



OPINION

# Harlem's buried treasure

By Post Staff Report

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Slaves clear Indian trails in New Netherland in this Charles Lilly painting. An unknown number were buried under what is now the 126th Street Bus Depot.  
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**It may not look like a national park or grand museum, but beneath the bus depot at 126th Street is a great American story, long buried and forgotten. It is the birthplace of Harlem.**

The depot, where the Willis Avenue Bridge meets First Avenue, marks the end point of Dutch Gov. Peter Stuyvesant's "road to New Harlem," a 10-mile trail from lower Manhattan constructed in 1658 by enslaved African workers. Beneath the depot's block-long concrete floor, according to historians and archaeologists, is where those slaves are still buried.

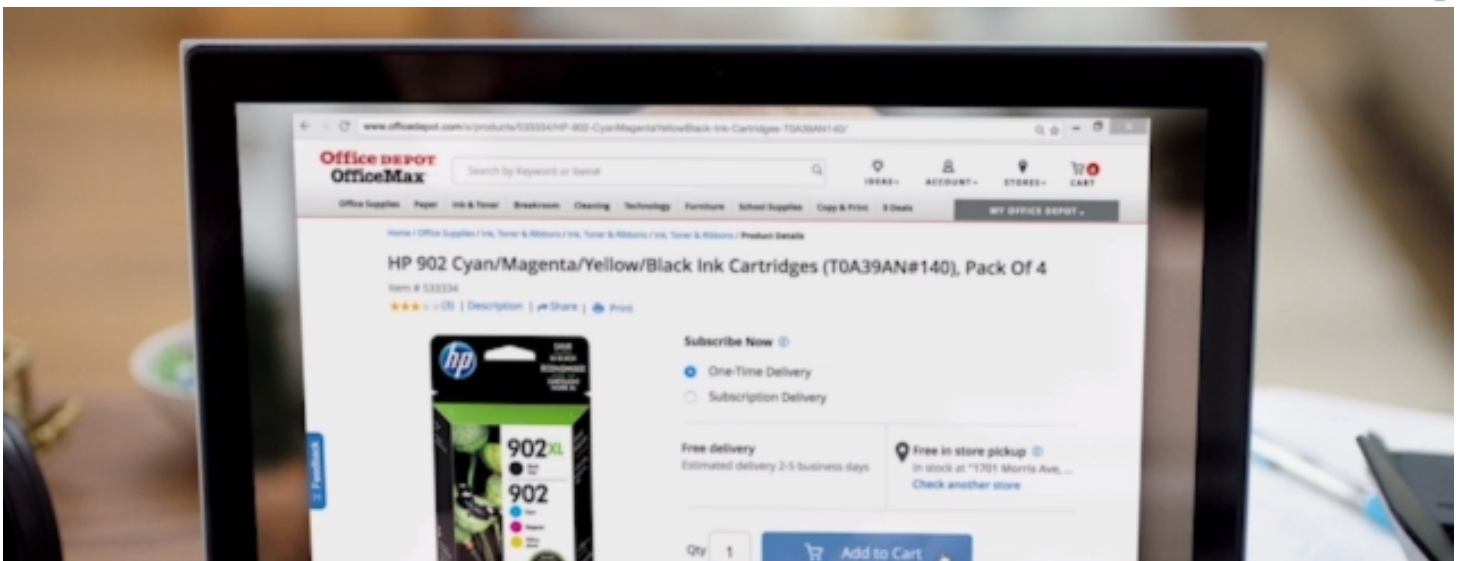
In lower Manhattan, a colonial village called New Amsterdam was established in 1625. Multinational from its inception, merchants and traders, primarily from Holland but also from England, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany and Scandinavia, built a center for trade and commerce, while the African slaves of the Dutch West India Company labored to expand the colony to the island's northern regions.

Throughout the Americas — from Albany to Argentina — the successful colony building strategy was the same: Deploy slaves to clear land for plantations, towns and roads, and entire families would migrate to the New World.

