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Seeking Brooklyn's Lost Mass Grave



Dave Sanders for The New York Times

CONFIDENT Bob Furman suspects that up to 256 Revolutionary soldiers lie under this lot in Gowanus.

By JUSTIN BURKE Published: August 25, 2012

NOTHING is visible at the intersection of Third Avenue and Eighth Street in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn to indicate that anything extraordinary is there. The artisanal-pie place on one corner and the auto body shops across the way suggest it is merely another spot in the city where grit is giving way to gentrification. But if a small group of history enthusiasts are right, this particular corner of Kings County is hallowed ground.

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They believe that there is a mass grave a few dozen yards to the east of the intersection that contains the remains of American heroes: soldiers from the First Maryland Regiment under Col. William Smallwood, which saved Washington's army during the Battle of Brooklyn on Aug. 27, 1776. Their burial site, these advocates say, deserves the same level of veneration accorded the military cemeteries at Gettysburg and Normandy.

The leader of the find-the-Marylanders group is Bob Furman, a Brooklyn historian and president of the Brooklyn Preservation Council, a nonprofit organization dedicated to maintaining brownstone Brooklyn's look and feel. "The evidence is quite strong," Mr. Furman said. "I'm confident enough that I tell everyone I know."

But Mr. Furman has no way to test his theory. Right now,

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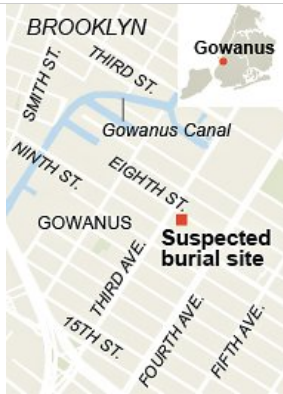
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The New York Times

the site he is targeting is a vacant, concrete-covered lot studded with weeds and surrounded by a chain-link fence. The owners, who say they are interested in developing the property themselves or selling it to someone who will, have rebuffed his inquiries about conducting an archaeological probe on the site.

For New York's relatively small community of Revolutionary War buffs, the Marylanders' mass grave is sort of an archaeological equivalent of the [Golden City of El Dorado](#) — a legendary site, long sought but never located. But Mr. Furman's quest is not just about history. In addition to solving an enduring mystery, pinpointing the Marylanders' resting place could influence development near the Gowanus Canal in the aftermath of the planned Superfund cleanup of the polluted industrial waterway.



Dave Sanders for The New York Times

HEROIC Kim Maier, executive director of the Old Stone House, a Revolutionary War educational center in Park Slope.

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An engraved illustration of the Battle of Brooklyn.

Superfund designation in 2010 slowed development near the canal but did not halt it. Work has already begun on a Whole Foods supermarket on the banks of the canal, and in July, the Lightstone Group, a developer, announced that it planned to revive a stalled project to build a residential complex with 700 rental units along the waterway. If the grave site was found, it could spur the creation of some type of memorial, federally financed or otherwise, that would prevent at least some development. What developer would want to tread on the bones of heroes?

THE Marylanders' story is among the more underappreciated chapters of the Revolutionary War. Vastly outnumbered, they launched a series of counterattacks that stymied rapidly advancing British forces, enabling thousands of American soldiers to evade encirclement and certain death or capture. Had the British not been checked, it is possible that the Continental Army would have been smashed, forcing Washington to surrender and effectively bringing the war

to an abrupt, inglorious end. "These soldiers saved the Revolution," Mr. Furman maintains.

Other experts don't go as far but agree that many historians have shortchanged the Marylanders. Kim Maier, executive director of the [Old Stone House](#), a Revolutionary War museum in Brooklyn, said their stand was an instance of extraordinary valor. "They really did sacrifice themselves," she said. "They knew going in they didn't have a great chance of coming out."

As many as 256 Maryland soldiers, almost two-thirds of the regiment, were killed. According to several accounts, the British forced local civilians to gather the bodies shortly after the battle and bury them at a site near what was then Gowanus Creek.

The mass grave has long been a source of fascination for amateur archaeologists and Revolutionary War enthusiasts. In the 1940s and '50s, city officials considered mounting a comprehensive search, and Robert Moses even drew up plans for a memorial park. Ultimately, the park never materialized because of a lack of money, and the one dig undertaken, in 1957, found no remains.

