

Around

Street fair to be held on May 28

The Ronkonkoma Chamber of Commerce will host its annual Hawkins Avenue street fair on May 28.

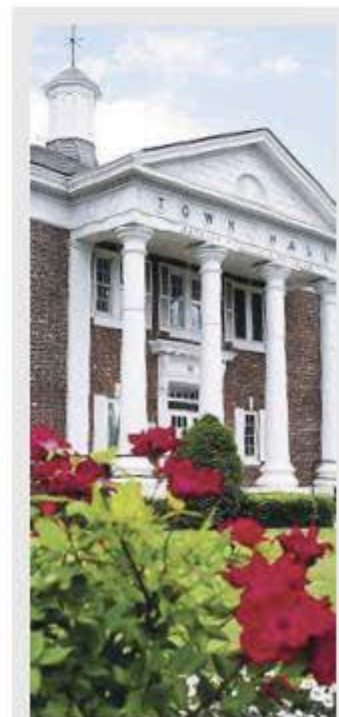
The chamber has advertised more than 200 vendors with live entertainment, merchandise, food, arts and crafts and children's rides at the Memorial Day weekend event, which will run from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The Ronkonkoma Chamber of Commerce and Ronkonkoma Rotary are also assisting Ronkonkoma veteran groups — including the American Legion, VFW and AMVETS — in a Veterans Memorial Day Parade on May 29.

"The community wants to ensure that the veterans have a successful parade," said Ed McNamara, chamber president. "We're very excited."

The parade kickoff will be at 10 a.m. beginning on Church Street and ending at Raynor Park, where there will be a veterans ceremony at noon.

— BRIANNE LEDDA



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HEMPSTEAD

PLOTTING HER COURSE

Research pays off, map of burial spots at historic cemetery to debut

BY BRINLEY HINEMAN
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Nearly two decades ago, historian Amy Vacchio started researching two prominent families who lived at Rock Hall, a Colonial-era mansion, and their connection to Hempstead's historic St. George's Cemetery. Four years ago, she started digging through burial records and began mapping hundreds of graves in the church's pre-Revolutionary War cemetery.

Vacchio's project is now complete, and on June 4, the cemetery will unveil a permanent outdoor map marking the hundreds of burial plots of those buried in the cemetery. The map will have a QR code to help visitors explore the graveyard and learn more about some of its 757 graves.

"I am so excited as a historian and a researcher for people to be able to learn about these stories," Vacchio said. "Every tombstone is so much a part of our history. . . . Each one is a story. There is so much to learn from it."

Vacchio is the director of the mansion-turned-museum in Lawrence, which is owned and operated by Hempstead Town. Her project was inspired after a visit to Alice Bannister McNeill's gravestone. McNeill, the last descendant of the prominent Martin family to live at Rock Hall, was a musician and painter. She died at age 36 in 1823 from breast cancer and left behind seven children. The Martins were headed by Josiah Martin, a sugar planter in Antigua who built Rock Hall as his retirement home, Vacchio said.

The church played an important role throughout McNeill's life, which left an impression on Vacchio. She was baptized, married and buried at St. George's, one of the oldest on Long Island.



Historian Amy Vacchio at Alice Bannister McNeill's gravestone in historic St. George's Cemetery.

"I just wanted to see where she was buried. I felt like I owed that to her," she said. "Someone should stand over her grave and say, 'I remember you.'"

Vacchio said she was granted permission to search the church's archives after years of requests. Little information was publicly available about the cemetery's graves, some of which have decayed and disintegrated since the first burial in 1724. Vacchio enlisted the help of Rock Hall employee Matt Longo, and the two searched through the 1702 church's records to piece together the lost stories of those interred.

Although other Martins are buried in the cemetery, their gravestones have been lost to time. McNeill's is the last standing. Some inhabitants, like plantation owner Josiah Martin and physician Samuel Martin, do not have gravestones and were buried under the original

Cemetery mapping

■ The new map of the historic St. George's Cemetery in Hempstead **will be unveiled at noon on June 4.**

■ The map showcases the efforts of Amy Vacchio, who has worked for four years to bring the stories and **names of those buried** in the cemetery to light.

■ Vacchio is also the **director of Rock Hall Museum**, which has connections to the cemetery.

church altar. Vacchio features their stories, along with about 20 others, on a cemetery website she created.

Longo said he was drawn to the project because "it seemed like a fun puzzle." That idea went out the window when he realized the painstaking process involved in mapping hundreds of graves. Vacchio's discovery of a

1934 map created by a Boy Scout troop in the 1930s, aided their research, resulting in mapping the names of about 60% of those buried at the cemetery, Longo said. He said he is unsure how many people are buried with missing headstones.

"It feels really good because it's something I've almost given up on maybe three or four times," he said. "The fact that I invested a lot of work and got some place, there's going to be something physically there, it's comforting."

Vacchio's work continues. The project will now focus on restoration work, which is costly and requires professionals. She has considered establishing a nonprofit to help raise funds and awareness about the work.

And there is more research to be done on those buried. "They have a story to tell," Vacchio said. "I will continue to tell those stories."

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