Population statistics tell the story. Of the 6.5 million people who sailed westward across the Atlantic to the Americas between 1500 and 1776, only 1 million were Europeans. Five and a half million were Africans, almost all of whom were slaves, according to historian Philip Curtin.

By the time Harlem was founded, slaves had cleared much of Manhattan for homes and farms. They had widened an Indian trail to create Broad-way. On Feb. 25, 1644, during the era of relentless Dutch and Indian Wars, some slaves received their freedom or grants of farmland.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



In 1653, Manhattan's slaves constructed a wall spanning the width of the island, later called Wall Street, before Stuyvesant had his eye set on a new frontier village.

Harlem gets its name from Haarlem, a Dutch town that was nearly destroyed during Spain's war against Holland in the late 16th century. Haarlem and its citizens were renowned for their strength, perseverance and ability to survive through difficult and painful times. Considered a dangerous outpost, vulnerable to Native American or English attack, New Haarlem was chosen as the banner for the frontier community. One in five Harlem residents were black.

In 1660, the First Dutch Church of Harlem, a small wood building, was founded on the high riverbank overlooking the Harlem River. Within a few years, a stately stone church was built nearby and its original site became the community's "negro burying ground." The church's primary cemetery, a k a "God's Acre," was for whites only.

If Harlem was about to become a land of opportunity for all of its pioneers, the hope did not last long. In 1664, the English took control, renaming the territory New York. Unlike Dutch rule, which allowed blacks to purchase their freedom, English laws were unabashedly racist. A 1706 law ensured the slave status of any child born to an enslaved woman. Free blacks lived with nearly as many legal prohibitions and restrictions as slaves. By 1716, black land ownership was abolished.

In Harlem, elegant country estates owned by a handful of the city's wealthiest family names, including Roosevelt, Morris and Dyckman, were the hallmark of the 18th century. Irish and free black squatters were tolerated in niches of the rocky, virtually unlivable terrain of upper Manhattan.

In July 1776, the steeple bell at First Church tolled the signing of the Declaration of Independence. White and black men (free and enslaved) built Continental Army fortifications at Rattlesnake Hill, now Marcus Garvey Park, and along the Harlem River, in anticipation of the British assault. Local black soldiers served in the patriot army in the battles of Morningside and Harlem Heights.

Following the Revolutionary War, America's national freedom did not extend to slaves, but opinions opposing slavery grew stronger. In 1785, abolitionists John Jay and Alexander Hamilton created the New York Manumission Society, which founded the African Free School for black children. In 1801, Hamilton founded this newspaper, the New York Evening Post, as a clarion of liberty and opportunity — to extend the American Dream to all. The same year, the West Indian-born Hamilton began work on his own estate, The Grange, in Harlem.

Slavery ended in New York City in 1827, but newly freed local blacks found a new set of barriers as they confronted northern policies that became known as Jim Crow.

Beyond 1850, Harlem's population grew rapidly with the influx of immigrants from Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe. These poor immigrants were seen as undesirable by some members of the First Dutch Church, and so the church eventually moved out of East Harlem. It left a small chapel at 121st Street, which became the worship home of African-Americans.

On July 7, 1853, that First Church of Harlem passed a resolution that "the property known as the Negro Burying Ground be sold to the highest bidder." It was bought for \$3,000, and soon after landfill covered the old cemetery.

"God's Acre" got different treatment. In the early 1870s, First Church sold it, but not before removing the buried remains to a plot at Woodlawn Cemetery in The Bronx.

The slave cemetery passed into history, and in 1947 an MTA bus depot was built over the spot. But in 2009, the church that replaced the First Church of Harlem — the Elmendorf Reformed Church — with its pastor, Rev. Patricia Singletary, took up the banner to commemorate the history of Harlem and to preserve and protect its African Burial Ground.

The proposal: Move the 126th Street Bus Depot to vacant city-owned land nearby and open this plot. A historic and cultural bonanza could emerge. A thoughtfully designed park, promenade or plaza could become the new "first stop" for visitors to America's black mecca. The history of Harlem would no longer be buried.

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