Various archaeologists say geography is the main reason the grave's location has remained a secret. In 1776 the area featured marshland and millponds surrounding Gowanus Creek. Only a few dots of high ground would have been suitable for a grave.

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The area was transformed beginning in the mid-19th century. The canal itself was dug in the 1860s, followed by industrialization along its banks. The neighborhood was made level, and both sides of the canal were lined with landfill. "Historically speaking, it's like night and day," said Alyssa Loorya, owner of Chrysalis Archeological Consultants Inc., which has surveyed the area.

Grave hunters' attention in recent decades has focused on a stretch of Third Avenue between Seventh and Eighth Streets, because Revolutionary War-era maps show hills in the area. Written reminiscences, compiled mostly in the 1950s but dating as far back as the 1890s, also tell of bones being found when basements were dug.

Many archaeologists are skeptical.

"The grave site has been difficult to pinpoint because the descriptions are, in fact, general, and in most cases secondhand," said H. Arthur Bankoff, the chairman of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at Brooklyn College. "There is a distinct possibility that the graves have been destroyed."

But Mr. Furman says that modern technology, including advanced computer mapping techniques and ground-penetrating radar, can help him succeed where others have failed. Professor Bankoff acknowledged that "advances in remote sensing" have enabled archaeologists to "locate things and sites that were elusive decades ago."

Mr. Furman says he believes that working with Eymund Diegel, an urban planner who lives in the area and is skilled at computer mapmaking, he can reconstruct the area's lost topography. He is convinced that the crest of the likeliest burial hill is just under the concrete that covers the vacant lot on Eighth Street. An extensive search of public records, he adds, shows that the site was never excavated, nor was it filled in.

An observation made last July raised the group's hopes further. Mr. Diegel was using a balloon to take aerial photos of the area as part of a project to map drainage patterns. Studying the photos, he noticed an unusual pattern of cracks in the concrete at the Eighth Street lot. To his eye, it indicated that the ground underneath had been disturbed in a way that might be consistent with a grave site.

As a next step, Mr. Furman wants to tear up a patch of concrete and probe the area with ground-penetrating radar. But even if he could obtain the money necessary for equipment and specialists, it is unlikely he would get permission to perform the tests.

An entity called Derby Textile Corporation owns the lot. Reached by telephone, someone connected with Derby, who asked that his name not be used because he did not want to be drawn into controversy, said the search for the grave site was "a bunch of gibberish." He insisted that a foundation had been dug when a structure was built on the property in the early 1900s and that there were no reports of bones being found.

The current owners bought the building in 1970 and it burned down in 1989, he added. The owners would prefer to develop the lot themselves, the man said, but would sell if the price was right; he declined to divulge a specific figure. "It's not a cheap piece of property," he said.

The other option open to the grave hunters is an even longer shot: persuade officials to come up with money to buy the lot and designate it a park. "If we can get a park," Mr. Furman said, "we can then try to figure out whether the Marylanders are there."

LIKE the men of Smallwood's regiment in 1776, the grave hunters are facing grim odds. The pending onslaught of development threatens to overwhelm their preservationist aspirations for the neighborhood.

Mr. Furman says he dreams of putting together a Brooklyn version of Boston's Freedom Trail, with stops at various points of Revolution-era significance. Mr. Diegel clings to a vision of a greenbelt along the canal. Both worry that the historical structures and the local businesses and artists who have made use of them in recent years will be lost if the

area is rezoned in the wake of the Superfund cleanup. They also acknowledge that there is no way they can match any future developers' financial muscle or connections.

In their eyes, the outcome of this second battle along the Gowanus will determine whether the neighborhood remains a low-rise middle ground that acts as a bridge between Carroll Gardens and Park Slope, or becomes an architectural island, full of the glossy towers of condos and rentals that have transformed the Williamsburg waterfront in recent years. "Urgency is an issue here," Mr. Diegel said.

Their best hope, it seems, is that the Marylanders might once again come to the rescue.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 26, 2012, on page MB1 of the New York edition with the headline: Seeking Brooklyn's Lost Mass Grave.

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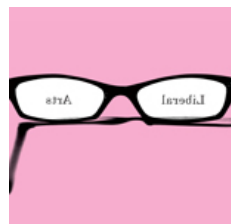
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