

126th Street Harlem African Burial Ground Memorial and Mixed-Use Project FAQ

Contents

Burial Ground: History & Past Archaeological Work	1
Burial Ground: Upcoming Archaeological Work	3
Other African Burial Grounds.....	4
Education & Engagement Effort	4
Redevelopment Project.....	5
Overall/Planning.....	5
Memorial & Cultural Education Center	7
Mixed-Use Project.....	8
Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative.....	8
Glossary.....	9

Burial Ground: History & Past Archaeological Work

When was the burial ground in use, and what happened to it after?

The village of Nieuw Haarlem was established by Dutch royal charter on August, 15 1660 on a sacred site of indigenous peoples. The Low Dutch Reformed Church (predecessor of today’s Elmendorf Reformed Church) was its founding place of worship. From the beginning, the church maintained two cemeteries: one for people of European descent, and another for people of African descent. The Harlem African Burial Ground served as a final resting place for enslaved and free New Yorkers of African descent from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s.

In 1869, prompted by Manhattan’s northward expansion and development, church leaders began transferring the human remains of the Europeans to new plots. Those buried at the Harlem African Burial Ground were left in place and the land was sold. In the decades that followed, hills were leveled, parts of the Harlem River were filled in, and multiple land transactions, developments, and urbanization

occurred on and around the site, all causing considerable displacement and desecration of the historic cemetery. Several uses occupied the land the decades that followed. The now decommissioned MTA 126th St Bus Depot was built on the site in 1947 and operated until it was decommissioned in 2015.

When and how was the burial ground discovered?

In the early 2000s, DOT’s work on the Willis Ave Bridge adjacent to the MTA’s 126th Street Bus Depot led to a documentary study of the area’s history. The process revealed the likelihood that a historic African burial ground had been located beneath a portion of the 126th Street Depot building and required further archaeological study. DOT contacted Dr. Rev. Patricia A. Singletary about the burial ground, who was then moved to conduct research and write her doctoral dissertation about the burial ground and form the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (now HABG Initiative) in 2009.

What has the archaeological process been to date?

In 2011, the MTA hired a consultant to evaluate the bus depot site’s archaeological history. The review of historical documents, a “Phase 1A” study, revealed that the site had a long and varied history, and that a portion was once used as a burial ground (termed the “Harlem African Burial Ground”) from the 17th to 19th centuries.

In 2015, the MTA ceased operations at the bus depot. Shortly after, NYCEDC commissioned consulting firm AKRF and their team of archaeologists to perform a preliminary archaeological investigation, a “Phase 1B” study in close consultation with the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (now Initiative), SHPO and LPC. The work performed in 2015 involved digging multiple trenches through the floor of the Bus Depot into the soil underneath. While two trenches located entirely within the historical footprint of the Harlem African Burial Ground had no remaining archaeological evidence of it, more than 140 disarticulated, redeposited and often fragmentary human remains (as opposed to intact burials like those found at the Lower Manhattan African Burial Ground) were found in one trench located partially within the northern edge of the historical boundary and partially within the area of the current Site that was part of the Harlem River until the mid-1800s landfilling. Fieldwork of this trench suggests that soils from the Harlem African Burial Ground could have been used for the landfilling itself. Fieldwork of this trench also made evident that additional human remains are present at the Site.

Elmendorf Reformed Church, the descendant church of the HABG, was involved in the removal of the human remains from the ground, and a ceremony was held to honor those once buried on the site.

What happened to the human remains found at the site?

Immediate steps were taken to preserve the human remains and artifacts when they were discovered. The HABGTF (now Initiative), NYCEDC, LPC and SHPO made the decision to remove all the human remains from the trench by careful hand excavation for further study and to prevent further

decomposition. The human remains that were removed were transferred under supervision from LPC and SHPO to the New York City Archaeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center, a locked, climate-controlled facility, for storage until they are reburied at the site's future memorial per the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative's wishes.

Burial Ground: Upcoming Archaeological Work

What is the scope of the new phase of archaeological work?

The new phase of archaeology will determine the complete distribution of human remains across the site, which will be safely and sensitively excavated and stored in a controlled environment until they can be reinterred in the future memorial. It begins with the co-development of a workplan with the HABGI and LPC, followed by fieldwork, lab analysis, and reporting.

How will the archaeological fieldwork be conducted?

