

19 MARCH 2010

STATEMENT BY ERIC V. TAIT, JR., DOCUMENTARIAN, AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE HARLEM PRESERVATION FOUNDATION, RE THE ERC COLONIAL HARLEM AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND.

Senators, thank you for holding this Hearing and for the opportunity to testify. To quote the eminent Humanist George Santayana: *“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”*

Unfortunately, MTA and DOT seem determined not to learn from the history of the 13-year battle our Community, and its many allies of every race, fought with the Federal Government over the earlier African Burial Ground that was disturbed in Lower Manhattan in 1991. That long, bitter struggle was a direct result of the General Services Administration’s federal bureaucracy NOT having any persons of color—or ANY concerned GSA person for that matter-- who would take seriously the cultural and historical significance of that African Burial Ground. I know the history well: “Then I’ll Be Free To Travel Home-Part 2” is my one-hour documentary on that “Battle to Save the (earlier) New York African Burial Ground.”

Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation with the MTA and DOT regarding **this** African Burial Ground. These hearings would not be necessary if these two Agencies took those cultural/historical issues seriously, and were sincere in responding to our concerns about the DOT work that’s being done now, and the MTA’s future plans, that negatively impact this Sacred Site.

I have three very troubling questions:

- 1) The Willis Avenue Bridge reconstruction work began before 2008, so why was there no monitoring of construction/excavation work **before** April 2008, and how do we know that such monitoring has been started (and is still correctly and conscientiously being done)?
- 2) The earlier Burial Ground was re-discovered under 25 feet of landfill. Landfill and grading took place on, and extended the original shoreline where this Harlem Burial Ground was established. If the foundation footings for the Bridge, ramps, temporary ramps, etc., go deeper than 10 feet, and more than likely they do, why was DOT test-borings only made to a depth of ten (10) feet?
- 3) Since we have more than our fair share of MTA Bus Depots/Parking Garages in our Community which severely, negatively impact the health of our residents—a state of de facto Environmental Racism whether it’s intentional or not—why does MTA not explore with us and our elected officials the option of relocating the offending Bus Depot?

IN CLOSING, let me state that the Harlem Preservation Foundation strongly supports this effort to reclaim and memorialize this African Burial Ground, and to establish a Cultural Historical Center in the area. In this way The legacy of Juan Rodrigues, the free Black-Hispanic from Santo Domingo whom the Dutch called "The Mulatto"—their interpreter and translator with the native Lenape Tribe-- can be widely known and celebrated. Without him, no successful fur trade with the Native Americans, probably no New Netherlands Colony, and no New York. Why not re-name the bridge for him?

Rodrigues and the Africans who followed him and built these Villages, Churches and Cemeteries, have never received any official recognition. We need to mark not just the memory and legacy of those early Africans, but their **physical** presence, in their original, sacred resting places.

I would also urge you to convene a follow-up special session with yourselves and the highest DOT and MTA Officials to screen that one-hour documentary that chronicles how intransigent and uncooperative GSA was, and also how **determined** our community was to honor those Ancestors, restore their significant cultural history and legacy, and memorialize that Sacred Site. In that way we can all learn from that recent, very negative history, and therefore will not be doomed to repeat it. Thank you.

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