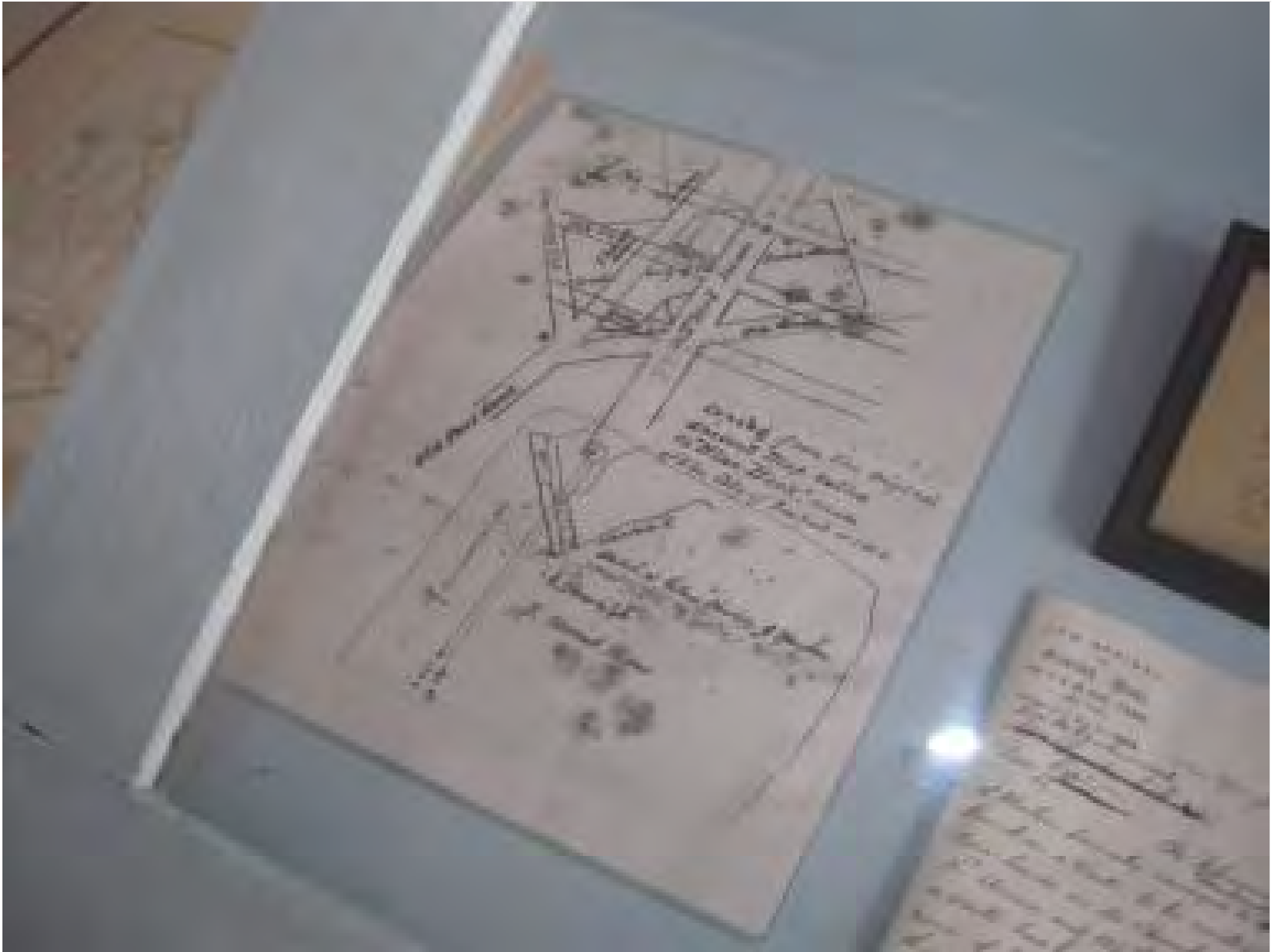


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Harlem Leaders Worry African Burial Ground Will Be Completely Lost to History

By DNAINfo Staff on February 1, 2010 8:45am | Updated on February 2, 2010 8:41am



The Church kept records like this one outlining the cemetery but as it struggled to survive preserving the land became less of a priority, said Rev. Patricia A. Singletary.

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DNAINfo/Gabriela Resto-Montero

By Gabriela Resto-Montero

DNAINfo Reporter/Producer

EAST HARLEM — What is now the MTA's 126th Street Bus Depot was once a colonial African burial ground, say community leaders who fear the cemetery will be lost to history under a plan to rebuild the station.

The 17th-century cemetery once occupied a one-quarter acre lot on the original Elmendorf Reformed Church grounds, on First Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets, according to archival records. African slaves built the church in what was then Manhattan wilderness, as well as a surrounding village.

“When you think of African enslavement, you don’t think of New York City,” said resident Azure Thompson, who attended a recent Town Hall meeting on preserving the cemetery.

“This burial ground effectively rewrites history, showing that slavery wasn’t just in the south.”

But a proposal by the MTA to replace the bus depot, beginning in 2015, along with current works to expand the Willis Avenue bridge, have local leaders worried that New York will lose its connection with this history.

Elmendorf Church Rev. Patricia A. Singletary formed a task force to preserve the cemetery in 2008. The coalition has outlined goals to protect and commemorate the burial ground.

“A cemetery is a community, and we have to be good stewards,” Singletary said.

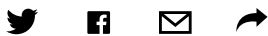
Archivists have identified some of the people buried at the site, drawing up family histories and starting a genealogical search for descendants. But the process of recovering remains has not begun.

City Councilwoman Melissa Mark-Viverito and U.S. Rep. Charles Rangel have lent their support to the task force.

Mark-Viverito and Rangel have also called for work to be halted on the Willis Avenue Bridge expansion project until researchers can determine whether any historical artifacts would be destroyed by it.

In a statement issued to DNAinfo, a spokesman for the MTA said the authority had not been aware of the burial ground.

The MTA was open to discussions with the community over the replacement of the bus depot while maintaining the operating levels for bus service in the rest of Manhattan, said agency spokesman Aaron Donovan.



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