

## Grave Concerns

A DOUGLASS STUDENT IS HELPING TO PRESERVE  
A PIECE OF NEW BRUNSWICK HISTORY

From her seat on a Rutgers bus that she rode regularly, history major Kelly Brennan wondered about the run-down cemetery behind the New Brunswick Public Library on Livingston Avenue. At a Douglass College event, she asked New Brunswick Mayor James Cahill about it. Her curiosity ultimately led to a summer job that involved taking an inventory of the cemetery monuments.

"I was surprised to learn that the cemetery contains a remarkable number of people who were crucial to the development of both Rutgers and New Brunswick," says Brennan, president of the Douglass College Government Association. "It seemed shameful that the place was such a mess." She also learned that the site contains three separate cemeteries: a Presbyterian cemetery, relocated from Oliver and Burnett streets in the 1840s; the Willow Grove Cemetery, founded in 1851; and the Cheesman Cemetery, opened in 1868. Underneath the toppled headstones and among the weeds were seven mayors of New Brunswick; notable residents with familiar Rutgers surnames like Hardenbergh and Voorhees; and two key figures in Rutgers history, James Neilson (RC'1866) and Taro Kusakabe (RC'1870).

Brennan, who continued working on the project through last summer, conducted a tour of the cemetery for the New Brunswick Historical Society and wrote an online history of the cemeteries. Her research helped her discover that Neilson—a prominent farmer and secretary and treasurer of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station—bequeathed his Wood Lawn

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mansion (now home to the Eagleton Institute of Politics) and his land to Rutgers. Kusakabe, one of the first Japanese students to earn a degree from an American university, became seriously ill and died, at age 26, shortly before the graduation ceremony. He inspired one of his Rutgers instructors, reformed minister William Elliot Griffis (RC'1869), who later visited Kusakabe's homeland and became one of the foremost Western interpreters of Japan's changing 19th-century culture.

Brennan has also done some work as a volunteer grounds keeper, helping right toppled headstones and removing graffiti, cans and bottles, and dead branches. "There is still a significant amount of cleanup work to be done," says Brennan, a native of Mountain Lakes. "But I'm very optimistic that improvements will be made since a housing development is going up, and new residents aren't going to want an eyesore outside their windows."



Kelly Brennan has tapped her knowledge of Rutgers history to find the resting places of people who once shaped the university and its surroundings.