Woodlands Rebirth

By Kristen A. Graham

High on a hill in West Philadelphia sits the most significant spot many Philadelphians have never heard of: the Woodlands, a historically and architecturally important mansion and cemetery that is home to many of the city's most notable dead.

It is 54 acres of green and calm on the west bank of the Schuylkill, an oasis directly across the street from a SEPTA trolley portal.

"It's this amazing place that nobody knows about," said Jessica Baumert, executive director of the Woodlands.

"We're trying to change that. We want to be put on Philadelphia's map again."

The Woodlands was the estate of William Hamilton, who in the late 18th and early 19th centuries owned much of what is now West Philadelphia. The Woodlands boasts a large portrait with neo-Classical columns and a lovely view of the river below.

Hamilton was a noted botanist and plant collector who introduced the gingko tree and blue hydrangeas to North America, a friend of Thomas Jefferson's.

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Information

To find out more about the Woodlands, the mansion and cemetery at 45th and Woodland in West Philadelphia, visit http://woodlandsphila.org or call 215-386-2181.

Woodlands path. A group from the neighboring VA Medical Center strolls the grounds daily; the University of Pennsylvania cross-country team also uses it. But the grounds and buildings have become even more of a gathering place in recent years, with craft fairs, nature walks, lectures, and other events drawing visitors — 30,000 last year. You can even rent the Woodlands for your wedding.

"We want people to use it like a park," Baumert said. That's in keeping with Hamilton's designs for the Woodlands.

Baumert hopes that balance can be raised in time. Once visitors learn about the Woodlands, she said, they're often hooked, as evidenced by the enthusiastic group of volunteers — including the 60 neighbors who use space in the community garden — who help in ways large and small.

"It's a place that's easy to fall in love with," she said. And it has great potential.

Take the carriage circle, the spot where buggies would park during funerals, a patch of land between the mansion and stables.

It's now essentially a reposito-

ry of construction equipment and dirt moved from other parts of the property. But it offers stunning views of the mansion and rest of the estate, and if you squat a little, you can imagine it as the site of a concert series or beer garden.

Baumert says it "has the potential to be one of the most amazing public spaces in Philadel-

phia."