The 2015 archaeological investigation encountered a low-density layer of disarticulated human skeletal remains in one of four excavated trenches, known as Trench 2. Trench 2 was situated outside the boundaries of the cemetery as documented on historical maps. This suggests that remains were historically removed from the footprint of the former cemetery and redeposited as part of the filling in of the western Harlem River coastline. However, remains may not be limited to the general vicinity of Trench 2, but could instead be diffusely and/or randomly distributed across a broad area. To facilitate the sensitive and respectful identification and removal of human remains across the entire site, AKRF will first determine the horizontal extent of human remains. This will require a flexible and dynamic process of directly examining the soils beneath the foundation slab at various distances from Trench 2. Once a reasonable understanding of the horizontal distribution has been attained, AKRF will systematically expose and disinter the remains.

When will the archaeological work begin and end?

The full archaeological scope of work (preparation, on-site field work, preparation of field reports, close-out, etc.) began in Fall 2023 and is expected to be completed by late-2025.

Furthermore, the City's Environmental Impact Statement in 2017 requires archaeological investigation prior to demolition of the bus depot and construction of the memorial, cultural center and mixed-use project.

What happens after this phase of archaeological work concludes? Will archaeology happen during demolition and construction of the memorial, cultural education center, and mixed-use project?

Following the conclusion of this phase of archaeological work, NYCEDC working with the City and in consultation with the HABGI will competitively procure an operator for the cultural education center and memorial and separately a developer for the mixed-use affordable housing project. Archaeological monitoring will continue into the next phases of the project.

How can community members be involved in the archaeological work?

One of the primary goals of the education and engagement effort is to provide a variety of opportunities for New Yorkers to learn about the Harlem African Burial Ground and the archaeological work as it is happening. AKRF will also provide public updates about their work as it progresses and will issue a report at the end of their work that will be publicly accessible.

Other African Burial Grounds

Why is the City focusing on this particular burial ground?

The historic footprint of the Harlem African Burial Ground is on City-owned land, within the larger bus depot site. Since the bus depot site encompasses a full Manhattan block and the historic footprint encompasses about 20% of that site, there is physical space to both honor the Harlem African Burial Ground and fulfill housing and job needs in East Harlem. The mixed-use development will support up to \$1M in operating expenses for the outdoor memorial and indoor cultural education center. The Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (now Initiative) was founded in 2009, and NYCEDC has worked closely with them on archaeological work and the vision for redevelopment of the bus depot site since 2015.

Education & Engagement Effort

What is the scope of the education and engagement effort?

The education and engagement effort will be multi-strategy and wide-reaching, with the goal of increasing awareness and understanding of the Harlem African Burial Ground, its sacred history, and the archaeology work that will be happening concurrently on the site. On August 15th, 2023 NYCEDC released an RFP to find a team of nonprofits, M/WBEs, or a combination thereof with experience in the Harlem community and black history to run this effort focused on bringing more public awareness to the site's history to the broader public.

What sort of activities will be part of the education and engagement effort?

The selected education and engagement team will develop a range of activities to the HABG story. The story will include age-appropriate curriculums that engage Harlem students, multimedia content, a website to raise visibility and create excitement throughout Harlem and beyond for outreach and engagement efforts that will occur throughout 2024 - 2025. These engagement effort may include: Collaborations with local artists; talks and lectures; walking tours; public meetings and workshops; educational curriculums and resources; collaboration and network building with other African burial grounds and places of significance to Black history and community; and multimedia and digital strategies.

When will the education and engagement effort begin and end?

The work will kick off in February 2024, beginning by identifying, cultivating, and stewarding community relationships in collaboration with NYCEDC and HABGI. The next phase involves a communications plan to tell the historical, social, and present-day story of the Harlem African Burial Ground. Outreach and engagement efforts such as a series of public events and workshops will take place throughout 2024 – 2025. A final report summarizing the impact of this effort will be released in 2025.

Redevelopment Project

Overall/Planning

How has the community engaged in planning for the future of this site?

Since early 2015, NYCEDC has worked in partnership with the local City Council member’s office (currently Diana Ayala) on a robust, community-based planning process for the redevelopment. The Bus Depot Task Force (BDTF) was formed from 2015-2016 and tasked with developing goals for the redevelopment project, which were reflected in the eventual rezoning and associated City commitments.

The BDTF was comprised of a group of community stakeholders that included the HABGTF (now Initiative), Community Board 11, and community-based organizations such as Operation Fightback, STRIVE, and CIVITAS, as well elected officials including Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer and City agencies.

From 2015, NYCEDC, with the HABGTF, met multiple times with Community Board 11, as well as Community Board 10, throughout the preliminary planning process for the project. In 2016, over 100 community members attended a project open house to learn about the significance of the historic Harlem African Burial Ground, while contributing their input to the visioning process for its next stage. In 2017, the Society for Historical Archeology awarded the team of the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force, AKRF Inc., and NYCEDC as the third-place winner of the Mark E. Mack Community Engagement Award for outstanding best practices in community collaboration, engagement, and outreach in historical archeology and heritage preservation work.

