

REFLECTION ZONE

African Burial Ground memorial and mixed-use development approved for Harlem

By JACKSON ROLLINGS • September 28, 2017

City Terrain East News Other Preservation



A rendering of the Harlem African Burial Ground memorial. (Courtesy Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force)

While completing work on the Willis Avenue Bridge in East Harlem in the early 2000s, an unexpected discovery was made. A building adjacent to the bridge – a bus depot operated by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority ([MTA](#)) – seemed to have been built on top of a colonial-era African burial ground.

In 2011, the MTA hired a consultant to complete a formal archaeological study (Phase 1A), which found that the depot grounds had indeed been an active burial site from the late 1660s to at least 1856. In 2015, the New York City Economic Development Corporation ([NYCEDC](#)) completed a Phase 1B archaeological assessment and the depot was shut down, its operations relocated offsite. The nearby [Elmendorf Reformed Church](#) – a descendant church of the burial ground – were involved in the extraction of more than 140 bone fragments from the site, which will be preserved and reinterred within a memorial.

As the MTA and NYCEDC discovered, the site had been the cemetery for descendants of Africans in the colonial era when the neighborhood was a Dutch settlement called [Nieuw Haarlem](#). An adjacent cemetery for white parishioners was relocated to the Bronx when its attendant church moved, but the ground holding the Africans' remains was repeatedly resold and developed over, its history obscured and desecrated.

Yesterday New York City Council approved a zoning application giving developers the go-ahead to construct a memorial at the historic burial ground, as well as a mixed-use housing and commercial complex including about 730 residential units, 80 percent of which will be made affordable. Before development begins, additional archaeological work will be conducted by the State Historic Preservation Office ([SHPO](#)) and the Landmarks Preservation Commission ([LPS](#)), supervised by the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force ([HABGTF](#)), which has advocated for the site's formal recognition since 2009.

The development, intended to be about two-thirds residential and one-third commercial, will center itself around the outdoor burial ground memorial and include up to 15,000 square feet of indoor memorial or cultural center space. The memorial itself will be allocated about 18,000 square feet, a wedge-shaped area near First Avenue. The overall site will span the entire city block.

In the HABGTF's original [design proposals](#) for the memorial, the names of the deceased are carved into walls of black granite surrounding a reflecting pool with its ripples illuminated onto the ceiling by internal light fixtures. Reverend Doctor Patricia A. Singletary of the Elmendorf Reformed Church managed to find the names in the church's records. The promenade, also etched with quotes from black luminaries like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., can double as a presentation space for guest lectures "pertinent to the site's history and larger issues concerning the legacy of slavery and colonization." The memorial corridor, lined with bronze sculptural reliefs depicting scenes of slavery and Native Americans, extends out onto an open, public lawn dotted with fiber optic lights that illuminate the grasses at night.

The NYCEDC plans to issue an RFP for development proposals for the site in 2018, with the final team selected in late 2018 or early 2019. The site is scheduled for construction on a tentative timeline from 2020 to 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Jackson Rollings](#)

Assistant Editor, The Architect's Newspaper

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