

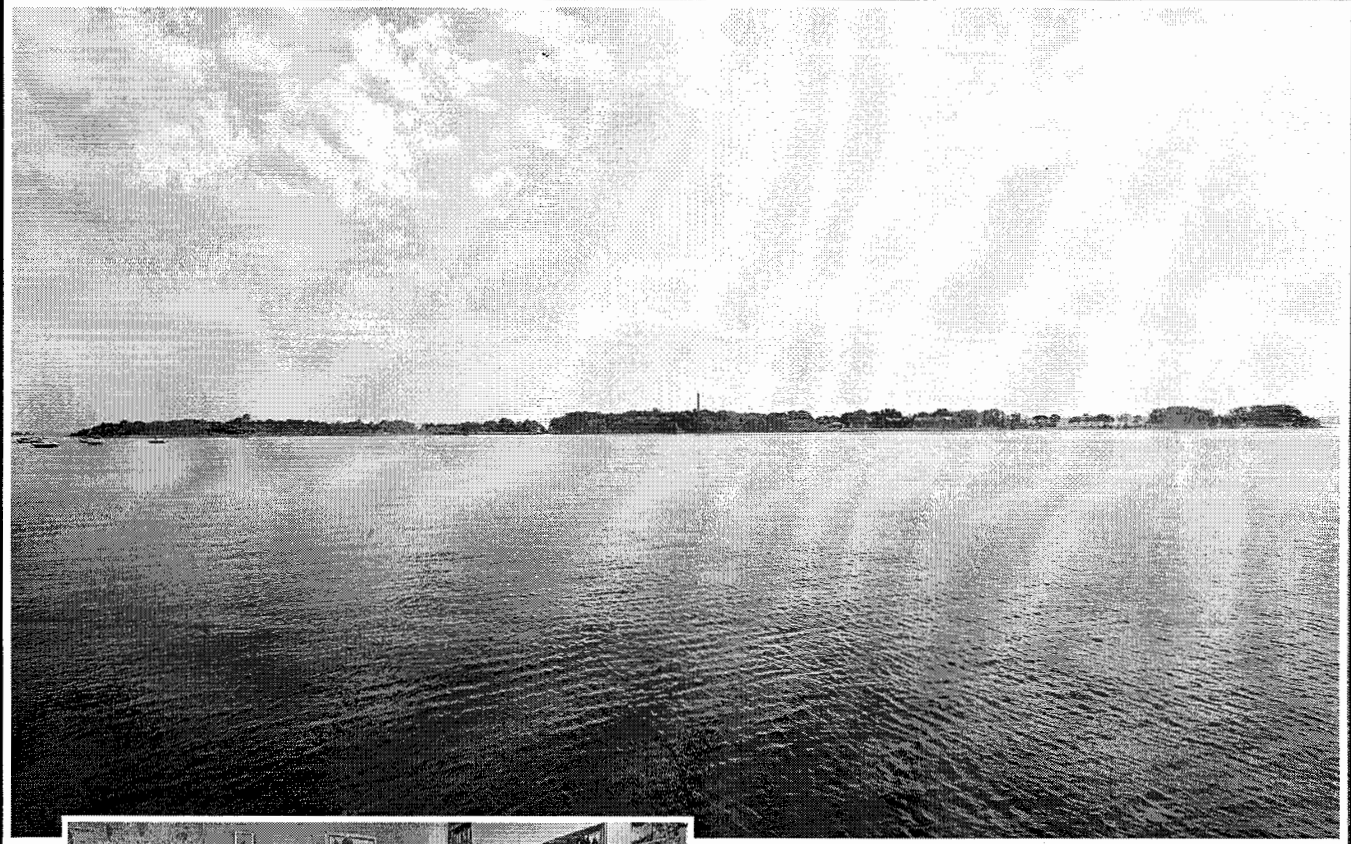


SPECIAL SECTION

### Adult ed this fall

Because learning  
never stops  
**G7**

# city life



After a friend's anonymous burial  
in potter's field on Hart Island,  
a group of homeless  
men and women  
began working with clergy  
in hopes of

