, once those funds run out, the state will step in.

For Mayo-Perez, however, the idea of her cemetery lying empty and still generations after the families of those who are buried there have passed away, seems a waste.

Mayo-Perez said that in the 19th century, families often used cemeteries much as they did parks, picnicking among the tombstones and spending peaceful hours reading a book. "Maybe it's time to revive that role and integrate it into our future plan," she said. "[Maple Grove is] right smack dab in the middle of a residential and business community."

To Mayo-Perez, cemeteries are not just places for the dead. "A cemetery is not just a place of remembrance," she said. "It is a place of healing. People come here for respite and serenity, even if they're not visiting someone who has passed. That's a healing role. People get what they need just by sitting here."

Additionally, Mayo-Perez said she hopes the cemetery will become a sort of education center. "We have a lot of history here," she said. "We could do all sorts of walking tours."

Because Maple Grove is not affiliated with any religious group, it became the resting place of a diverse swath of Queens society. Now walking its

pathways, names of people from every ethnic background imaginable are visible.

"Lots of cemeteries do tours of prominent people, JP Morgan types," she said. "I want to do more than that. I think every person is famous in their own way. We all make a contribution in some way or another." Mayo-Perez has already hired a researcher to cull as much information as possible about the people buried in the cemetery, and to place the individuals in their historical context.

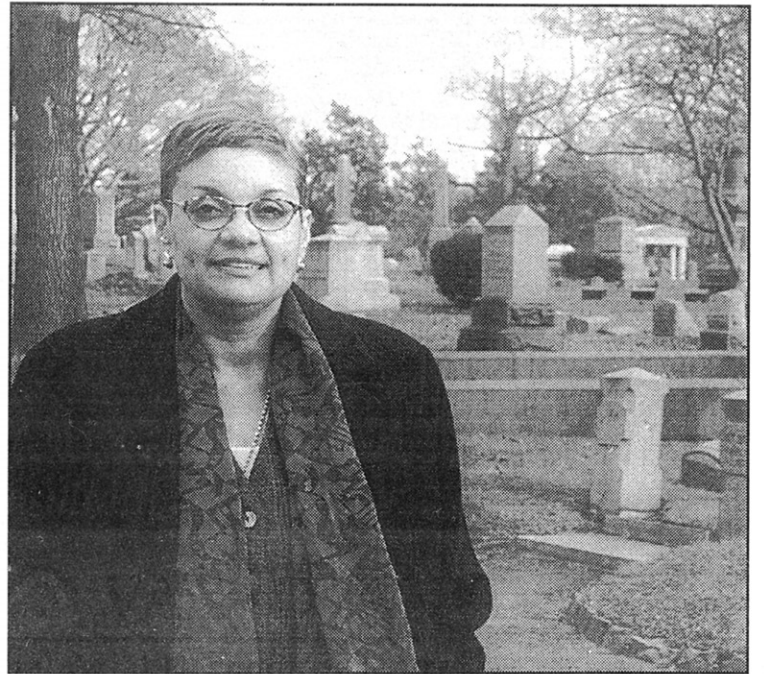
The researcher is currently focusing on burials along the southern border of the cemetery where many poor and indigent people were buried during a devastating flu epidemic in the 1920's.

Maple Grove, which opened in 1875, is the resting place of Queens luminaries such as John Sutphin, a local judge for whom Sutphin Boulevard is named; John Harvey Smedley, founder of Long Island Savings Bank; Edward Mandel, a renowned Jewish educator; Harold Campbell, a superintendent of New York City schools.

The carved tombstones and stonework of the cemetery also provide an opportunity to explore the aesthetics and beliefs of years past. She has already created a partnership with nearby PS 99, and last year, students spent an entire semester learning about a group of massive gargoyles that were once mounted on their school façade but are now on the cemetery grounds. "They learned about architectural history and did math projects relating to the enormous sculptures. Mayo-Perez said she would like to see more projects like that taking place at Maple Grove.

"We could even do topography or geology lessons," she said. She also noted that there are many species of birds that frequent Maple Grove, as well as some interesting turtles.

"All the assets are here," Mayo-Perez explained. "We should share what we have with others, and create a role for the cemetery once we are no longer able to do burials."



THE QUEENS COURIER/photos by Elizabeth Cooper

Linda Mayo-Perez, President/CEO of Maple Grove Cemetery, is already planning for the day when the cemetery is full and won't be able to bring in revenue from new burials.