On September 27, 2017, after approval by Community Board 11 and Borough President Gale Brewer, the New York City Council voted unanimously to approve a land use application that facilitates the creation of the memorial and redevelopment of the larger Bus Depot site. After the ULURP process, the site was included on the National Register of Historic places.

In 2019, in partnership with the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force and City Council member Diana Ayala, NYCEDC completed the installation of an exhibition in La Marqueta public market showcasing the past, present, and future of the burial ground site.

Why is this site being built on, given its history?

This is a large site – a full Manhattan city block. About 20% of the site is the historic footprint of the Harlem African Burial Ground. This entire area will become a public outdoor memorial, and no buildings will be built there.

After several years of community engagement, the Bus Depot Task Force, comprised of Community Board 10 and 11 and former Council Member Melissa Mark Viverito, decided that a mixed-use program would provide needed affordable housing and job-creating commercial space, while honoring the site’s legacy and history. The mix of uses also supports up to \$1M annually in operating expenses for the operator of the memorial and cultural center, ensuring their sustainability.

The project successfully completed ULURP in 2017 to enable the long-term redevelopment of the mixed-use project by a private developer, in addition to ensuring the permanent outdoor memorial on the historic footprint of the African Burial ground, a dedicated cultural education space to the site’s history, and affordable housing and commercial space.

How will the City use this public site to address the community’s urgent needs while also providing the memorial?

The 0.4-acre historical burial ground footprint exists on the southeastern corner of the 2.7-acre bus depot, which covers an entire city block. With the memorial as the centerpiece, this large site presents an opportunity to create a significant amount of affordable housing and other job-creating and community-serving uses for the East Harlem community—a core goal of this project established by the Bus Depot Task Force and one that the City takes very seriously.

The overall program is to include approx. 18,000 SF permanent outdoor memorial on the entire burial ground footprint and 15,000 SF of indoor memorial/cultural education center space. Approximately two-thirds of the total development program is expected to be housing and the remaining one-third commercial space.

Through the Points of Agreement letter, the City has committed to include the HABGTF Design Guidelines in the development RFP, which inform the physical relationship between the memorial and other development on the site, and the City will include a preference for RFP responses that maximize

the size and quality of the public open space provided. Additionally, the City has committed to ongoing engagement with the HABGTF leadership and CB11 throughout the RFP and developer selection process.

Importantly, the eventual agreement between the City and the Developer will include a provision that will restrict development from being built on the area of the outdoor memorial.

Memorial & Cultural Education Center

Will the memorial and cultural education center be public?

The memorial will be an outdoor, public space owned accessible to all. It will be directly owned by the City and stewarded by the same operator as the indoor cultural center.

How will the memorial be designed?

The process for the design for the outdoor memorial has yet to be determined. As the project moves forward, the future operator and developer will work with the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative and the City to develop an appropriate public-engagement process around the planning and design of the outdoor memorial and indoor cultural center.

Who will run the memorial & cultural education center?

NYCEDC will release a public RFP to find an appropriate operator for the memorial and cultural center.

How will the City ensure that this project creates and sustains a memorial?

The foremost goal of this project is to achieve a permanent, public outdoor memorial to the history of the burial ground and the people who were buried there. The City is committed to making sure this happens. The City has committed to requiring that redevelopment of the site will include a permanent outdoor memorial located on the entire historic footprint of the burial ground, as well as an indoor cultural center.

It is imperative that this project can support the costs of first, building the memorial and cultural center, and second, sustaining its operations over time. To this end, as outlined in the project's Points of Agreement Letter, it is intended that the City will require the selected Developer to make an annual contribution of up to \$1M to offset operating costs of the outdoor memorial and indoor cultural center. In addition to contributions to offset the operating costs, the City has committed to seeking capital funding for all or a portion of the pre-development archeological work, construction of the outdoor memorial, and construction of the indoor cultural center.

Mixed-Use Project

What is the overall program for the mixed-use project? And how much housing will the project provide?*

The program for the mixed-use development will include mixed-income housing (80% of which will be affordable housing), office, a mix of retail including street-level stores and potentially larger-format destination users, and a small parking component. The commercial portion of the project (retail and office) will be approximately 300,000 square feet when complete. The project will also include an 18,000 sq. ft outdoor memorial on the site of the burial ground, a 15,000 sq. ft indoor cultural center, and 15,000 square feet of additional cultural and community space.