## Giving numbers a **name**

G2

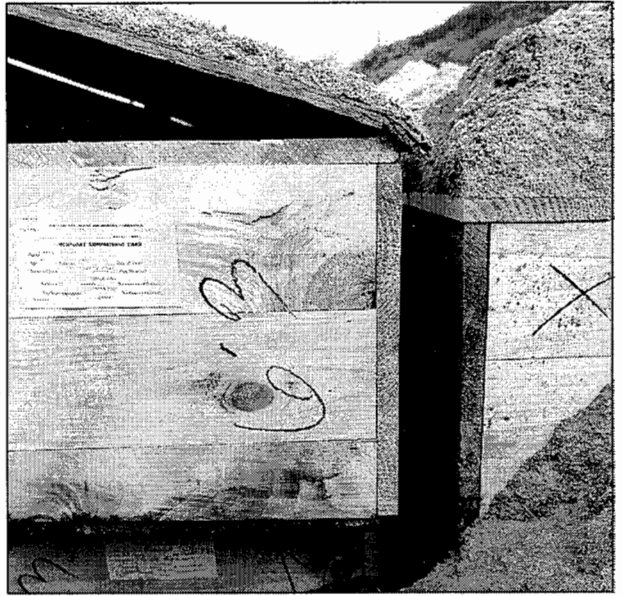
NEWSDAY PHOTO / JULIA GAINES, TOP; PHOTO BY JASON DECROW, BOTTOM

Members of the advocacy group Picture the Homeless, above, tried to visit the grave of a friend on Hart Island in May but were turned away.

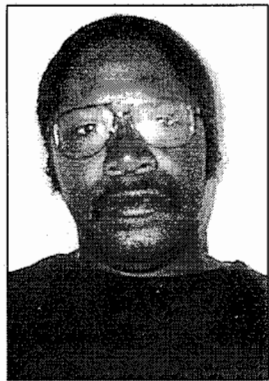
INSIDE: IMMIGRATION Q & A, REAL ESTATE ADVERTISING / CLASSIFIED

# Not forgotten

When homeless advocate Lewis Haggins Jr. was buried in potter's field, his friends recognized the need to honor him — and all those resting there in unmarked graves



NEWSDAY PHOTO, 1987 / CHRIS HATCH



Lewis Haggins Jr.

BY LUIS PEREZ  
STAFF WRITER

**T**hey traveled by train and bus to visit a dear friend's grave, only to be turned away at the gate.

Bruce Little and several other homeless people hoping to pray over Lewis Haggins Jr.'s final resting place arrived at a City Island ferry slip on a sunny day in May. It's not that they didn't know the rules: Only those with an appointment are allowed to visit the graves on Hart Island, the city's sole potter's field, and they hadn't made one.

But the homeless group was hoping to join a Bronx Catholic group that was there on its authorized yearly trip to the island to celebrate an Ascension Thursday Mass.

At the dock, the two groups chatted politely — the homeless men and women explaining that untold thousands of homeless people, many of whose identities are unknown, are buried there. But, lacking the key pre-approval, they could not be accommodated. Little and his friends were soon watching the ferry churn across the East River without them.



PHOTO BY JASON DECROW

At an Aug. 8 meeting in Harlem, members of Picture the Homeless, an advocacy group that wants to start monthly interfaith services on Hart Island, discuss plans for their campaign to increase access to potter's field. For now, appointments are needed to visit the island's graves, where many of the city's homeless are buried.

"I don't think it's fair," said Little, 41. "If he was buried in a regular cemetery, I would be able to see him."

"It was sad," said Linda Poleznak Herrick, 55, of Binghamton, who was in the church group and whose aunt is buried on the island. "I understand that they're friends and family, and sometimes even closer than friends and family."

#### Out of reach

Little and the other homeless people there that day are part of Picture the Homeless, an advocacy group lobbying the city to start monthly interfaith services on Hart Island, a little-known part of New York that is rich with history but often seems so inaccessible it exists only in the imagination.

