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Harlem Bus Depot Built Atop African Burial Ground

by [Ben Muessig](#) in [News](#) on Mar 15, 2010 3:40 pm



Community activists are hoping that planned construction projects won't disturb the remains of African slaves buried in a long-forgotten 17th century cemetery underneath an MTA bus depot on East 126th Street. With the MTA planning to replace the bus facility and the city renovating the nearby Willis Avenue Bridge, locals are trying to preserve the graveyard in an effort to keep the burial ground from being desecrated.

Authorities only found the cemetery in 2008, when Department of Transportation employees working on the Willis Avenue Bridge uncovered human body parts, according to [NY1](#). Since then, activists have urged officials to preserve the graveyard, which belongs to the Elmendorf Reformed Church—Harlem's oldest church. "They emphasized one thing. That was 'We're going to be very respectful of the bones.' And they repeated, 'We're going to be very respectful of the bones.' Well that unnerved us because if they said that they must have found something," Rev. Patricia Singletary told the station.

The MTA is planning to build a new bus depot on the site in 2015, and noted in a statement: "We are open to discussion with the community and elected officials about our plans to replace the depot in a way that meets our very substantial operating needs." The city says it has voluntarily expanded its "Sensitive Monitoring Zone" for work of the Willis Avenue Bridge to account for the burial ground. In 1991, workers constructing a federal office building on Duane Street in Lower Manhattan uncovered an African burial ground. The discovery sparked major protests as activists fought to protect the site from development. Officials eventually relented and changed building plans to devote a portion of the site to a [national memorial](#).

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