The project will include a minimum of 524,000 square feet of housing and we estimate the project will deliver between 600 and 700 units depending on their size and mix. It's important to note that these are just estimates, and that the final unit counts, sizes, and mix of unit types won't be known until the potential developers have submitted their proposals, and even then the details may shift.

What we do know fairly well is the split of affordability. 80%, or 419,000 square feet of that housing must be affordable, which could be about 480-560 units, again depending on the unit size. 20% of the units will be deeply affordable, meaning set aside for New Yorkers earning 30% or less of the Area Median Income. 50% of the units will also be set aside for low-income New Yorkers earning up to 60% of the Area Median Income.

Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative

When and how was the HABGI founded?

When DOT learned about the burial ground as part of their documentary study in the early 2000s for the Willis Ave Bridge reconstruction, they contacted Dr. Rev. Patricia A. Singletary because she was pastor of Elmendorf Reformed Church, the successor of the Low Dutch Reformed Church and descendant church of the burial ground. Dr. Rev. Singletary was moved to conduct research and write her doctoral dissertation about the burial ground and form the Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force in 2009 with Melissa Mark-Viverito, who was then councilperson for District 8. The Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force is now known as the Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative.

What does the HABGI do?

The Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative was founded to raise awareness of the burial ground, restore dignity and respect to this sacred site, and advocate for a memorial. The HABGI is the driving force in ensuring that the burial ground's legacy is properly recognized and respected. They have worked with EDC since 2015 to guide the archaeological work, develop goals for the redevelopment, co-host education and engagement events, and other activities. They will work closely with EDC on the new phase of archaeological fieldwork and the upcoming education and engagement effort.

Glossary

The 126th Street Harlem African Burial Ground Memorial and Mixed-Use Project is the full name of the project. Harlem African Burial Ground (HABG) should be used in reference to the project, instead of calling it the 126th St project or Bus Depot project.

Anthropology is the study of human beings and their ancestors through time and space and in relation to physical character environmental and social relations, and culture.

- [Merriam-Webster](#)

Archaeology is the study of past societies and cultures through material remains of past human life and activities, called the archaeological record. **Material remains**, in an archaeological sense, refers to tools, pottery, jewelry, etc. **Disarticulated human remains** are bone fragments that have been separated from the original human body through decomposition, disturbance, or other processes.

- [Oxford Bibliography](#)

Archaeological Fieldwork is when archaeologists survey potential sites and work on site of excavations. Since the process of excavation involves disturbing, altering or otherwise destroying the original site, archaeologists must be careful to document as possible while they are digging so the site can be "reconstructed" in the lab when artefacts are moved for further study. Documented information will include many maps, descriptions of each feature and unit, the soil color and texture, photographs, and forms that systematically document the process of excavation.

- From <<https://www.uwlax.edu/mvac/process-of-archaeology/fieldwork/fieldwork-introduction/>>

Archaeological Lab Analysis involves cleaning, sorting, cataloging, stabilized, and labeling artefacts recovered from the field. The analysis of human remains and any associated burial goods can help to identify the age, sex, height, health, nutritional status of the individual, and may be able to provide important information on the culture. State and Federal laws strictly govern how to deal with human remains, and ensure that they are treated with respect. The wishes of the descendant community are taken in to account when excavating and analyzing the remains.

- From <<https://www.uwlax.edu/mvac/process-of-archaeology/lab-analysis/human-remains-analysis/>>
- From <<https://www.uwlax.edu/mvac/process-of-archaeology/lab-analysis/laboratory-process/>>

Archaeological Resources are the material evidence of human culture and activity in the past. They include artifacts (items made or given shape by humans), features, sites, and associated documentation.

Bioarcheology is the study of bones and other biological materials found in archaeological remains in order to provide information about human life or the environment in the past. Bioarcheologists seek to tell the stories of our respective ancestors.

- [Oxford Bibliographies](#)

The Biocultural approach to anthropology is where evidence collected from skeletal remains including biological profiles, ancient DNA, and stable isotopes, were interpreted in conjunction with artifactual data and historical context. For example, biological stress indicators are considered evidence of social inequality and change. A critical approach to biocultural exploration focuses on how inequality shapes disease in society.

- 6352, [Libre Texts](#)

Biocultural anthropology is the scientific exploration of the relationships between human biology and culture or how culture affects our biological capacities and limitations. Biocultural methods focus on the interactions between humans and their environment to understand biological adaptation and variation. Uses methods and data from archaeology, ethnography, and historical record.

