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Discovery of Burial Ground Backs a Less Conventional Version of Harlem's History

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP JAN. 27, 2016

Harlem's African roots are at last coming to light.

Kept apart in life, pushed aside after death, the black residents of Harlem in the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s have seemingly emerged from an unlikely spot: beneath a bus depot near the Harlem River where a "Negro burying ground" was once maintained by the first church in the Dutch settlement of Nieuw Haarlem.

The discovery of 140 bones by archaeologists digging within the decommissioned depot was announced last week by Melissa Mark-Viverito, the City Council speaker, and the Rev. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of the Elmendorf Reformed Church on East 121st Street, the successor to the Harlem Reformed Dutch Church of 1660.

Most poignant was a skull found in a trench halfway between the large bus-wash stall and a vehicle inspection station, near the center of the 2.4-acre depot. On examination, Vincent H. Stefan of Lehman College, who specializes in human skeletal biology, concluded that it belonged to an adult woman who was likely of African descent. The pastor has called her Nana, out of respect.

Though small in scale in archaeological terms, the find offers an important and intimate link to a long-forgotten past.

It should help rewrite conventional history, which portrays Harlem as a white enclave until the 20th century, when African-Americans began moving there in great numbers. And it buttresses an argument long made by the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force that black people, free and enslaved, helped build Harlem from the very beginning.

“Our prayer was that the remains would reveal themselves,” Ms. Singletary said on Tuesday, during an interview in the church social hall. “Remember, Sharon? We said, ‘Bones rise up.’”

“Sharon” is Sharon Wilkins, the deputy borough historian of Manhattan and a member of the task force. “These discoveries are a validation of our work and our research,” she said. Ms. Wilkins and Jean Ballard Terepka, another task force member, pored over the records of several churches to find at least 60 people — identified as “colored,” “Negro” or “African” — who were buried at the river’s edge. Not all were members of the Reformed church.

Ms. Singletary said she hoped the remains could return to the site one day as part of a memorial within whatever redevelopment project comes after the depot.

The last bus rolled out of the 126th Street Bus Depot a year ago. The New York City Economic Development Corporation, which is overseeing long-term redevelopment of the site, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which still uses the depot for emergencies like the blizzard last weekend, approved the excavation of four trenches by an archaeological team from AKRF, led by A. Michael Pappalardo. He was on the team six years ago that unearthed an 18th-century sailing vessel at the World Trade Center site.

In trench No. 2, which reached a depth of more than nine feet below the foundation slab, archaeologists found human remains, including the skull; a thimble; and glass and ceramics. There was also a bulkhead post that had been driven when the river ran where First Avenue is now. When they sawed into it to

obtain a study sample, the archaeologists were greeted by the sharp smell of cedar, undiminished over the centuries.

What indicated to Dr. Stefan that the skull belonged to an adult was the fusion of two bones, the occipital and the sphenoid, that would have been joined with cartilage in a younger person.

The skull was smaller than one might expect to see in a male, Dr. Stefan said. Further telltale signs of its sex were the fact that the muscle attachment areas were less pronounced and the upper margins in the eye sockets were sharper.

Its profile was relatively long and low, Dr. Stefan said, a trait that can be associated — though not exclusively — with people of African descent, as can prognathism (protrusion of the jaw), rectangular eye sockets and hyperbolic, or U-shaped, tooth rows. Further, a prominence called the mastoid process is notched at the back, not smooth.

“As a whole, all of those features indicated to me that this individual was more than likely of African ancestry,” Dr. Stefan said. But he said her age at death could not be estimated, nor how long she had been dead.

Burials were recorded in the cemetery as late as 1850, Ms. Wilkins said.

At least 200 remains from a nearby white cemetery were reinterred at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx in the 1870s, she said. The African burial ground was simply plowed under and pushed aside, supplanted by a pleasure and amusement ground known as Sulzer's Harlem River Park and Casino, then by William Randolph Hearst's Cosmopolitan movie studio, and then by the bus depot.

Archaeologists found no intact graves. “The remains were disarticulated and apparently randomly distributed in a layer of disturbed and redeposited soils,” Mr. Pappalardo said.

And that tells a story itself. “We've lost the awareness of just how cruel racism, Jim Crow-ism was,” said Christopher Moore, who retired last year as a member of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. “It didn't care about those who were alive or dead.”

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