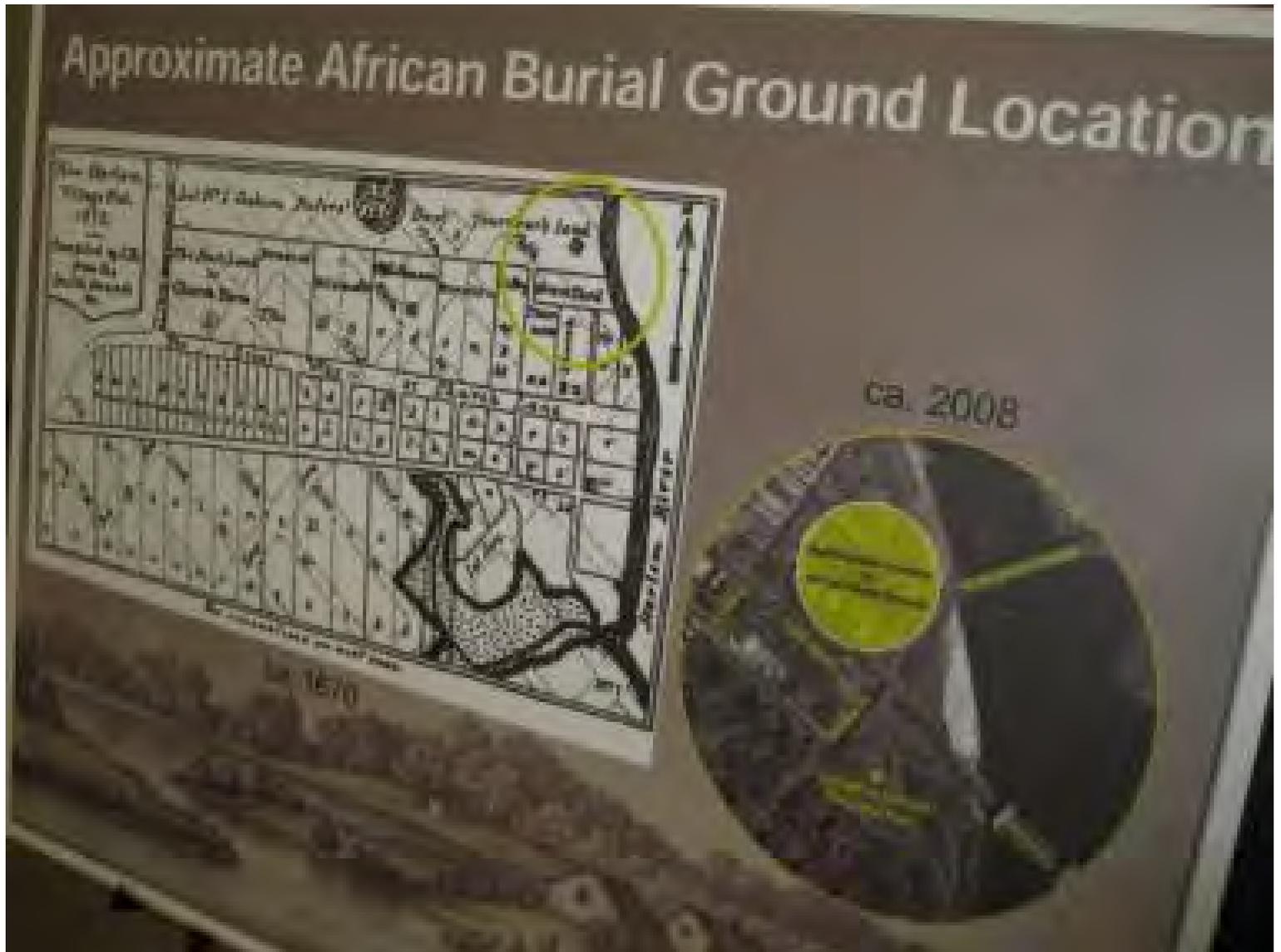


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MTA Pledges Archaeological Probe into East Harlem African Burial Ground

By DNAINfo Staff on March 19, 2010 7:14pm | Updated on March 19, 2010 7:12pm



Sens Jose Serrano and Bill Perkins held a public hearing at Elmhurst Reformed Church Friday to discuss protecting the site of a former African Burial Ground.

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DNAINfo/Gabriela Resto-Montero

By Gabriela Resto-Montero

DNAINfo Reporter/Producer

EAST HARLEM — After months of negotiations with the city, residents who want to preserve a colonial-era African burial ground won a small victory at a public hearing Friday when MTA officials agreed to conduct an archeological study of the land in search of remains.

The investigation of the cemetery that lies beneath the 126th Street bus depot was scheduled to begin years from now, but the MTA agreed under public pressure to push up the start date.

"Africans worked here. They worshipped here, maintaining and following several religious traditions. And Africans died here," said Rev. Patricia Singletary, pastor of Elmendorf Reform Church, which has been pushing to protect the burial site.

Community members feared upcoming reconstruction of the bus depot, slated to begin in 2015, along with ongoing construction of the Willis Avenue Bridge, could disturb the remains (<http://www.dnainfo.com/20100201/manhattan/harlem-leaders-worry-african-burial-ground-will-be-completely-lost-history>) of its former African burial ground located between 126th and 127th Streets along First Avenue.

The MTA pledged to accommodate the community's concerns.

"Our intention is to work as a partner," said Hilary Ring, director of government affairs for the agency.

State Sens. Jose Serrano and Bill Perkins called the public hearing (<http://dnainfo.com/20100319/east-harlem/landmarking-protections-eyed-at-public-hearing-for-harlem-african-burial-ground>) at the Elmendorf Reformed Church on 171 E. 121st Street to find ways to protect the burial site.

The MTA's move to investigate could help advocates who want to have the site declared a historic preservation site, said J. Winthrop Aldrich, New York's deputy commissioner for historic preservation.

Whether or not any remains are found, the site should be commemorated for the rare history it signifies for African Americans and the East Harlem community, Serrano said.

"It's still hallowed ground," he said. "It's still something of historical significance."

Members of the task force formed to commemorate the burial ground were pleased with the MTA's statement and cautiously optimistic about getting the site protected.

"It's an uphill battle to get anything north of 96th Street preserved," said Eric Tait, a member of the task force.



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