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# Rezoning a Block in Harlem, Respecting an African Burial Ground

By JAMES BARRON SEPT. 26, 2017

For not quite two centuries starting in the mid-1660s, when a Dutch village was established under the name Nieuw Haarlem, a church in Upper Manhattan had separate cemeteries, one for white parishioners, the other for descendants of Africans.

When the church moved, the remains of the white people were moved to a cemetery in the Bronx. The graves of the blacks were left where they were as the land was given over to a beer garden, a movie studio and, eventually, a block-square depot for streetcars and buses.

On Wednesday, the City Council will vote on a zoning framework to put the same land to yet another use, a million-square-foot development with about 730 apartments, half of which would be rented to low-income families. But the plan would preserve the area once occupied by the African burial ground as a memorial, a reminder of history that has been too often overlooked.

“This is obviously a historical wrong that this project presents an opportunity to right,” said James Patchett, the president and chief executive of the New York City Economic Development Corporation, which is behind the plan. He added that his goal was to “make sure that that area is not only developed on but preserved as a memorial to what that was — and acknowledge the wrongs.”

The vote on Wednesday would be the latest milestone for the zoning framework, which won the approval of the local community board, **Community Board 11**, in the spring. Among the earlier milestones was the discovery of more than 140 bones and bone fragments in 2015, by archaeologists working for the economic development corporation.

Two task forces offered information and guidance as the zoning plan advanced. The site is in the district of the City Council speaker, **Melissa Mark-Viverito**, and she served a co-chairwoman of one of the task forces.

“Establishing this monument was years in the making,” she said by email, “and will help fill missing gaps in our city’s collective history.”

The city has yet to choose a developer for the site, which runs from First Avenue to Second Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets, and Mr. Patchett said the process for selecting one would not begin until after the City Council vote. The African burial ground occupied about 15 percent of the 116,000-square-foot lot, and he said that its original boundaries would not be infringed on.

“There will be no development within this footprint,” he said.

The burial ground covered a wedge-shaped chunk of the block, closer to First Avenue and the 126th Street side of the lot. Mr. Patchett said that leaving that area open for a memorial would present “a design challenge,” but one that was “certainly not insurmountable.”

“There are not a lot of sites on this scale that present themselves in Manhattan these days,” he said, adding that the very size would give potential developers and architects flexibility in preparing possible designs.

The separate cemeteries were established by the church because that was “a common practice” in colonial New York, said the **Rev. Dr. Patricia A. Singletary**, the pastor of the **Elmendorf Reformed Church** in Harlem. It was no different than in Lower Manhattan, she said, where an African burial ground was discovered in the 1990s.

In Harlem, she said, “Everybody in the community attended the Dutch church. Everybody who was of African descent who worked in the community lived in the community. They were all part of the church one way or another.” And when other churches opened, “they buried their loved ones in that site. All denominations, the Episcopal Church, A.M.E. Zion, they were all there.”

Dr. Singletary’s church is a successor to the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem, which was established when Nieuw Haarlem was new in the 17th century. The church moved a few blocks away in the mid-19th century and sold the African burial ground to a judge who was a parishioner.

He used it as grazing land for sheep and cattle, and Dr. Singletary said that parishioners complained — presumably after the sale but before the move — “because they kept hearing the noise of the sheep and the cattle during the worship service.” The task force’s website said that began “a long tradition of disrespect for this sacred site: funerals and burials took place as farm animals wandered on the cemetery.”

Descendants of people buried in the church’s white cemetery were contacted so that the bodies could be exhumed and reinterred — at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, Dr. Singletary said.

“No arrangements were made for those of African descent,” the task force’s website says. “Their remains were left in the ground, and the city was built on top of the Harlem African burial ground.”

Over the years, the site was home to an amusement park with a carousel, a barracks for a National Guard infantry unit and a movie studio owned by the newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. That building was demolished and a depot was built there for the Third Avenue Railway Company’s streetcars and, later, its buses. The city bought that building in the 1960s and vacated it two years ago.

Now Diane Collier, the chairwoman of the community board, said she was excited about what the rezoning would make possible, because she was confident the site’s sacred past would finally be respected — and remembered.

“Everyone’s been talking about downtown’s African burial ground,” Ms. Collier said. “Well, look, right here in Harlem, there was one. Thank God for Reverend Singletary and the church that kept the records, the actual names of people who were buried there.”

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