

2017 GMAC Mark E. Mack Community Engagement Award

Project Team: AKRF, Inc., the New York City Economic Development Corporation, and the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force

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Media Materials: Several photographs with captions and an 8.5" by 11" version of a large-scale presentation board accompany this nomination. There is also a short video of the excavation at <https://vimeo.com/162688742>. Also, the Harlem African Burial Ground Task force maintains a comprehensive website with information regarding the burial site at <https://harlemafricanburialground.wordpress.com>.

Essay:

Part 1, a brief description (approx. 500 words) that details how the nominee or project team exhibits a commitment to community outreach, collaboration, and/or engagement beyond the required scope of involvement.

In the summer of 2015, the New York City Economic Development Corporation (NYCEDC) hired AKRF to conduct an archaeological investigation inside a decommissioned bus depot in East Harlem, NY. The depot was located on the site of the Harlem African Burial Ground, originally established by the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem (RLDCH) and in use between c. 1665 and the mid-19th century. The City-owned site has been targeted for creating a memorial and for re-development to address vital community needs such as affordable housing and good jobs.

All surface signs of the burial ground were erased by more than 150 years of development. However, passionate area residents, elected officials, and the leadership of the Elmendorf Reformed Church—the Harlem-based descendent church of the RLDCH—united to advocate for recognition of the site's history. Organized as the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (Task Force) in 2009, the group has tirelessly worked to reclaim the past, restore the dignity of those interred, and to memorialize the historically and culturally significant site.

AKRF's primary role was to determine the presence or absence of the cemetery and other historic archaeological resources through appropriate archaeological methods. In recognition of the Task Force's extensive efforts, the NYCEDC directed AKRF to periodically consult with the Task Force throughout the investigation. This consultation was initially formal and tentative. However, with interaction came familiarity, trust, and collaboration; the archaeologists gave the Task Force insight into the complicated methods of urban archaeology and the Task Force provided research on the site's history and taught the archaeologists what it means to advocate for a group of individuals who were mistreated in life and again in death. Together, the stakeholders and the archaeologists developed a testing plan and initiated fieldwork.

The field team encountered no evidence of the former cemetery throughout most of the site. Task Force members periodically visited, examined the sterile trench walls, and patiently listened to descriptions of the investigation's progress. Then, on the morning of August 25, one hour before a

planned Task Force visit, the archaeologists discovered the disarticulated skull of an adult woman of African descent, along with other disarticulated skeletal remains. The remains were not in their original grave site but had been disturbed and ended up reburied in redeposited fill along the former marshy bank of the Harlem River. For the archaeologists, the moment of discovery was one of excitement and heightened professional focus. However, for the Task Force members it was an event of great solemnity. Their emotional reaction soon led all present to the somber realization that they were in the presence of the remains of a woman, possibly one who had been enslaved, who had helped build Harlem centuries earlier; a woman whose burial had been desecrated; a woman whose dignity, if not her identity, could now be restored.

The archaeologists, NYCEDC, and the Task Force were in constant communication as many sensitive issues were worked out: Should the remains be excavated? Should they be studied? How and when should the discovery be made public? After the discovery of more than 100 additional human remains and completion of the investigation, a ceremony was held in the depot. Task Force leadership re-consecrated the burial ground and the skull discovered on that first day was given a name, *Nana*, “the African term of respect for an elderly woman.” This profoundly emotional event transformed nameless archaeological remains into a human being, a dank dusty bus depot into a sacred place, and the varied participants into an extended family. Collaboration between AKRF, NYCEDC, and the Task Force has continued since the initial discovery and has focused largely on public outreach as the planning process continues. Outreach has included a widely-attended Black History Month presentation at the descendent church, public screenings of a short video highlighting the field efforts and ceremony for the diverse community, and presentations at other professional and community meetings.

Part 2, an overview (approx. 500 words) of the archaeological project, the research objectives or main questions under investigation, and a description of how your work encourages diversity in historical archaeology.

NYCEDC hired AKRF to complete an archaeological investigation of the bus depot in compliance with New York City’s environmental review process, which requires City agencies to consider the effects of their projects on significant historic properties. Based on the work of previous researchers, the site had already been identified as sensitive for various types of historic period archaeological resources. However, determining their actual presence or absence was necessary to make informed decisions regarding redevelopment of the block, plan a memorial and/or open space, and to identify the location of resources that should be preserved in situ (e.g. intact burials) and those that could be archaeologically documented and removed. Just as importantly, although the significance of the place where the cemetery was once located was well established, there was a strong desire to recover tangible evidence of the burials. In the words of the Task Force leadership as reported by the New York Times earlier this year, “our prayer was that the remains would reveal themselves ... we said ‘Bones rise up.’”

