



HARLEM AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

TASK FORCE

Memorandum

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From: Jean Ballard Terepka, Archivist, St. Michael's Church and Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force History Committee Co-Chair

Sharon Wilkins, Borough of Manhattan Deputy Historian and Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force History Committee Co-Chair

To: General Audience

Date: January 2016

Re: Harlem African Burial Ground History and Task Force Overview

The history of the Harlem African Burial Ground is rich and compelling. This historic segregated burial ground, whose footprint includes a portion of the present day Metropolitan Transit Authority 126th Street Bus Depot, was active from the mid-17th to the mid-19th centuries, and then desecrated and forgotten throughout the 20th. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, this sacred ground is being remembered once more through the work of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force, whose core mission is to promote, protect, reclaim the history of, and commemorate this important cemetery. In addition, the Task Force is charged with the responsibility of preserving this sacred space, honoring the dead who are contained within it and recognizing the contributions of the enslaved and free Africans who helped to build the infrastructure, culture and economy of colonial New York. Their lives of pain, sacrifice, skill, strength, arduous labor and spiritual endurance laid the foundations for New York's political, cultural and economic successes. Their compelling stories are integral to all American stories and to American history itself.

History:

“Nieuw Haarlem,” (Harlem) established by the Dutch in 1660 as the second colony of New Netherlands, was built on a favorable riverside section of Manhattan that was sacred to the indigenous Lenape and central to their thriving culture. As the lower Manhattan colony of New Amsterdam moved north, the Dutch displaced the Lenape and relied on the expertise and labor of slaves to build the two colonies and develop the infrastructure that connected them. During the 17th century, slaves belonging to Dutch, German and Huguenot families built Nieuw Haarlem's farms, businesses, and public and private structures. By the time the British took control of New York in the late 17th century, Harlem was already a multi-ethnic cosmopolitan center in which more than thirty languages were spoken. Prominent Dutch and Huguenot families and business owners began to develop powerful relationships with similarly situated Anglican families. Together, they established strongholds of political, economic and social influence, making New York City one of the most politically powerful and commercially successful cities on the North American coast.

Enslaved and free Africans were the colony builders who sustained the infrastructure and economy of colonial New York by means of their specialized skills and expert craftsmanship. Either by necessity or as directed by their owners and employers, people of African descent managed farms and businesses and provided entertainment for various social settings, contributing significantly to the polyglot culture of the city. However it was common practice, reinforced by regulations, to separate Africans from Europeans in almost all aspects of daily life. From the colonial era until just before the Civil War, the Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem maintained two cemeteries, one for people of African descent and one for people of European descent.

Enslaved and free Africans interred in the Harlem African Burial Ground, sometimes known as the Negro Burying Ground, attended the Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem as well as Anglican and Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist churches. Initial examination of church records has yielded the names of more than sixty individuals identified as “colored,” “Negro,” or “African” and, in some cases, there is evidence of personal ties and kinship circles. The records also clearly demonstrate the presence of stable multi-generational families some of whom endured challenges of violence, political volatility and disenfranchisement.

Desecration of the Harlem African Burial Ground began almost three decades before the last recorded interment when European- descended leaders of the Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem began “leasing” the Negro Burying Ground for their livestock. By the middle of the 19th century, the Church was forced to sell its surrounding land as urbanization and light industry increased. Ultimately, both cemeteries were sold. The remains of people of European descent – founding families of colonial New York and the young United States – were disinterred from the Harlem cemetery and then re-interred in the Woodlawn Cemetery in The Bronx. But the remains of the people of African descent were left in place.

Over time, this section of the emerging city was built over the old Negro Burying Ground. By the end of the nineteenth century, as planned urbanization progressed, an amusement park and dance hall were constructed on top of the sacred land. The loss of historical memory continued to influence further desecration of the cemetery. In the 1920s, the site consisted of a movie studio and theater, as well as the Third Avenue Railway Company's trolley barn. In the mid-1940s, the Metropolitan Transit Authority purchased the Third Avenue Railway Company. The tracks from the former trolley barn were demolished and the site was converted to a bus depot of three stories and deep below ground storage space. This edifice was constructed within the footprint of the cemetery. In addition, the construction of the Willis Avenue Bridge in 1901 and its renovation, completed in 2012, took place on the edges of the mapped Harlem African Burial Ground.

