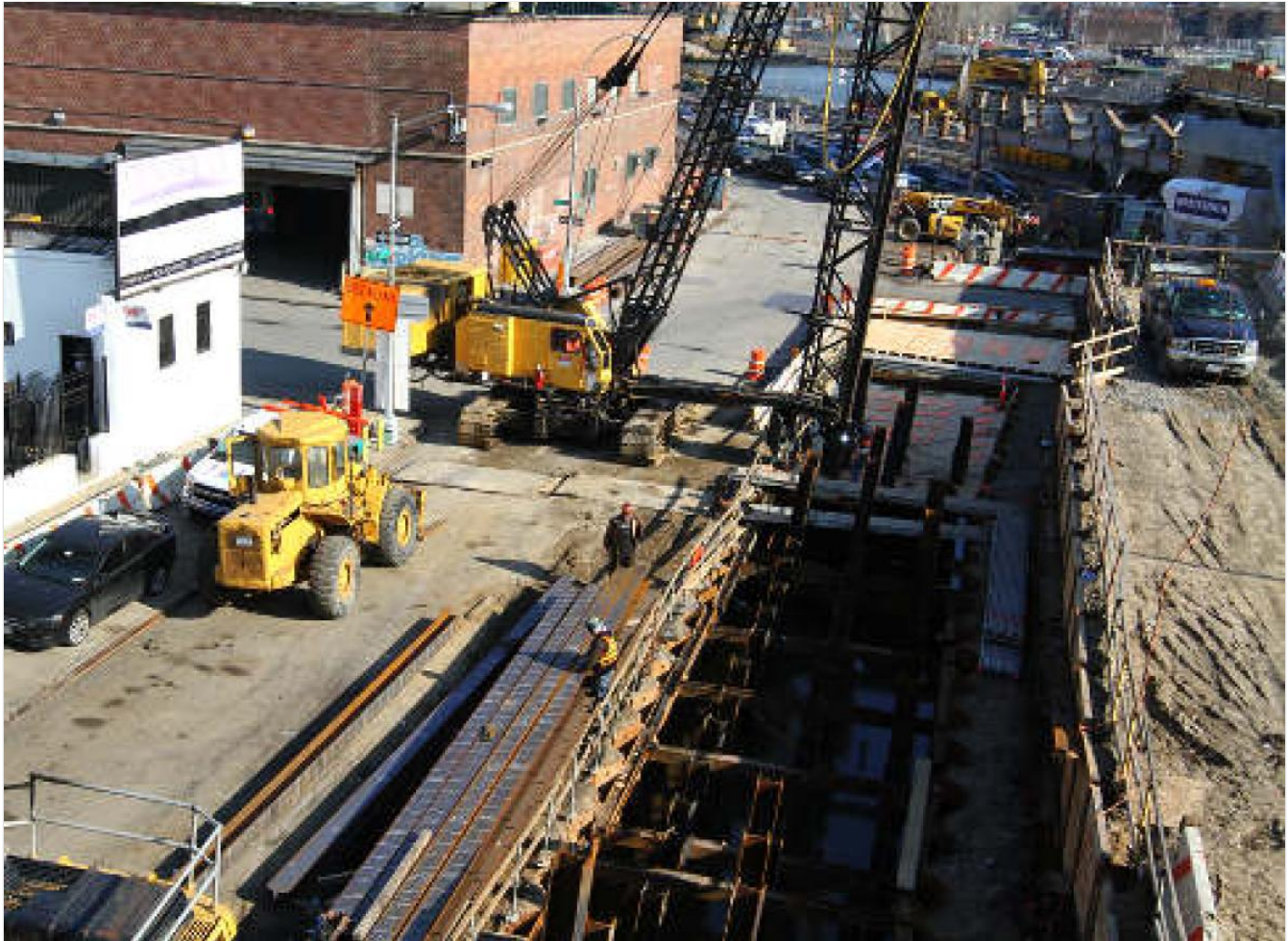


Harlem fighting to protect African burial ground

BY MICHAEL J. FEENEY

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The Harlem African Burial Ground is underneath this city bus depot. (SANTOS FOR NEWS)

There's a hidden piece of African history in East Harlem, and a group of local leaders are doing all they can to preserve it.

For more than a year, residents and church officials have battled to preserve and memorialize the centuries-old Harlem African Burial Ground, now under a city bus depot at 126th St. and Second Ave.

Government agencies haven't always been cooperative - insisting that a part of the cemetery does not exist, advocates charged.

"The Harlem community is watching and very concerned about what's going on," said the Rev. Patricia Singletary, leader of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force. "We just want the ... burial ground to be memorialized, properly commemorated and preserved."

The 1660s cemetery, once called the Harlem Colored Burying Ground, was used by the Dutch to bury the enslaved and freed of African descent. Parishioners from at least six Harlem churches are buried there.

At St. Mary's Episcopal Church on W. 126th St., the Rev. Earl Kooperkamp has kept a well-worn, 150-year-old brown ledger with the names of those buried at the site carefully written in flowery script.

They include Herman Cannon, 69; Mary Stewart, 20; Benjamin Pearsall Benedict, 1; Israel Williams, 5, and numerous members of the large Hagerman family, the records show. Kooperkamp believes such an important site should stand preserved, with the bus depot demolished.

"These were the founders, the ancestors of this parish," he said. "I want to see it as a memorial to these ancestors. It doesn't need to be a bus depot. We could lose one."

There has also been controversy over whether the burial ground stretches into an area where the city Department of Transportation is building a ramp leading to the Willis Ave. Bridge, with the DOT insisting it doesn't.

"The area has been excavated numerous times over the centuries for development ... making it unlikely that additional work in this area would turn up any issues," a DOT spokeswoman told the Daily News.

But leaders from the community don't agree, and have kept a close watch over the property.

"There was a strong feeling of disrespect and disregard of our concerns," said Singletary, pastor of Elmendorf Reformed Church on E. 121st St., which owns the burial ground. "We are not being filled in [by the DOT]."



But DOT officials said the agency has been cooperative.

"We established the monitoring zone and then voluntarily expanded it in response to community concerns," a spokesman said, adding an archaeologist is called to the site when work is done in that area "in the unlikely event that excavation revealed any artifacts. None have been found."

Still, passions run high about the site, and advocates like Christine Campbell, a task force and St. Mary's member, is ready to do whatever it takes to preserve it.

"We don't want to lay down in front of a bulldozer," she said. "But if we have to, we will."

mfeeney@nydailynews.com

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