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Traces (Perhaps) of Nieuw Haarlem

By **David W. Dunlap** January 19, 2009 11:15 am

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 for certain until the soil is dug up, but the prospect of such a discovery is being greeted both anxiously and eagerly by a couple of stewards of Harlem history. The bucolic farming village of Nieuw Haarlem was established in March 1658, meaning that it is still 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, and not just about preserving the cemetery, but preserving or recapturing a hugely significant era in New York’s history, the founding and settlement of Harlem.”

The area around First Avenue, just north of 125th Street, is critical to Harlem history as 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. Its first, rudimentary church building stood on a site bounded by First Avenue, East 126th Street and East 127th Street, now occupied by a New York City Transit bus depot. (The depot was constructed for the bus line subsidiary of the Third Avenue Railway.) At the time, this would have been right on the shoreline.

What is even more tantalizing is that the original church site “was afterward used as a negro burying ground,” according to a 1910 historical sketch of the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem by the Rev. Dr. Edgar Tilton Jr. This would

make it one of exceptionally few remaining African-American historical sites from the colonial period. The hunger among New Yorkers for any physical trace of a story that was largely ignored or obliterated until recent years was reflected in the tremendous interest generated by the discovery of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan.

The Rev. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of the Elmendorf Church, said that she and the church elders were “concerned about the coming community outcry” should there be no plans to commemorate the site or protect any artifacts or vestiges that may be found. “Remember,” she said, “this site represents the beginning of Harlem’s existence.”

In the near term, the construction project closest to the site involves the replacement of the Willis Avenue Bridge by the city Department of Transportation. Work began last year and is to be finished in 2012.

“As a precaution, and in accordance with the State Historical Preservation Office, we have established a monitoring zone on the westernmost part of the project area (First Avenue),” Seth Solomonow, a spokesman for the department, said in an e-mail message, “and we have committed to having an archaeologist on-site in the unlikely event that excavation reveals any artifacts.”

“We are aware that historical maps show a former church and a burial ground below the nearby bus depot, but our bridge replacement work is well outside that area,” he said. “Some historical maps show that the current project area is along former waterfront or was actually submerged at the time the cemetery was in use. In addition, the area has been excavated numerous times over the decades and centuries for development, for sewer, gas and electrical installation, for the development of the existing bus depot, and for construction of the Harlem River Drive and the current Willis Avenue Bridge.”

It is the bus depot’s future that is more closely tied to the burying ground itself. Charles F. Seaton, a spokesman for the transit agency, said rehabilitation of the depot is planned around 2014. Asked whether that project might include commemoration of Nieuw Haarlem and the burying ground, he said, “We would have to see what is discovered and then make a determination on how to proceed.”

Robert B. Tierney, the chairman of the landmarks commission, is “very interested in a careful review to determine the appropriate level of recognition,” his spokeswoman, Elisabeth de Bourbon, said. That will depend in part on whether any burials can be found.

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