

PROSPECT CEMETERY, 157th Street and Beaver Road, Jamaica, Borough of Queens.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 10099, Lot 36.

On November 9, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of Prospect Cemetery and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 5). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Nine witnesses, including the representative of the Prospect Cemetery Association, spoke in favor of designation. There were no sneakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Prospect Cemetery, the early graveyard of the small town of Jamaica, is one of the few remaining Colonial cemeteries in Queens. In the early 1600s, this site was part of the land belonging to the local tribe of Indians known as the "Yemecah", meaning beaver, an animal which thrived in the area. In 1656, a group of English colonists petitioned the Dutch Governor-General, Peter Stuyvesant, to grant them a settlement which was near today's John F. Kennedy Airport. Apparently, this site was not satisfactory, and later in the same year, the colonists moved northward, and described themselves: "We owners by purchase from the Indians and grant from the Governor and Council--living at ye new plantation near unto beaver pond, commonly called Jamaica -- ... have reserved unto ourselves 10 acres of planting land a man" The Dutch called this area "Rustdorp", but after the surrender of the colony to the British, "Jamaica" was used exclusively. In its first year of existence, the settlement elected Daniel Denton, a member of a family which was to remain in the area for generations, as clerk of both the town and church, illustrating the interrelationship between church and government in this early period. It was not until thirty years later, in 1686, however, that Jamaica was granted its charter as a village by British Governor, Thomas Dongan.

The earliest record of the cemetery dates from November, 1668, when townsman John Wascot was hired to enclose the "burring plas", then ten rods square, with a fence, five rails high. The cemetery was established, therefore, shortly before 1668, since it is doubtful that the town would allow such hallowed ground to stand unprotected for very long. Several references were made to the "burring place" during the 17th century, when citing other locations in the town. The cemetery was generally known as the Presbyterian burial ground, since it was associated with the Old Stone Church built in the 1690s, which stood near today's Union Hall Street. Due, however, to the close interaction of church and state -- the church served also as the town hall -- the cemetery was as well the property of the Town of Jamaica.

The Presbyterian congregation in Jamaica came to blows with the Episcopalians in 1704, when the property belonging to the Church was confiscated and turned over to a representative of the Church of England, William Urquhart, an Episcopalian minister. Urquhart occupied the parsonage for five years, until he died in 1709. Shortly afterwards his wife surrendered the property to Reverend George McNish, a Presbyterian minister. However, simultaneously, another Episcopalian preacher arrived in Jamaica, who thought he should occupy the parsonage. Ultimately, the decision, aided by the authority of the Presbyterian sheriff, was made by the town, and Reverend McNish moved into the parsonage.

In 1753, the intimate relationship between church and town came to an end when it was voted at a town meeting to grant the land set apart for the use of "a minister of Presbyterian denomination" to the Presbyterian Church and congregation, for them "to have and to hold ... forever in trust". The cemetery, however, was not specified as part of this transfer. As late as 1879, the Town of Jamaica still retained title to the original burying ground, but it may be possible that the Presbyterian Church used the cemetery, while not actually owning it. When the Presbyterian Church applied to Governor William Tryon for incorporation in 1775, "a cemetery for the interment of their Dead" was mentioned, but whether this was the town

burial ground, or another separate graveyard, is not known.

During the Revolutionary War, the men of Jamaica, many of whom were buried in the cemetery, played a prominent role. This area was essentially a Loyalist stronghold, but a militant minority formed a local Committee of Correspondence and Observation to popularize patriot sentiment. The Committee chairman, Elias Baylis, died in 1777 and was buried in the cemetery. The tombstone erected over his grave after 1843 tells of his long suffering at the hands of the British during the war. Captain J.J. Skidmore, also buried here, formed a band of Minutemen, made up of local soldiers, which later became part of Colonel Lasher's First New York Battalion. This group held Cobble Stone Hill Fort during the Battle of Long Island.

The early graveyard was entered from an extension of Beaver Road, on the north side of today's Prospect Cemetery. Gradually, in the first half of the 19th century, its size was increased as various individuals purchased the land surrounding the cemetery and laid it out in family plots. Although it had been a common practice to bury one's relatives in their family farm property, when the farm was sold, often the family remains were removed. One such instance occurred in 1840, when Garret Nostrand sold his family farm at the Wallabout and purchased a lot in the Jamaica graveyard in order to bury the boxes containing the remains of his ancestors. Such private lots as these extended the boundaries of the cemetery at its western and its northern ends. Still another reason for the purchase of cemetery lots was the incentive for profit. One of the largest lot holders was Isaac Simonson, a local carpenter, whose house stood on a large tract of land to the south of the original burying ground. In 1841, Simonson purchased some land to the west of the cemetery and subdivided it into lots for sale. He advertised these burial plots as "adjoining the old Presbyterian Burial ground", and today this section forms the western extension of the cemetery.