**'When a homeless person dies, if they die in the street or in a shelter, they disappear. I assume they're on Hart Island. It's sad that people disappear like that.'**

— William Burnett, an organizer for Picture the Homeless

Since 1869, Hart Island has served as the "City Cemetery" for those whose bodies go unclaimed, whose families are too poor to pay for burial or who otherwise die in the shadows. Inevitably, thousands of homeless have been buried there. With nearly 800,000 plots, it is the largest burial ground in New York City. At 101 acres, it also is the city's largest undeveloped tract of land.

Perhaps most unexpected is that it is run by the city Department of Corrections, and that

prisoners from Rikers Island volunteer to perform its burials. They are paid 50 cents an hour to bury adults, children and babies in pine coffins, which in each grave are placed three deep, two abreast and are numbered. One day, it is hoped, the remains may be excavated, perhaps returned to a long-lost loved one. Sometimes, prisoners pray during burials, but there is never a member of clergy, nor a ceremony.

Through the years, historians, artists and journalists have taken guided tours of the island, and officials say that anyone wishing to visit the grave of a family member or friend can do so by appointment.

"Our policy is to honor the

Before burial on Hart Island, a body is put in a simple pine coffin. The coffins are placed three deep and two abreast in a grave. Graves are numbered.

wishes of any family member who has loved ones buried in City Cemetery," said Tom Antenen, a spokesman for the corrections department.

But only one group, St. Benedict's Roman Catholic Church in the Bronx, has held a regular memorial service on Hart Island, in the form of a Mass every Ascension Thursday, 40 days after Easter, for the past 10 years. Outside the island, several churches host their own services for those buried there.

#### Push to widen access

The exclusive atmosphere of Hart Island has left some members of Picture the Homeless feeling slighted.

Haggins, 48, was co-founder of Picture the Homeless, a Harlem-based group founded in 1999 that fights for the rights of homeless people.

Haggins died on a subway car in Brooklyn two days before Christmas 2003, of pancreatitis and cardiomyopathy. He is survived by family in Trenton, N.J.

Members of the group say that when Haggins was buried on Hart Island, they recognized the need for a broader memorial for the forgotten homeless.

"When a homeless person dies, if they die in the street or in a shelter, they disappear," said William Burnett, a group organizer who lives in a city shelter. "I assume they're on Hart Island. It's sad that people disappear like that."

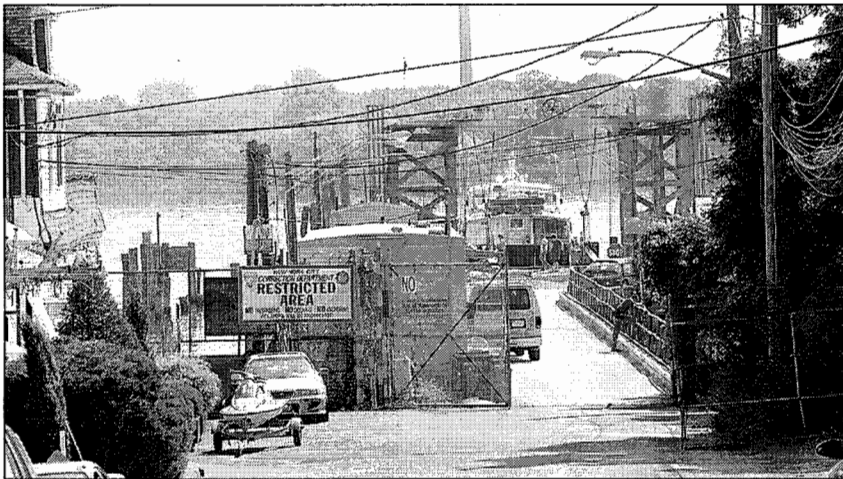
The group has since partnered with clergy from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths to form the Interfaith Friends of Potter's Field, which would organize a monthly memorial service.