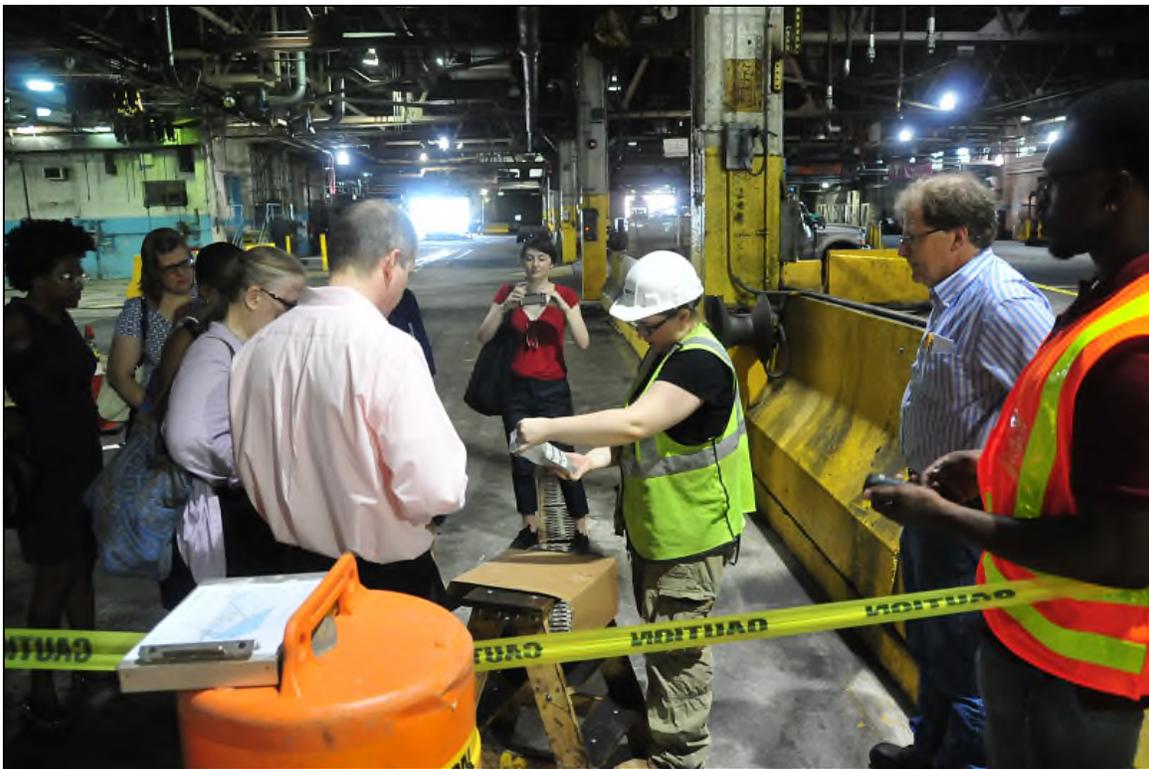
The first step of AKRF’s investigation involved a close examination of historic maps, topographical information, and drawings of utilities and underground tanks to understand how the site’s landscape was modified after the cemetery was no longer in use and to identify specific areas of disturbance. Remote sensing technology was then used to gather additional subsurface data before excavation. Fieldwork consisted of the excavation and close monitoring of four large trenches through the depot’s foundation slab using a large excavator. One trench was located in an area sensitive for historic foundations and shaft features such as privies and wells; two were within the expected boundaries of the former cemetery; and one was partially within the cemetery’s historical boundaries and partially within what was originally the Harlem River adjacent to the cemetery. Each horizontal soil layer was closely examined as each trench wall was observed and documented to identify potentially buried ground surfaces. A geomorphologist assisted with the interpretation of redeposited and natural deposits.

Disarticulated and fragmentary human remains were encountered within only one of the test trenches. The remains were examined by a forensic anthropologist, who was regularly present on the site for the remainder of the investigation. After it was determined in consultation with the Task Force that leaving the remains in place would contribute to their further deterioration, the field team carefully hand-excavated and screened over 1,000 cubic feet of soil from that trench. In an on-site temporary laboratory space, the forensic anthropologist conducted a more thorough examination of each bone, including collection of metrical information and, where possible, the identification of element, sex, age, and ancestry/race.