Today, almost a century and a half after the last known burial, New Yorkers in general have no idea of the existence of the Harlem African Burial Ground or its significance.

Harlem African Burial Ground (HABG) Task Force:

In 2009, one year before the Elmendorf Reformed Church, successor church to the Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem, celebrated its 350th Anniversary, the New York City Department of Transportation (NYC DOT) contacted Elmendorf regarding its long held plans to refurbish the Willis Avenue Bridge. NYC DOT also sought to ascertain whether Elmendorf knew of the existence of the Harlem African Burial Ground.

Concern immediately arose that NYC DOT construction near the site would cause further desecration to the long forgotten sacred ground. A Task Force, co-chaired by the Rev. Dr. Patricia A. Singletary and City Council Member and Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, was assembled. From its inception, the Task Force consisted of

multiple public constituents including academics, clergy, professionals, government representatives, elected officials, journalists, historians, East Harlem residents and other concerned citizens. Guided by mutual respect, expertise, and a deep knowledge of history and activism, the members developed a strategic and collaborative process that allows for many divergent voices and enables people of varying economic strata, ethnic and racial origins and different professional backgrounds to work effectively and in concert with a shared vision to preserve, protect, reclaim and commemorate Harlem's historic African burial ground through research, analysis and interpretation of outcomes and public education. The sacred space is to be saved and memorialized so that a truly American story, highlighting the significant contributions of people of African descent, can be told.

Over almost a decade, strategic collaborations with a number of public and private entities have been conducted concerning methods for returning this important history to modern memory. Some of these activities have included presentations, academic papers, public testimony, website development, negotiations with regulatory authorities, research and discussions to explore the complex and nuanced issues affecting the history of the burial ground and New York within the broader context of American history. These discussions have led to the development of a conceptual design for a memorial and cultural space that will advance education and disseminate this history to local residents, regional and national visitors and international tourists.

Guided by this vision, the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force is working with the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the 126th Street Bus Depot Task Force to facilitate the development of the 126th Street bus depot site, upon its release from the Metropolitan Transit Authority, into a contemporary urban center where individuals and families can come together to live, work, create, shop and relax, and also reflect upon the significant and newly recovered history of the sacred Harlem African Burial Ground. Local residents and visitors alike will gain a deeper understanding of American history and be afforded an opportunity to consider their identity and place within the context of Harlem's past, present and future.

Partial listing of Harlem African Burial Ground activities and accomplishments:

2009: Establishment of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force.

2010: Commemoration of 350th Anniversary of charters conferred upon the Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem and the Village of Harlem.

2011: East Harlem Community Board 11 designation of Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force as representative spokes-agency for the Burial Ground. Co-sponsorship of a public hearing with New York State Senators Perkins and Serrano that resulted in legislative resolution J629: *Commemorating Harlem's Historic African Burial Ground in Recognition of Black History Month*. Creation of the Harlem African Burial Ground website (www.HarlemAfricanBurialGround.wordpress.com) on which memoranda, articles and updates are posted.

2012: Assistance, educational support and facilitation of community charrette by the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force for graduate school students in the Hunter College Urban Planning Studio Practicum, resulting in the publication of "Reclaiming Cultural Heritage: A Plan for the Harlem African Burial Ground."

2013: Application for historic designation by the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force with the National and State Register of Historic Places. This application was well received and designation is likely to be granted,

especially in light of recent archaeological research. Authorship by Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force historians for the Department of Transportation of text for a plaque describing the history and significance of the burial ground which is now installed on the Manhattan side of the Willis Avenue Bridge.

2014-2015: Receipt of a \$15,000.00 City Council grant to engage architect Anthony Carrion to design a concept that would authentically represent the significant social, economic and cultural history of the Harlem African Burial Ground within a vibrant and dynamic modern East Harlem community.

2015-2016: On-going successful collaboration with the environmental firm AKRF Environmental, Planning, and Engineering Consultants, the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the 126th Bus Depot Task Force.