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Honoring our history, building our future

City Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and the Rev. Patricia Singletary | 1/28/2016, 1:37 p.m.



Elmendorf Reformed Church Wikipedia

For nearly 400 years, Harlem has served as a home to communities of African descent—individuals who played a pivotal yet often overlooked role in our city's growth, history and success. Despite this rich past, many New Yorkers remain unaware of how deep the roots of the Harlem/East Harlem community run.

In 2008, during the environmental review process prior to the construction of the new Willis Avenue Bridge, City Department of Transportation archaeological consultants determined that there may be a burial ground associated with the Elmendorf Reformed Church (descendent church to the 17th century Low Dutch Reformed Church of Harlem) near the bridge site. The church was contacted about this possibility, leading to the 2009 formation of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force. Three important task force objectives emerged: research, education and memorialization.

The task force, made up of a wide cross section of community stakeholders, including government officials, scholars, experts in historic and cultural preservation, clergy and concerned citizens from multiple communities of interest, engaged in independent research and confirmed that the area once held an African burial ground, or “Negro Burying Ground,” with no official records of disinterment. This led to a 2011 New York Senate hearing where the Metropolitan Transportation Authority acknowledged the existence of a colonial cemetery under a portion of the 126th Street bus depot.

In the summer of 2015, archaeologists hired by the New York City Economic Development Corporation dug investigative trenches beneath the floor of the bus depot and found the disarticulated remains of at least two individuals, one of whom is likely to have been a woman of African descent. No intact burials or funerary artifacts were discovered. Prior to securing the remains in a temperature-controlled environment, they were blessed in a private ceremony at the depot. The rediscovery of remains from the burial ground is compelling because it teaches about the origins of New York and Harlem and the unrecognized contributions of people of African descent who built these communities.

Since 2009, our task force has worked with city and state officials to hold several community forums, including a design charrette, to engage stakeholders in a strategic process that has led to potential ideas for the redevelopment of the bus depot site. Continued community engagement is a proper way to honor those who were buried in this sacred ground and build a memorial to them in the context of a vibrant development that meets current needs and appropriately honors the past.

We plan to continue historical and archaeological investigations prior to the redevelopment of this sacred site in order to discover more about its history and the contributions made by African-descended people to New York’s success.

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