Three acres were added to the cemetery in 1856, when Nicholas Ludlum, a wealthy New York City hardware merchant whose family had long resided in Jamaica, purchased the land between the east side of the "old burying ground" and Prospect Street (today's 159th Street) from the Long Island Railroad Company. The addition encompassed "about 10 lots", most of which Ludlum sold. According to an article in the Long Island Farmer of 1856, Ludlum planned to improve and beautify the cemetery grounds. In the next year, 1857, Ludlum, at his own expense, had a small chapel erected, as a memorial to his three daughters, each of whom had died at an early age. Ludlum's first daughter, Cornelia Maria, died at the age of thirteen, while the next, Mary Cecelia, lived only to the age of one, and his third, Mary, who had married Lewis Cass, Jr., the U.S. Minister in Rome, died at the age of twenty one. Called the Chapel of the Sisters, the building was to be used for family interment. Small in scale, this Romanesque Revival style chapel is of random ashlar fieldstone with decorative light brown-colored sandstone trim. The gable-roofed structure, originally crowned with handsome iron cresting, has gabled porticoes at both its 159th Street entrance and its cemetery side. Since the chapel was used for burials, the funeral party no doubt entered the chapel at the 159th Street entrance, and after the services made its way to the grave site through the cemetery doorway. A large round arch, completely enframed with alternating voussoirs of fieldstone and sandstone, leads to the deeply recessed arched doorway at the 159th Street entrance. Above the door, a stone tympanum, encircled by an inscription, is ornamented with the religious symbols of the Bible and a cross, as well as a scythe, representing death. This portico, like that at the cemetery side, is embellished with sandstone quoins and also a row of corbels which follows the rake of the gable. On the cemetery side, the large round-arched door, now filled in, is flanked on either side by small, narrow arched windows with sandstone trim. At the north and south ends of the chapel, large stained-glass rose windows elegantly pierce the heavy fieldstone walls. The chapel was a handsome addition to the cemetery, and it remains today one of its principal points of interest. This three-acre Ludlum extension greatly changed the configuration of the older graveyard, since the cemetery was now entered from the east at Prospect Street (159th Street), with the more recent grave sites near the chapel.

The cemetery, consisting of a number of different sections added over a 200-year period, was taken over by a single group in 1879, when the Prospect Cemetery Association of Jamaica Village, Inc., was formed. This is the first record of the name "Prospect" for the cemetery. Before the Prospect Cemetery Association acquired the property, the cemetery was still owned by the Town of Jamaica. Eventually, the Association, which still exists today, received

title to all of the cemetery grounds.

Very little has changed in Prospect Cemetery since the end of the 19th century, save for the addition of new graves, marked frequently by tall obelisks, which contrast vividly with the earlier, smaller gravestones. During the summer of 1976, selected family gravesites were cleared of debris and brush as part of a Bicentennial Project, sponsored by Community Planning Board 12 in Queens.

Prospect Cemetery is a valuable reminder of much of the early history of Queens, and especially of Jamaica. The earliest section of the cemetery begins approximately at the site of the Raynor family plot and extends to the west, to join Isaac Simonson's 1841 addition. This original portion is also much narrower than the present graveyard and totals an area of 165 square feet. Many of the old tombstones are of brownstone with various types of ornamentation. It is believed that the earliest gravestone in the old part of the cemetery dates from 1709. Another old tombstone is that of Thomas Wiggins, who died in 1728. His brownstone grave marker is carved in a very simple manner with his name and the date of death. The 1737 tombstone of Thomas Walton is more richly carved. Its three-arched top is ornamented with an angel's head of a primitive design, and a decorative curvilinear motif extending along either side. The angel head was a common theme on gravestones and occurs quite often in the cemetery. The brownstone grave marker of Obadiah Mills, who died at the age of twenty six on September 17, 1773, also displays an angel with wings. In some instances, skulls replaced the angel's head. Many of these early grave markers, also ornamented with curvilinear designs, are of limestone.

A number of Revolutionary War veterans, many of whom served with Skidmore's Minutemen, are buried in the cemetery. These include several members of the earlier generation of the Ludlum family who were part of the Minutemen band. Increase Carpenter (1733/6-1807), who fought in the Battle of Long Island, is also buried here. One of the most renowned figures in the cemetery is Egbert Benson (1746-1833), who in 1794 served as Justice of the Supreme Court and in 1801 was Chief Justice of the U.S. Circuit Court, which was abolished soon after. Benson then retired to Jamaica, where he died.

Behind this old section of the cemetery, extend the lots sold by Isaac Simonson. Since these date from a later period, a few obelisks characteristic of the later 19th century, may be seen there.

It was common for Negroes to be excluded from white cemeteries, and such was the case with Prospect. One exception, however, was made and is recorded as: "Jane Lyons, a colored woman, who upwards of 65 years was a faithful and devoted domestic in the family of James Hariman, Sr., of this village, died December 19, 1858. Age 75 years."

Many names of the important early families of the area appear throughout the cemetery, and these include Sutphin, after whom Sutphin Boulevard was named, and Van Wickes, for whom the Van Wyck Expressway was named. Relatives of many of the original settlers of the Village of Jamaica continued to be buried in the cemetery at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. These graves are marked by ornate tombstones and tall granite obelisks. A descendent of one of the early local families, John H. Brinkerhoff (d.1903), the village supervisor, and his wife Laura (d. 1891), have a richly decorated tombstone, topped with a small ornamental sarcophagus, incised with the letter "B".

The very early origins of the cemetery, together with its 19th century additions, make it an important part of the history of Jamaica. Its early Colonial period is marked by the picturesque tombstones of many members of the town's prominent families, as well as several veterans of the Revolutionary War. The Simonson and Ludlum additions border, in part, the old graveyard and are occupied by many 19th-century obelisks. The fine Romanesque Revival Chapel of the Sisters is a particularly handsome feature of the cemetery and is a monument to an important local family, the Ludlums. The cemetery remains today in a well-preserved state, due primarily to the care and interest of the Prospect Cemetery Association.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Prospect Cemetery has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Prospect Cemetery is the oldest cemetery in Jamaica, Queens, that it includes the graves of families significant to the early history of Queens, that it acts as a reminder of the historical importance of the Village of Jamaica, and that it contains a fine, mid 19th-century chapel, today a focal point of the cemetery.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 63 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark Prospect Cemetery, 157th Street and Beaver Road, Jamaica, Borough of Queens and designates Tax Map Block 10099, Lot 36, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.