"It just seems like a no-brainer that this is how we respect and honor another human being,"



PHOTO BY MELINDA HUNT, 2002

Mass graves for infants on Hart Island, above



NEWSDAY PHOTO / JULIA GAINES

Hart Island is visible beyond the ferry landing at the end of Fordham Street in City Island, the Bronx.

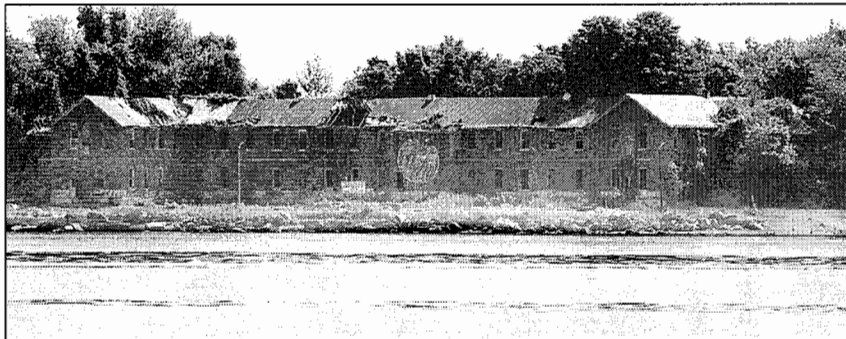
said the Rev. Elizabeth Maxwell of the Church of the Holy Apostles Episcopal Church in Manhattan, who served as a chaplain at the World Trade Center recovery effort and now is part of the effort.

At a recent meeting with corrections department officials, both sides agreed to work out an arrangement for such visits.

**'Our deepest fear'**

The island is full of forgotten memories. Before it was a potter's field, it was a cemetery for Union and Confederate soldiers. It also was once a home for delinquent teens, a place to keep captured Germans during World War II, the site of Nike missile silos during the Cold War and even a dumping ground for Ebbets Field bleachers.

Melinda Hunt, an artist and filmmaker working on a documentary about Hart Island, said the island touches the core of the human psyche.



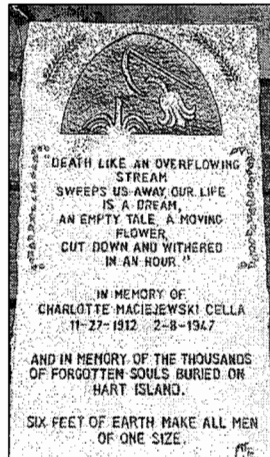
NEWSDAY PHOTO / JULIA GAINES

Some buildings on Hart Island, such as a former Phoenix House drug rehabilitation building visible from the City Island ferry landing in the Bronx, have fallen into disrepair.

"It's our deepest fear to have our lives be forgotten," said Hunt, who also wrote "Hart Island" (Scalo, 1998). "The worst that can happen is that your life doesn't mean anything to anybody, and that's how people view this place."

Physically, the island has its beauty. Visitors find it wrapped in a 19th century stillness, with decaying buildings, native wildflowers and birds' nests.

Hunt suggested the city would have to invest funds to make Hart Island more accessible to



Though Charlotte Maciejewski Cella is buried at Hart Island, her tombstone, in another cemetery, is not allowed there.



the public. But first, the public would have to show it wants to visit. The homeless group, for one, is motivated, because it doesn't want to forget the friends and family — and history — buried in this cemetery off the shore of City Island.

It is the fear of being forgotten that members of the Picture the Homeless group say they dread. It also is what Herrick, who attended the Mass in May, found herself fighting back that Thursday morning.

Some years earlier, Herrick designed a tombstone for her Aunt Lottie, who is buried on Hart Island. But she was told that personal grave markers are not allowed. Today, the marble slab sits in Pelham Cemetery on City Island.

On Hart Island, a guide directed her to an anonymous field where Charlotte Maciejewski Cella, who was 34 when she died alone and sick in New York City in 1947, is buried in plot 210, section I, grave 45. "They just say, 'It's in this area,' and they point to the area," said Herrick, a librarian. "I couldn't stand over her grave and say a prayer. The most I could do was stand on the island."