



# Queens Chronicle

SOUTHEAST QUEENS EDITION

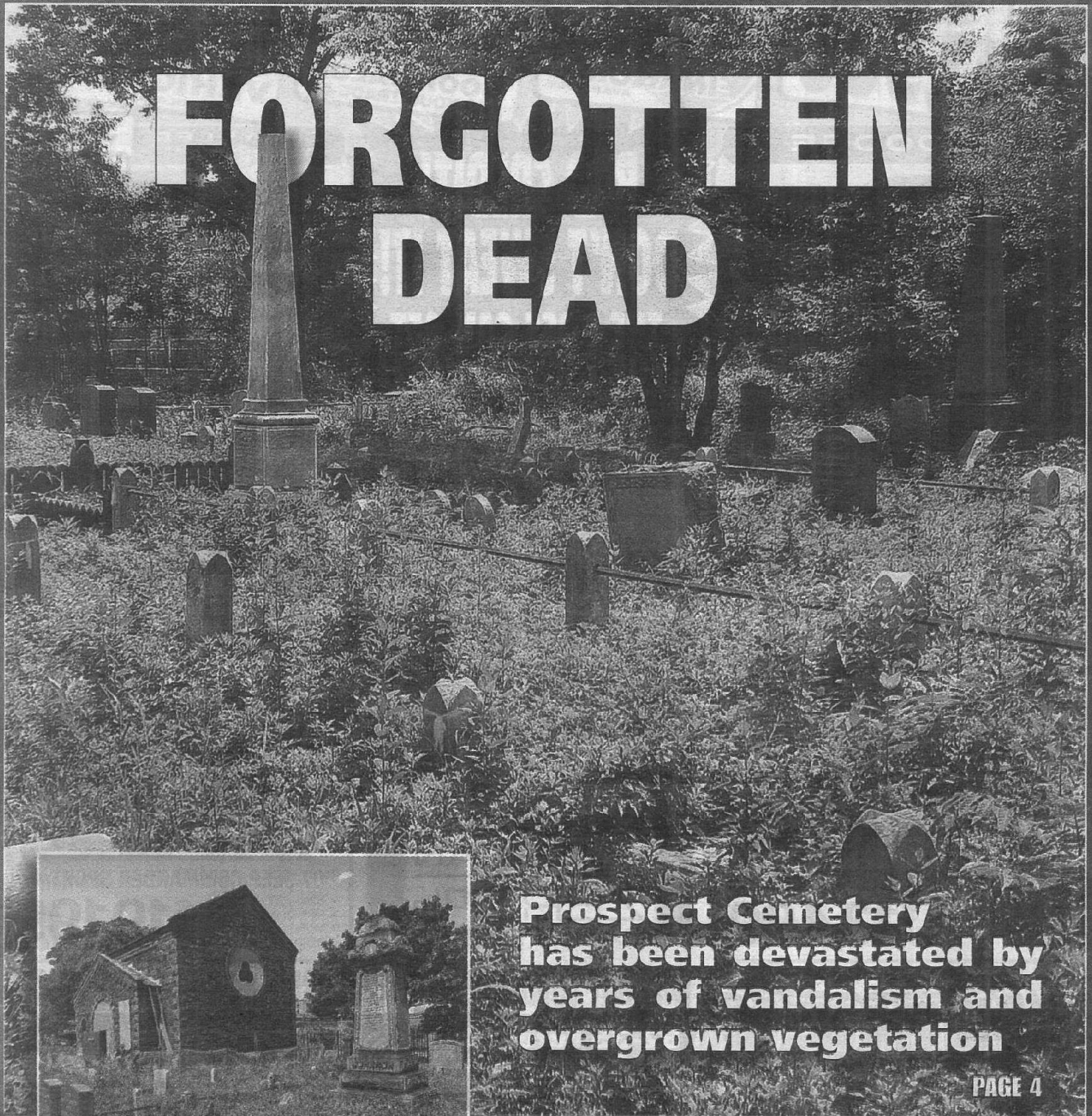
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# FORGOTTEN DEAD

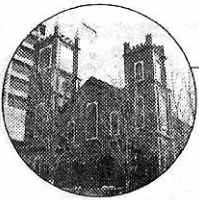
**Prospect Cemetery  
has been devastated by  
years of vandalism and  
overgrown vegetation**

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(photos by Michael O'Keefe)

The Merrick, Van Wyck and Sutphin families are buried in Prospect Cemetery in Jamaica.



## SOUTHEAST QUEENS NEWS

# Putting Life Back Into A Graveyard

by **Theresa Juva**

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The symphony of buzzing insects and warbling birds is the soundtrack to the story of Prospect Cemetery. Founded in 1668, the 4.5-acre graveyard in Jamaica is the final resting place of the borough's most famous families.

But today, the memory of the Van Wycks, Sutphins and Merricks and Revolutionary War veterans have disappeared underneath thick and thorny vegetation that has become an overgrown manifestation of time and neglect.

"I've shed enough tears over this to float a battleship," said Cate Ludlam, whose ancestors are buried in Prospect, which is located on the York College campus.

In the mid-1980s, Ludlam was contacted by a local resident who discovered the famous headstones while rescuing puppies in the wild brush. Ludlam soon learned her relatives were not only buried in Prospect, but that the chapel located on the grounds — the Chapel of the Sisters — was built by her ancestor, Nicholas Ludlam, after his three young daughters died.

Interested in revitalizing the site, Ludlam reached out to other descendants and re-organized the Prospect Cemetery Association, a group of descendants that was originally given responsibility of the site, but disintegrated in the years after it was formed in 1879.

The response was lukewarm, and membership dwindled; in 1996, Ludlam pulled



(Michael O'Kane)

**Cate Ludlam, president of the Prospect Cemetery Association, surveys the grounds where her ancestors are buried. The Chapel of the Sisters is undergoing a renovation, while Ludlam's group works to secure funding to also restore the graveyard where famous Queens families are buried.**

weeds and raked the grounds in an effort to restore it herself — until the monsters of poison ivy and tall grass eventually reclaimed it.

Focus shifted to the chapel where cooperation among the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, the Landmarks Conservancy and the Prospect Cemetery Association led to a movement to save the designated city landmark, also listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

By 2002, fundraising efforts began for the renovation of the chapel, which had sat vacant for years.

The groups secured more than \$600,000 from state and national preservation funds and Borough President Helen Marshall's Office. The project will revamp the interior of the chapel, including the floors, and plumbing, heating and electrical systems. An additional \$399,000 was spent on the overall site and a pedestrian walkway was

built on 159th street in front of the chapel linking the college campus to the Long Island Rail Road. A sturdy exterior fence was also installed to keep vandals away.

In April, ground was broken on the chapel improvements and is expected to be completed by the beginning of next year.

Karen Ansis, a member of the Prospect Cemetery Association and the Landmarks Conservancy, has been working on gaining funds for the cemetery. In June, she applied for a \$500,000 state grant that is set aside for properties on the national registry.

She said the overhaul will cost \$1.1 million and the complexity of the problem — damaged tombstones and vegetation unearthing markers or completely obliterating them — makes the restoration especially costly and difficult, much like an archaeological dig, she explained.

She noted the group will seek the additional \$600,000 from private donors and local elected officials.

Ludlam said restoring the graveyard is the last piece in the project to make the site a community epicenter.

"The grounds are the history," she said. "This is the history of Jamaica. This is the history of the United States. This is what freedom is all about."

She said she wants visitors to someday be able to wander the graveyard and be enthralled with the stories that lay in it.

"I'm very optimistic," she said of the possibility the graveyard will eventually be filled with life. "I feel failure is not an option." □