

OLD GRAVESEND CEMETERY (including the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery), Village Road South, Gravesend Neck Road, Van Sicklen Avenue, and McDonald (Gravesend) Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn.

Landmark Site: Tax Map Block 7146, Lot 1.

On January 27, 1976, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Old Gravesend Cemetery and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 6). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Eleven witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

The memory of the old town of Gravesend survives today principally in the picturesque Old Gravesend Cemetery, its most significant remains, and in the legend of the pioneer woman who founded it. Lady Deborah Moody, an Englishwoman, first settled in a colony at Lynn, Massachusetts. She led a group of Anabaptists--religious separatists who did not believe in infant baptism--and political dissidents, from that colony to the New Netherland area in order to establish an independent settlement with guarantees of religious freedom. Gravesend, where she finally settled, is believed to have been named after either the hometown of Lady Moody in England, or after the hometown on the Maas River of the Dutch Governor, General William Kieft, who affirmed the Gravesend charter in 1645. The Gravesend town charter was the first in the New World to list a woman patentee, and one of the first to expressly allow freedom of religious beliefs for its inhabitants. Roger Williams' colony in Providence, Rhode Island, which also guaranteed "freedom of conscience" was founded at about the same time. It was also the first land document in the New York area to be written in the English language, as the surrounding areas were primarily settled by the Dutch. Mespat (Maspeth) was founded in 1642 and Vlissingen (Flushing) in 1643.

The original town patent encompassed a vast tract covering much of what is today known as Coney Island, Bensonhurst, Unionville, South Greenfield, Brighton Beach, Manhattan Beach, Sheepshead Bay, and Midwood, and the tract reached up through Flatbush to approach the site of Prospect Park. Though Gravesend is today physically indistinguishable from other communities that were later amalgamated into Brooklyn, in the later part of the 19th century Gravesend was still separated from other surrounding towns. From its founding Gravesend was a choice location for a farming community. It had both a physical and political independence from the surrounding villages as the only English community in a predominately Dutch area, a condition which prevailed until the 1720s. Furthermore, it was the only town in the area that was laid out according to a defined urban plan.

The town plan of Gravesend appears in a drawing of 1645 and consisted of an enclosed town center, containing the houses and other town functions within protective walls. Outside these palisades were forty individual "plantations"--wedge-shaped farming strips, each of which radiated outward from a point at the center of the town. After years of subsequent development, which has completely ignored the old town plan, most of the boundaries of these wedge-shaped farm lots have disappeared but a few are still traceable as property lines and streets.

The palisades enclosed a sixteen-acre square, which was bisected by two orthogonal roads--one running north-south (the former Gravesend Road, now McDonald Avenue) and the other east-west (Gravesend Neck Road)-- dividing the town into quadrants. In each quadrant, the land around the perimeter was used for house lots, leaving a central square behind the house as common ground. The common grounds were originally used as protected areas for animals at night, but in time they provided the sites for the burial ground, the school, the town hall, and a church.

Such an example of urban planning in a newly settled land was most unusual. The formal geometry of this town plan is more reminiscent of the city plans of Renaissance and Baroque Europe than might be expected. According to the urban historian, John W. Reps, the plan used at Gravesend was like that used in a few other early American settlements as far south as Georgia, and seemed to satisfy existing functional needs with a degree of formalism that would allow for expansion. Thus, Gravesend is an exceptional example of early American town planning.

The burial ground, occupying the original common ground of the southwest quadrant, remains today as Gravesend Cemetery, sole reminder of this pioneer community. With only 1.6 acres, it is one of the smallest cemeteries in the city. Although it was originally a square at the center of the southwest quadrant, subsequent donations of adjacent properties have given it the irregular shape it has today. For example, in 1687 John Tilton willed his property to it. The burial ground existed as early as 1658 when twenty guilders were bequeathed in the will of Thomas Spicer to enclose the cemetery with a fence. The earliest recorded death in Gravesend (and perhaps interment in the cemetery) was in 1650, but most of the gravestones predating the 18th century have disappeared or become illegible. The graves of several men notable in the Revolutionary War have been identified: Rutger Van Brunt (d. 1812), member of the Provincial Congress and colonel of the Gravesend militia; Rem Williamson (d. 1825), captain of the Gravesend militia; and Joost Stillwell (d. 1827), captain of the Gravesend militia. The graves of most of the original patentees and many of their descendants are here. In 1863 Tennis G. Berger compiled a list of inscriptions from the Gravesend Cemetery; he noted that the oldest inscription "on a broken slab of grey field stone" read: "Ida G. born 1676 d. 1751 aged 75. Among the many old family names he recorded are: Cowenhoven, Ryder, Van Nuyse, Suydam, Wyckoff, Van Pelt, Gerritsen, Dyckman, and Van Sicklen. The Van Sicklen family maintained their own cemetery in the northwest corner of the Old Gravesend Cemetery. It is still separately fenced and identified as that of the family. Although, it has never been firmly ascertained, it is generally believed that the founder of this community, Lady Moody, was buried in the cemetery.

The cemetery occupies a large irregularly shaped lot in the block bounded by Village Road South, Gravesend Neck Road, Van Sicklen Avenue, and MacDonald Avenue. Recently restored, it is a charming reminder of Gravesend's past. The headstones, many of which are slabs of brownstone, have inscriptions in Dutch and English. Some also have carved angel heads with wings.

The Old Gravesend Cemetery is a notable survivor of a planned community. Its gravesites are a reminder of the ideals, plans, and aspirations of its early pioneer settlers.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history and other features of this cemetery, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Old Gravesend 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, the Old Gravesend Cemetery includes the graves of families significant to the early history and formation of the town and Brooklyn, that it acts as a reminder of the historical importance of the village of Gravesend, and that it also serves as a reminder of the ideals of pioneer communities in New York City and the country.

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 the Old Gravesend Cemetery (including the Van Sicklen Family Cemetery), Village Road South, Gravesend Neck Road, Van Sicklen Avenue, and McDonald (Gravesend) Avenue, Borough of Brooklyn, and designates Tax Map Block 7146, Lot 1, Borough of Brooklyn, as its Landmark Site.