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CITY ROOM; Under Bus Depot, An Old Cemetery?

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

UNDER BUS DEPOT,

An Old Cemetery?

Are traces of the original Harlem settlement -- including an African burial ground -- awaiting discovery during the replacement of the Willis Avenue Bridge and the planned rehabilitation of the 126th Street Bus Depot?

There will be no way to know until the soil is dug up, but the prospect of such a discovery is being greeted anxiously and eagerly by a couple of stewards of Harlem history. The farming village once known as Nieuw Haarlem is in its 350th anniversary year.

"What an awesome way to celebrate!" said Christopher Paul Moore, a member of the Landmarks Preservation Commission and the research coordinator for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library. "Seems like a cultural bonus could be reaped from this."

The area around the depot and bridge was the original location of the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem. This body, founded in 1660, is perpetuated today as the Elmendorf Reformed Church, 171 East 121st Street.

The site of its first, rudimentary building -- a plot bounded by First Avenue, East 126th Street and East 127th Street -- "was afterward used as a negro burying ground," according to a 1910 historical sketch by the Rev. Dr. Edgar Tilton Jr.

This would make it one of the few remaining African-American historical sites from the colonial period. The Rev. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of the Elmendorf Church, said she and the church elders were "concerned about the coming community outcry," should there be no plans to commemorate or protect the site.

The replacement of the bridge by the City Department of Transportation began last year. The agency has established a monitoring zone around the First Avenue side of the project, Seth Solomonow, a spokesman, wrote in an e-mail message.

"We have committed to having an archaeologist on site in the unlikely event that excavation reveals any artifacts," he said.

But he also noted that the bridge project is "well outside" the burial ground site and that the entire vicinity has been excavated many times, reducing the chance that any colonial remnants survive. The depot is to be rehabilitated around 2014.

Robert B. Tierney, the chairman of the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission, is "very interested in a careful review to determine the appropriate level of recognition," said his spokeswoman, Elisabeth de Bourbon. That will depend in part on whether any burial plots can be found. DAVID W. DUNLAP

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ON THE BLOG

Theory on an 1862 Emoticon: Amid all the recent attention on the inspirational quality of Abraham Lincoln's speeches, a historical newspaper specialist believes he has found an example of a sideways winking smiley face embedded in the New York Times transcript of an 1862 speech given by President Lincoln.

Other historians are not so sure, saying the semicolon alongside a close parenthesis is either a mistake or a misinterpretation of something that is perfectly grammatical for that era.

PHOTO: Harlem waterfront, 1765. (PHOTOGRAPH BY "MANUAL OF THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF NEW-YORK," 1863)

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