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# Evidence of Burial Ground Is Discovered in East Harlem

By DAVID W. DUNLAP JAN. 21, 2016

For nearly a decade, keepers of Harlem's historical flame have insisted — in the face of official skepticism — that a significant antebellum landmark lay beneath an enormous bus depot near the Harlem River.

They had plenty of documents to show that the 126th Street Bus Depot in Upper Manhattan occupied the site of a Reformed Dutch churchyard where New Yorkers of African descent had been buried from the 17th century through the 19th century. What they lacked were any remains.

Now, they have them.

More than 140 bones and bone fragments were found at the site last summer by archaeologists under contract to the New York City Economic Development Corporation.

Most compelling of all was a skull, its cranium intact, that most likely came from an adult woman of African descent.

Like the discovery 25 years ago of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, the find in East Harlem offers a poignant, tangible link to black history, whose traces were ignored or discarded for generations by historians who chronicled New York from a white, European standpoint.

The uptown discovery was announced on Wednesday by Melissa Mark-Viverito, the City Council speaker, and the Rev. Dr. Patricia A. Singletary, pastor of the Elmendorf Reformed Church at 171 East 121st Street, in their capacity as leaders of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force.

“We’re very excited,” Ms. Mark-Viverito said. “This is a way of affirming a part of Manhattan history that has been overlooked.” Now, she said, the challenge is to create a fitting memorial.

Dr. Singletary, who reconsecrated the burial ground in September, has given the name Nana to the person whose skull was found — “the African term of respect for an elderly woman,” she said.

Her church is a successor to the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem, founded in 1660. The burial ground occupied the lot where the first church rose, on the riverfront at what is now First Avenue, between 126th and 127th Streets.

The bones and bone fragments were all found in a layer of soil deposited outside the known boundaries of the cemetery, said A. Michael Pappalardo, an archaeologist at AKRF, which performed the work for the city. The remains were “disarticulated,” he said, that is, separated at the joints.

“No intact burials were encountered or disturbed,” Mr. Pappalardo said.

Neither were any funerary objects discovered, he said, though archaeologists did dig up household artifacts like window glass, ceramics, pipes and a thimble.

The long, low bus depot is an obvious candidate for residential redevelopment. But the Economic Development Corporation said through a spokesman, Anthony Hoglebe, that it agreed with the task force that “any future for this site must include a memorial.”

The task force and the development corporation waited to make the announcement, Ms. Mark-Viverito said, so they could do so in a coordinated, respectful way.

Along those lines, Dr. Singletary was asked whether the reconsecration service had been small and private to keep it from becoming a media circus. “You could print that,” she allowed.

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