- [Oxford Bibliographies, Britannica](#)

Commingling refers to the “mixing of the bones of two or more individuals.” The level of commingling depends on the condition of the bodies prior to burial, the level of decomposition, taphonomy, and if there was any intentional destruction or relocation of the bodies. In the field of forensic anthropology, every effort is made to reassociate individuals, meaning remains are sorted out and returned to their respective individual bodies.

- 6352

Decommission refers to something removed from active service or use.

Descendant Community refers to a group comprised of lineal descendants, members of descendant institutions, as well as people who self-identify as descendants. In this instance, church congregation members, people who are part of the African diaspora or whose ancestors were victims of the transatlantic slave trade can be considered part of the descendant community

Disarticulated human remains are bones that have been disconnected from the body, specifically at a joint.

Enslaved people are held involuntarily and forced under threat of violence or death to work without pay for the profit of another, as their legal property. Enslaved people were seen as commodities to be bought, sold and exploited. Enslavement often extended to descendants. The use of terms such as “slaves” dissociates an individual from their pre-enslavement cultural heritage. Using the term “enslaved” versus “slave” emphasizes the condition of being made a slave through coercive (kidnapping) or legal means. Similarly, using the term “Enslaver” versus “Slave Owner” or “Master” emphasizes the condition of enslavement enforced by the individual.

- Meriam Webster, and Archaeology 1B report

Excavation refers to the systemic removal of earth or digging of a hole, channel, or trench from the ground often to remove material.

Fragmentary human remains are unidentified parts of a human skeleton that have been broken into smaller pieces. Forensic anthropologists work with forensic archaeologists in the recovery of remains from burials to create a biological profile for the deceased which includes ancestry, sex, age at death and stature, experienced trauma or pathologies.

- From <<https://www.therai.org.uk/forensic-anthropology/what-is-forensic-anthropology>>

The Harlem African Burial Ground Initiative (HABGI) is the current name of the community group. The Harlem African Burial Ground Task Force (HABGTF) is the predecessor of this group. HABGTF can be used when talking about work prior to 2023, such as the founding of the group in 2009 or the 2015 archaeological work, but HABGI should be used for current and upcoming work.

LPC is short for Landmarks Preservation Commission. They are responsible for protecting New York City's architecturally, historically, and culturally significant buildings and sites by granting them landmark or historic district status, and regulating them after designation.

- From <<https://www.nyc.gov/site/lpc/about/about-lpc.page>>

MTA is an acronym for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. They are a public corporation that operates public transportation in the NYC metropolitan area.

MWBE is short for Minority & Women Owned Business Enterprises. MWBE is generally used to refer to a business entity that has been certified by the City, state or federal government, to be at least 51% owned by one or more individuals from socially or economically disadvantaged groups.

- From <<https://ogs.ny.gov/mwbe/minority-and-women-owned-business-enterprises-frequently-asked-questions>>

New Yorkers of African Descent - Historical research indicates that “Africans named their institutions ‘African’ in New York City as soon as they obtained the freedom to put such nomenclature on record in the early nineteenth century”

- Archaeology 1B report.

Procurement refers to the purchase by governments and state-owned enterprises of goods, services and works. As public procurement accounts for a substantial portion of the taxpayers’ money, governments are expected to carry it out efficiently and with high standards of conduct in order to ensure high quality of service delivery and safeguard the public interest.

- From <<https://www.oecd.org/gov/public-procurement/>>

Racial reconciliation Is a long-term strategy for responding to the [generational] harms of racism with the goal of restoration and healing. Reconciliation first requires understanding how racism is perpetuated

through institutions and systems, accounting its far reaching impact, and acknowledging and atoning for wrong doing or injury. A restorative justice approach to reconciliation emphasizes repairing harm by empowering local communities through a process of dialogue which leads to concrete actions that address ongoing and historical harms. While cities and public bodies often set up Reconciliation Commissions to address legacies of systemic racism, reconciliation processes and solutions are unique to the community seeking healing.

- [Olufemi Taiwo](#), [Source](#), [Source](#)

Redeposited human remains are those that have been reburied in the earth or a tomb.

RFP is short for "Requests for Proposal." RFPs are an invitation for potential suppliers to submit their proposals when a city agency is looking to procure a service or product.

A **Steward** is someone who manages and directs affairs

Site refers to a place or spatial location. In this instance, it is appropriate to say that Nieuw Haarlem/Harlem and the Harlem African Burial Ground was established on a sacred site of "indigenous peoples". Specifying Lenape or another nation is incorrect, as there were many nations in the area at the time. A map of indigenous nations is here - <https://native-land.ca/>