The archaeologists who investigated the Harlem African Burial Ground served as a human thread connecting modern New York City and East Harlem's early history. Another thread resulted from the talented local historians and genealogists who sifted through various church ledgers and other historic documents to identify the names of individuals buried on the site, making their names known to the modern world. The passionate advocates who organized a community, local politicians, and City agencies to build support for a memorial constitute yet another thread. Once woven together, these diverse threads formed a cord strong enough to pull those interred at this site back through time to be memorialized by East Harlem's current and future residents and restore agency to a group of people whose mistreatment in life and death prevented them from being able to advocate for themselves.



Photograph 1 – Archaeologists working at the Bus Depot



Photograph 2 – Archaeologist displaying artifacts during Task Force and NYCEDC site visit



Photograph 3 – Task Force members during site visit



Photograph 4 – Reverend Dr. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor at Elmendorf Reformed Church of Harlem, and Sharon Wilkons, Deputy Borough Historian of Manhattan, both members of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force, moments before on-site ceremony



Photograph 5 – Community Meeting at Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College

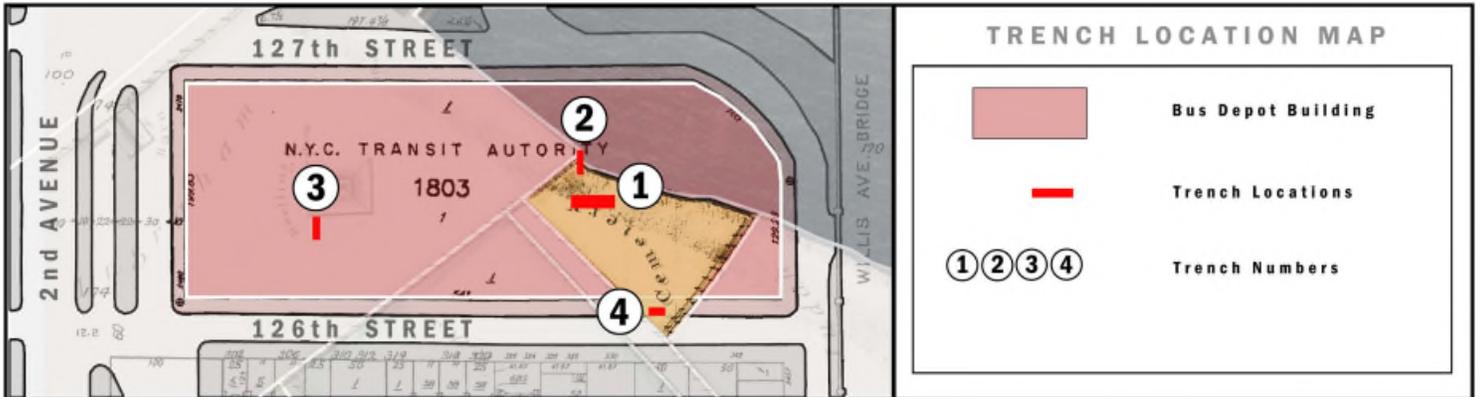


Photograph 6 – Community Meeting at Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College

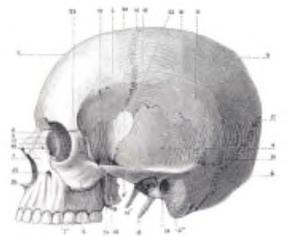
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

AT THE

African burying ground at Harlem

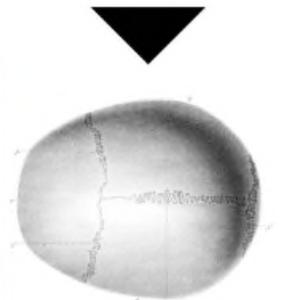


The New York City Economic Development Corporation hired environmental planning and engineering consultants, AKRF, Inc. to conduct a Phase I-B Preliminary Archaeological Investigation. Subsurface testing was limited in scope; its purpose was to identify the presence or absence of important buried resources. In Trench 2 (1 of 4 test pits excavated at the 126th Street Bus Depot), disarticulated human remains were found along with other archaeological artifacts. All recovered artifacts have been safely secured in accordance with approved city and state archaeological protocols.

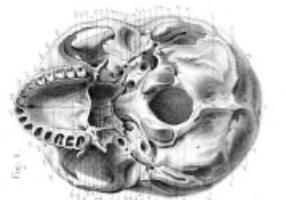


The above illustration depicting a skull is representative of a partial skull such as the one found in Trench 2 and exhibited below.

City and state archaeological protocols dictate that an archaeologist must be on site when any future construction occurs.



The above illustration depicting the top of a human skull is intended to identify the human remains shown in the adjacent photograph.



The above illustration depicting the base of a human skull is intended to identify the human remains shown in the adjacent photograph.