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Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force Wants to be Present for DOT Work

By Jeff Mays ([//WWW.DNAINFO.COM/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/jeff-mays](http://WWW.DNAINFO.COM/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/jeff-mays)) | June 23, 2011 8:48pm

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By Jeff Mays

DNAINfo Reporter/Producer

HARLEM — A community group is concerned that an African burial ground (<http://www.dnainfo.com/20100201/manhattan/harlem-leaders-worry-african-burial-ground-will-be-completely-lost-history>) under an East Harlem bus depot could be damaged by Willis Avenue Bridge construction.

The Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (<http://harlemafricanburialground.wordpress.com>) wants the Department of Transportation to keep them informed, and have them present, when they test soil in the area. The group also wants a full accounting from DOT of all soil that was extracted and analyzed during the installation of the new bridge.

The move comes as the group of church, civic and elected leaders received a letter of support from Community Board 11 saying they should be identified as the group that officially represents the public's interest in preserving the burial ground and creating a memorial and educational site there.

"We needed the community support to continue engaging the DOT, state and MTA regarding the historic African Burial Ground," said Thomas Lunke, director of planning and development for the Harlem Community Development Corporation and executive committee member of the task force.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is conducting tests (<http://www.dnainfo.com/20100319/manhattan/mta-pledges-archaeological-probe-into-east-harlem-african-burial-ground>) on the site of the bus depot at East 126th Street and Second Avenue in advance of possibly building a new depot there starting in 2015. The task force is particularly concerned about a trailer filled with "contaminated" soil that they say DOT excavated from the new bridge site.

Both free and enslaved Africans were buried in the cemetery on First Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets maintained by what is the now Elmendorf Reformed Church.

"We are doing our due diligence to preserve this legacy," said Rev. Patricia Singletary, pastor of Elmendorf Church. "We must have a memorial because that is the origination of Harlem, the ancestors who built the village of Harlem and the entire city."

Using historical records, the task force believes the archaeological zone extends well beyond the bus depot, including portions of the new Willis Avenue Bridge, the planned Harlem River Park, Wagner Houses and the city Economic Development Corporation's project to build a media and cultural center (<http://www.dnainfo.com/20110318/harlem/east-harlem-merchants-want-city-speed-up-development-project>) at East 125th Street and Second Avenue, according to a new map they've assembled.

Lunke said it's possible that the burial ground area is saturated with remains beyond the boundaries because of a similar situation at the Lower Manhattan African Burial Ground and the number of churches, African and otherwise, who sent their members' remains to the Harlem site.

"What is being unearthed there and are they documenting what's in the soil? We are concerned about there being human remains and no one being notified," said Marina Ortiz of East Harlem Preservation.

The DOT, however, has denied that the burial ground extends to the site of the new bridge.

"We have been working with the community on this issue for several years and it is important to note that the work on the new bridge is occurring well outside the area where the burial ground is located," said a DOT spokesperson.

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The DOT also says the area has already been excavated several times for utility instillation, the construction of the Harlem River Drive, the bus depot and previous Willis Avenue Bridge.

Nevertheless, the agency has also created a monitoring zone in accordance with guidelines from the State Historical Preservation Office that has since been expanded. The DOT has also committed to having an archaeologist on site whenever they work in the zone.

"To date, no artifacts or human remains have been found but we will continue to adhere to this protocol until work is complete," a DOT spokesperson told DNainfo.

But members of the taskforce are not willing to take the DOT's word for it.

"The DOT has not been as cooperative as they said they would be," said Singletary. "But they should know that we are not just some ad hoc group. We are coming with evidence because we want them to do the right thing. We are not going away."



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